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## **Brand new Knowledge**

How knowledge-intensive startups use social media to build their corporate brand

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Brand new Knowledge. How knowledge-intensive startups use social media to build their corporate brand.

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**Abstract**

Building a corporate brand is as a crucial resource for the survival of companies. Social media as a tool for branding practices has been emphasized in research about startups. In such research, less focus is on certain groups of startups, such as Knowledge-intensive startups (KI Startups). This is peculiar as such startups differ in societal contributions and how they are constituted. Thus, as social media branding practices might enhance the survival rate, it is important to extend this research about KI startups.

The purpose of this thesis is to understand how and why KI startups in Sweden use social media to build their corporate brands in regards of four different branding elements.

The thesis has an exploratory and interpretivist philosophy with an abductive approach. A qualitative method was chosen to collect the empirical data. Firstly, a pilot study which contained a questionnaire was sent to a sample of KI startups to attain an initial understanding of the field. Secondly, semi-structured interviews with six KI startups were conducted for a main study.

The findings indicate that the interviewed KI startups use social media to build brand awareness, influence and engage customers, attract new employees, and to build reputation. The findings also indicate that some KI startups use social media to attain a credible and knowledgeable brand perception.

Our findings may help other KI startups when choosing a social media channel, and what content to post in the brand building process. Suggestions for further research are a similar, but more extensive study in Sweden, or a study in a country that is different to Sweden.

**Keywords**

Startups, Entrepreneurship, Branding, Social media, Knowledge-intensive firms, Social media marketing

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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The success of startups is important for society as they increase economic growth and create new jobs (Wennekers & Thurik, 1999; Regeringen, 2016). However, startups face a variety of challenges due to their newness, such as being unknown to potential customers (Eggers, Eggers & Kraus, 2016; Gruber, 2004; Witt & Rode, 2005). To survive in the market, startups need to overcome these challenges. New companies, that is startups, have a higher failure rate than already established companies (Baum, Calabrese & Silverman, 2000). According to Gruber (2004), the failure rate can be as high as 70% during the first five years of a firm. To survive in the long run, there are certain activities that are especially important for startups to engage in.

Similar to startups, knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs) are also facing specific challenges. KIFs are characterized by advanced knowledge as input to produce qualified product or services. For example, firms such as computer consultancy firms, advertising agencies, R&D units and high-tech firms are categorized as KIFs (Alvesson, 2001). Because of unclear quality of products or services that KIFs provide, it is a challenge for such firms to mediate their knowledge to stakeholders (Starbuck, 1992; Alvesson, 2001). When stakeholders are not understanding the knowledge, they cannot evaluate the provided product or service. To assure customers of the product or service quality, KIFs have to build images of being knowledgeable, for example (Alvesson, 2001; von Nordenflycht, 2010).

Building a corporate brand may overcome the challenges of startups and KIFs. Building a strong corporate brand is a crucial strategy for any startup to be successful (Tumasjan, Strobel & Welpel, 2011; Gruber, 2004; Witt & Rode, 2005). In addition, one can assume that a strong corporate brand can counteract the challenges for KIFs. Despite some variations in defining corporate brand, a consensus regarding its broad context has emerged. According to Hatch and Schultz (2003), a corporate brand can increase the visibility, recognition and reputation of a company, and contribute to all

stakeholders' images of the organization. Similarly, Balmer and Gray (2003) argue that a corporate brand functions as a sustainable, valuable and strategic resource. The authors state that these resources distinguish the brand from competitors, and differentiates the brand in the stakeholders' minds.

It is important to build a strong brand, not only for startups and KIFs, but for any firm (Keller, 2009; Keller & Lehmann, 2006; Kapferer, 1997; Keller, 2003). There are several communication channels and activities that can be used in the brand building process. One of these activities is the use of digital channels, such as social media (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). Digital channels are important in the corporate brand building process for companies since they can be cost-effective (Karimi & Naghibi, 2015; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010), and provide timely and direct-end consumer contact (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In addition, social media is important for companies since they can provide a variety of benefits. Some of the benefits of social media in the context of corporate brand building are brand awareness (Jones, Borgman & Ulusoy, 2015), reputation (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011), attract new employees (Tumasjan *et al.*, 2011), and influence and engage customers (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Nisar & Whitehead, 2016). Such potential advantages of using social media in the corporate branding process can be assumed particularly important for startups as they are challenged by their newness (Eggers *et al.*, 2016).

Social media and the connection with corporate branding has been studied in the literature (Ashley & Tuten, 2015; Bruhn, Schoenmueller & Schäfer, 2012; Gao & Feng, 2016; Erdem, Keller, Kuksov & Pieters, 2016). The connection between startups and social media branding has also been a topic for research before (Chen, Ji & Men, 2017; Jones *et al.*, 2015; Geho & Dangelo, 2012; Karimi & Naghibi, 2015). However, there is a gap between knowledge-intensive startups (KI startups), that is knowledge-intensive new and small firms, and how they use social media in the corporate branding process. This is interesting as one can assume that KI startups generally use social media in some form, since social media is increasingly used in



the world (Nisar & Whitehead, 2016). For example, there were 2,46 billion social network users worldwide in 2017 (Statista, 2018).

## 1.1 PROBLEMATIZATION

Branding has previously mostly been seen relevant for big enterprises, and not as important for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and startups (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Merrilees, 2007). Reasons for this are lack of knowledge about branding and failure to recognize that a company is a brand, and that branding strategies are not needed to start a company. Thus, focus of branding might be limited in practice (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Merrilees, 2007). However, research has been conducted to provide insights of what role branding has for startups. Merrilees (2007) states that little research exists in this field, which is worth extending. He has therefore studied the role branding has for the development of new SMEs, and suggests that branding is a powerful force for the development of startups if it is incorporated. Brand building activities can be done through a variety of tools and activities. However, using digital channels and social media have recently gained more focus within research. For example, Bresciani and Eppler (2010) have studied branding strategies in startups located in Switzerland. Within their conclusions, they provide five guidelines. One key guideline is that startups should use social media as a part of the branding strategy. The authors emphasize the benefits of relatively low cost and potential wide reach that social media facilitates, which are especially suitable for any startup. However, Bresciani and Eppler (2010) states that their study is limited to the geographical context, and thus encourage similar research in other countries.

Regarding the role of social media in startups, Chen *et al.* (2017) have written an article about the strategic use of social media to engage stakeholders of startups in China. Their findings show that many of the purposes of engaging stakeholders through social media usage in startups are aligned with existing branding literature. They state that social media usage is beneficial for startups as it is efficient to engage stakeholders, which facilitates awareness, increased reputation, improved image and so on. Thus, their emphasis is not only on customers per se, but rather about communicating with all stakeholders. Further, the authors suggest that further

research about stakeholder engagement on social media should be done in different sociocultural contexts, such as developed countries.

A versatile focus of brand building activities, including social media usage as explained by Chen *et al.* (2017), are aligned with research about corporate brands. According to Hatch and Schultz (2003), a corporate brand has a broader scope than products brands as it pushes brand thinking beyond the product and relationship with consumers. Regarding the role of corporate branding, it has been emphasized as a crucial resource for any firm (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Balmer & Gray, 2003), and especially startups (Rode & Vallaster, 2005). However, Rode and Vallaster (2005) argue that research about corporate branding for startups needs to focus on confirming factors that influence certain startups' corporate branding processes. In addition, Timmons (1999) argues that startups need to establish corporate brands as soon as possible to survive the competitive market. Thus, despite further in-depth research is encouraged, the importance of building corporate brands for startups have often been stressed as paramount to the development of startups.

However, the existing research connecting startups' incorporation of social media within the branding process often deals with startups broadly defined. For example, the article of Bresciani and Eppler (2010) is written with a general view of startups as young businesses. However, the article of Chen *et al.* (2017) claims that startups are mostly high-tech firms despite explaining the term "startups" as formally undefined. Thus, there is an ambiguity if startups are any new firm or only firms providing advanced product and services, such as high-tech. This is peculiar, as certain startups are worth isolating when conducting such research due to differences between different groups of startups.

We find it valuable to distinguish and explore startups that are knowledge-intensive and how such firms incorporate social media to the corporate branding process. KI startups' contributions are important for the society in another scope than startups in general. General startups contribute with economic growth and the creation of jobs,

for example (Bercovitz & Feldman, 2006; Harper, 2003). However, startups have also been argued to contribute with break-through innovation, which established firms do not contribute with (Cohan, 2011). Further, it is arguable that any startup can produce break-through innovation as it needs certain knowledge. For example, Alvensson (2004) points out that knowledge is the key issue for the success of high-tech and R&D firms. Thus, certain knowledge could be argued as a prerequisite to produce breakthrough innovation. Further, KI and tech-intensive product- and service-startups may not necessarily contribute with direct economic growth as general startups do. Knowledge-intensive and tech-intensive startups rather provide radical innovative solutions, which often are capitalized at a later stage by themselves or larger corporates. However, this procedure does both generate extensive economic and societal growth for knowledge economies. Hence, KI startups play a fundamental part in knowledge economies, such as Sweden (Andersson, 2017).

To summarize the theoretical relevance of this study, research suggests that startups should engage in corporate brand building through social media due to its startup-specific benefits. Current research also stresses the importance of startups building successful corporate brands as it enhances the chances of surviving in the market. Adjacent literature suggests further research of this matter, as it is often limited by certain contexts. Literature provides insights of how startups use social media and the importance of it. However, these studies have either processed startups in more general terms or differently to each other. Therefore, it is valuable to isolate certain startups from each other to consider differences between them. For example, the degree of complexity behind products and services, and societal contributions of general startups and KI startups. Startups in general can mainly be regarded as important for economic growth as the term includes any new business. In comparison, KI startups add the contribution of important innovation and hence societal development. Thus, it is important to focus the emphasized research gap of startups and social media branding by conducting a study that specifically consider KI startups. This may provide insights of what role social media has in the branding process for KI startups, which partially can explore such startups specific competitiveness and survival in the market.

In addition to the theoretical exploration, this study may also provide practical insights for KI startups. The versatile usage of social media can enhance the corporate brand, and if the expression of the corporate brand is changed, it will affect the corporate image (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012). Interestingly, literature stresses the importance of KIFs managing their image due to output ambiguity (Alvesson, 2001; von Nordenflycht, 2010). This means that KIFs which provide complex products and services have problems communicating desired images of themselves directly from the features and quality of their products and services. The challenge is that it may be hard for non-experts to understand the products or services provided by KIFs. Thus, except providing the product or service, other activities are important to perform to attain a successful image (Alvesson, 2001). The exploration of KI startups' social media usage in a corporate branding perspective, may provide insights of how KI startups can manage desired corporate images with social media. This may help other KI startups regarding how to use social media to manage their specific challenges.

## **1.2 PURPOSE**

The purpose of this thesis is to understand how KI startups located in Sweden use social media to build their corporate brand. Our aim is to approach the research gap between KI startups and social media branding in a local context.

## **1.3 RESEARCH QUESTION**

What is the role of social media practices for brand building in KI startups?

## **1.4 DISPOSITION**

*Chapter 1* introduces the background for this thesis, followed by the problematization, purpose and research question. *Chapter 2* contains the theoretical methodology, which describes the interpretivist philosophy, the abductive approach, and why they are relevant for this thesis. *Chapter 3* discusses the literature which the thesis is based on. *Chapter 4* presents the empirical method, which is how we

performed a questionnaire as a pilot-study and semi-structured interviews for the main study. *Chapter 5* presents the findings from the study; the semi-structured interviews. *Chapter 6* contains the discussion about our findings. *Chapter 7* concludes this thesis with a summary, followed by practical and theoretical implications, limitations of the study, and suggestions for further research.

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## 2. THEORETICAL METHOD

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*In this chapter we are going to present the methodologies we have used, and the reasons behind these choices. We describe why we have an interpretivist philosophy and why we have used an abductive approach. We also discuss the chosen theory. Finally, we provide critique of the sources used in this thesis.*

### 2.1 METHOD PHILOSOPHY

Bryman and Bell (2011) discuss three research philosophies which are positivism, interpretivism and realism. These philosophies describe different positions concerning whether or not the social world can and should be studied according to the same principles, procedures and ethos as the natural sciences. Positivism advocates the application of the methods of the natural sciences to the study of social reality and beyond. The realistic position acknowledges a reality independent of the senses that is accessible to the researcher's tools and theoretical speculations. Realism implies that the categories created by scientists refer to real objects in the natural of social worlds. Lastly, the position of interpretivism requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action. Thus, interpretivism is a contrasting philosophy to positivism (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Since interpretivism is about the subjective understanding of human behavior and not the definite explanation of it, our thesis takes an interpretivist position. Our aim is not to explain how KI startups generally should build their corporate brand through social media tools. Rather it is about subjectively interpreting and understanding how different KI startups do this through, partly a questionnaire, but mostly interviews. In addition, our study is largely of a qualitative character, which generally points to the interpretivist position (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

### 2.2 RESEARCH APPROACH

The research approach describes how to use the theory in the research. There are three different research approaches; inductive, deductive, and abductive (Saunders, Lewis

& Thornhill, 2012). While an inductive approach moves from data to theory and a deductive approach moves from theory to data, an abductive approach combines these two and moves back and forth. An abductive approach is the most common approach in research, and this approach is also going to be used in this thesis. The aim of this thesis is to collect data and explore the phenomenon of social media branding in KI startups. By doing so, we will contribute to existing theories and literature about social media, branding and KI startups, which goes in line with an abductive approach (Saunders *et al.*, 2012).

## **2.3 CHOICE OF THEORY**

Theory is necessary if a researcher should see the material “*as something*” (Ahrne & Svensson, 2011, p. 182) and makes it possible for us to “*see something as something*” (Ahrne & Svensson, 2011, p. 184). In this thesis, different theories about branding, startups, KIFs and social media are used. We have also used different combinations of these concepts, which will be outlined in *Chapter 3*. We chose theories of different fields since there is no existing research that conjoins relevant fields of our study’s context, to the best of our knowledge. As stated, this study is aimed to approach the current research gap of particularly KI startups and such firms’ usage of social media in their branding activities. Therefore, as no similar research has been conducted and cannot be used, it was necessary to gather and use separate literature that cover theory of the major constituents of our study’s context; startups, knowledge-intensive firms, branding, digital marketing and social media branding. However, this thesis has an explorative and descriptive design, and an abductive approach, which means that we do not rely on just theory alone. If the thesis would have relied on just theory, it would have prevented us from new findings.

## **2.4 CRITIQUE OF THE SOURCES**

The majority of the sources used in this thesis are peer-reviewed articles collected from Kristianstad University's database *Summon* and *Google Scholar*. In addition to these articles, academic reference books were used. Many of the sources used are experts in the research field of branding, KIFs and startups, which strengthen the

trustworthiness of this thesis. Many of the sources have also cited older articles, which can be considered as classic articles within the fields. Thus, we can assume the sources to be reliable.



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## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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*To gain better knowledge about the role of social media in KI startups, the following chapter will provide a description and understanding of relevant literature. The concepts described include the definitions of startups, KIFs, social media and corporate branding. Finally, we present an overview of the relevant theory.*

### 3.1 STARTUPS

The concept of startups will be described as this thesis focus on social media branding within KI startups. Despite that our focus is narrower than startups in general, it is important to understand general concept of startups to continue with an understanding of a certain type of startup. Firstly, startups are argued to be part of the more major concept of entrepreneurship, which is valuable to briefly explain. According to Shane and Venkataraman (2000) defining entrepreneurship as individuals who start new firms is insufficient, but still a fundamental part of entrepreneurship. This approach is shared by further researchers, who mean that starting businesses is part of entrepreneurship (Jarillo & Stevenson, 1990; Sharma & Chrisman, 1999; Gartner, 2008). In addition, the success of entrepreneurship and starting new businesses, have been connected to innovation. Drucker (2011, p. 17) states that *“innovation is the specific tool of entrepreneurs, the means by which they exploit change as an opportunity for a different business or a different service”*. Hence, being innovative is a prerequisite to the success and effects of entrepreneurship and ultimately startups.

Therefore, prior research often explain that startups are part of entrepreneurship. Such research explains what makes a new business, that is startups, more successful than others regarding innovation. Thus, there is consensus regarding that startups are preconditioned by innovative entrepreneurs to succeed. Now the underlying concept of startups will be presented as startups are closer to our focus in this thesis.

There is no formal definition of startups. However, there are some general assumptions about the characteristics of startups, which can be explained through an extensive literature review by Gruber (2004). The first and most stated characteristic is the “newness”, i.e. a firm in the early stages of development. A second characteristic is the “smallness” of such firms. A third characteristic is the environmental uncertainty that is reflected in uncertainty of customers and sales. Therefore, there is a broad consensus of what a startup or a new venture is, that is new and small firms operating in an uncertain environment (Gruber, 2004). Despite this, it is rather impossible to find distinctions of what “new” and “small” are. Nevertheless, there are attempts on definitions.

The characteristics of newness, smallness and an uncertain environment of a startup have been further emphasized by other researchers. Bresciani and Eppler (2010) state that startups are commonly defined throughout literature as having existed for maximum five years, which indicates for young and new firms. Eggers *et al.* (2016) argue that startups share the specific characteristic of being new, which implies limitations of resources. Such limited resources include capital (Wong & Merrilees, 2005; Abimbola, 2001), time (Wong & Merrilees, 2005), and knowledge about branding (Rode & Vallaster, 2005). These authors have a rather broad view on what a startup is. This view is not totally shared by other researchers. For example, Chen *et al.* (2017) argue that a startup has a certain focus of providing high-tech products and services. Eggers *et al.*'s (2016) description of startups indicates that being innovative, which is similar to providing high-tech products and services, is not a prerequisite. Therefore, the focus of startups, that is what they aim to do, is not given within literature. Despite differences, such as the focus of startups, later descriptions of startups are similar to the extensive description provided by Gruber (2004).

As there is no definite consensus regarding the concept of startups, we agree that startups are small and young firms that operates in uncertain environments. We also understand startups in general as new firms in any industry. Thus, speaking of only startups, we have a rather broad view of this concept.

### 3.2 KNOWLEDGE-INTENSIVE FIRMS

As this thesis focus on KI startups, it is necessary to present the concept of knowledge-intensity and such firms. The characteristics and challenges described in the literature of KIFs is relevant in the context of KI startups as well. This as the only apparent difference of KIFs and KI startups is the current stage of such firms. However, the major constituents of such firms do not differ, regardless of stage.

The concept of knowledge is somewhat complex and unclear because of dissimilarities throughout the literature's explanations (Blackler, 1995; Alvensson & Kärreman, 2001; Tsoukas & Vladimiro, 2001). Thus, there are many definitions and categorizations of knowledge throughout literature, which are both broad and narrow. Despite many approaches and attempts to define knowledge in its general, there is a consensus that knowledge-intensity and KIFs imply certain advanced knowledge (Starbuck, 1992; Alvensson, 2001; Alvehus & Jensen, 2015).

The term knowledge-intensity is originally an imitation of the economic labels of capital-intensive and labor-intensive, which are labels that describe the importance of capital and labor as production inputs. Therefore, the term knowledge-intensive imply the higher importance of knowledge in comparison to other inputs (Starbuck, 1992). The label distinguishes thus certain firms from others regarding the differences of knowledge input required for the firm's output. According to Alvensson and Kärreman (2001), this view of knowledge as a resource in the context of business, is often emphasized throughout literature.

Definitions of what a KIF is differs to some extent. Starbuck (1992) defines a KIF as a firm were one third of the employees are experts, and the experts are those who have gained esoteric (difficult to access, difficult to understand) knowledge. Esoteric knowledge is gained through formal education or extensive experience, which separates them from other people or "non-experts". This view has more recently been emphasized by von Nordenflycht (2010), who agrees that KIFs heavily rely on an intellectual skilled workforce. Von Nordenflycht calls this approach for a person-

centric view of knowledge-intensity. Similarly, Alvesson (2001), states that a KIF is a firm where the work is of an intellectual nature, and the employees are mostly qualified and well-educated. This view has more recently been emphasized by Alvehus and Jensen (2015), who take stance on the requirement of educated and qualified employees who provide knowledge work. A further definition is made by Ditillo (2004), who states that a KIF is a firm which provides intangible solutions to its customers based on mainly the knowledge of its employees. This view is similar to Sheehan's and Stabell's (2010) definition of KIFs, who state that such firms sell problem-solving services based on expert knowledge that its expert employees possess. These definitions are coherent to the previous examples, but the difference is that Ditillo (2004) and Sheehan and Stabell (2010) categorize a KIF as merely a service-firm. The previous exemplified definitions are thus broader in the question of what output that is provided by KIFs.

While there is a consensus that KIFs are characterized by highly educated and experienced employees, there are also consistent depictions in the literature of the challenges of KIFs. Reconnecting to the ambiguity of knowledge, Alvesson (2001) and Alvehus and Jensen (2015) state that the ambiguity of knowledge makes the knowledge-intensive output hard to evaluate by customers. This leads to clients/customers not knowing whether KIFs products or services are valuable or not. This means that customers only perceive something as good or bad, and not knowing if it is good or bad (Alvesson 2001). As a counteract for this challenge, Alvesson (2001) argues that KIFs need to establish close social links with customers, which are done through proper rhetoric, regulation of image and proper management of relationships. Such activities can then affect customers to perceive KIFs' products or services as valuable. Rhetoric means different elements of arguments and persuasion, which affect the customers. Regulation of image means that KIFs should create and feed an image, which is coherent to the image the customers associate as good. The management of relationships is important since the concept of knowledge is a social construction, and is dependent on the perception and recognition of others. KIFs must therefore build and improve the relationships with different groups, such as clients, to be accepted as knowledge-intensive (*ibid.*). Similarly, von Nordenflycht (2010) states that an experts' accomplishments are hard to evaluate by non-experts since the

output is unclear for non-experts without the same knowledge. As a counteract for this challenge, von Nordenflycht (2010) argues that firms should signal quality through different mechanisms. For example, KIFs should signal quality through appearing as knowledgeable, which can build a reputation of being so. The appearance of being knowledgeable does namely serve as a proxy for good quality in the eyes of customers, and can be done through different activities of the firm (von Nordenflycht, 2010).

In line with researchers, we also understand KIFs as extensively relying on the input of certain knowledge possessed by a major part of the firm's employees, which then is used to create knowledge products or services. Further, we treat KIFs as both product and service firms, as it would be hard to argue for an exclusion. In Table 1, there is an overview of the differences between a KIF and a non-KIF.

**Table 1.** Differences between KIFs & Non-KIFs

Characteristics	KIFs	Non-KIFs
Higher education and/or experience among employees in general	Yes	Not necessarily
Advanced/innovative/high-tech output	Mostly	Rarely
Unclear output quality, hard to evaluate quality	Yes	No
Quality of output is perceived by	Appearance, image reputation perceived etc.	The output itself, as it is evaluable by the client.

(Based on von Nordenflycht, 2010; Alvesson, 2001; Starbuck, 1992)

### 3.2.1 KNOWLEDGE-INTENSIVE STARTUPS

To the best of our knowledge, there is no formal definition of “knowledge-intensive startups”. However, it is valuable to present existing examples of positions to what KI startups are in order to understand that KI startups are a combination of the concepts of knowledge intensity as well as KIFs, and startups. In prior studies about KI startups and knowledge-based entrepreneurship, it is possible to decipher considered definitions. Baker, Miner and Eesley (2003) have written about KI

startups without defining KI startups. However, by looking at their samples and their standpoint of what knowledge-intensity is, it is possible to understand their view of KI startups. The startups in their sample were knowledge-intensive by which they meant shared the common importance of human capital. The sample was divided into two groups, environmental consulting firms and computer training firms. Median age for environmental consulting firms was 3,7 years and the median number of employees was 8. Median age for computer training firms was 3,2 years and the median number of employees was 3. Further, the majority of the firms' employees had technical or science degrees. These facts show that the startups were relatively young, had quite few employees who in general had extensive education.

Burger-Helmchen (2008) has written an article about knowledge-based entrepreneurship, which can be considered synonymous to KI startups. The author states that knowledge-based startups are processed as high-tech firms in literature. Based on academic literature, he defines such firms as less than eight years old started by knowledgeable individuals that wants to develop and exploit innovative products or services. Burger-Helmchen (2008) proposes that knowledge-based entrepreneurship is either about commercially exploiting science-based knowledge, or developing new knowledge built on science. Despite there is no absolute definition by Burger-Helmchen (2008), he emphasizes the importance of knowledge gained from science when discussing knowledge-based startups.

As both Baker *et al.* (2003) and Burger-Helmchen (2008), we assume that KI startups are equal to KIFs in the question of knowledge-intensity. The difference between KIFs and KI startups is the same difference between established firms and startups as carried out in the section "Startups". Thus, we understand KI startups as young KIFs producing innovative products and services in an uncertain environment with limited resources. Hence, a fusion of the concepts of knowledge-intensity and startups.

### 3.3 BRANDING

To understand what branding is, we first need to know what a brand is. According to Keller (2003, p. 3) a brand is a “*name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them, intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and differentiate them from those of competition*”. Branding is the term that is used when a company is using these resources in the brand to differentiate themselves from their competitors (Kapferer, 1997). Since this thesis focus on corporate branding, a broader explanation of this concept will be described in the next section.

#### 3.3.1 CORPORATE BRAND

The definition of corporate brand varies in the literature. One definition is that a corporate brand is defined by the characteristics (i.e. heritage, credibility, people) of the organization (Aaker, 2004). Argenti and Druckemiller (2004, p. 369) state that a corporate brand is “*a brand that spans an entire company (which can also have disparate underlying product brands)*”. Another definition stated by Knox and Bickerton (2003), is that corporate branding goes beyond customers to include all of the stakeholders in a company. Balmer (2001) states that corporations should ask themselves what the promise from the brand is. The corporation should then reflect upon if these promises are accurate and if they are reflected in the reality. Urde (2003) provides a framework about core-value based corporate branding to help brands in their branding process. He argues that the core values affect an organization at all levels at all the time. The core values affect areas such as leadership, communication, strategy, and product development, which in turn constitutes the corporate brand (Urde, 2003). In addition, a corporate brand can be leveraged to create credibility or customer loyalty (Aaker, 2004).

As stated before, we are focusing on corporate branding in this thesis. However, it is important to know the differences between a corporate brand and a product brand. Hatch & Schultz (2003) have identified seven differences between a corporate brand and a product brand. First, the focus is on the company in corporate branding, and on the product in product branding. Second, the corporate brand is managed by the CEO,

and the product brand often by middle managers (also Balmer, 2001). Third, the corporate brand needs to attract support from all kind of stakeholders, while the product brand only needs support by the customers (also Knox & Bickerton, 2003). Forth, in the branding effort for the corporate brand the whole company is responsible, while the marketing department is responsible for the product brand. This goes in line with the fifth difference, which is that communication for a corporate brand should involve the whole company, while the product brand should be handled by marketing communications (also Balmer, 2001). Sixth, there is a difference in the time horizon (short time horizon for the product brand and long for the corporate brand), Finally, the corporate brand has a strategic importance for the company, while the product brand has a functional importance.

To summarize, a corporate brand is more extensive than a product brand as it is constituted by the entire company. In Table 2, the differences between a product brand and a corporate brand are summarized.

**Table 2.** The differences between a product brand and a corporate brand

<b>Item</b>	<b>Product Brand</b>	<b>Corporate Brand</b>
Focus attention on	The product	The company
Managed by	Middle manager	CEO
Attract and gain support of	Customers	Multiple stakeholders
Delivered by	Marketing	Whole company
Communication mix	Marketing communications	Total corporate communication
Time horizon	Short (life of product)	Long (life of company)
Importance to company	Functional	Strategic

(Based on Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Balmer & Gray, 2003)

### 3.3.2 *BRANDING AND STARTUPS*

The literature about corporate branding is vast, and research about startups have been extensively explored. However, the relationship between corporate brands and startups is an under-explored field (Bresciani & Eppler, 2010; Merrilees, 2007). Branding is often seen as something that is just for big businesses, and branding in



small businesses and new ventures has even been described as an “oxymoron”, that is a combination of contradictory words (Merrilees, 2007). Even though there is limited research about the relationship between startups and corporate branding, there are exceptions which will be described in this section.

One of the first known studies in the field of branding and startups is Boyle’s (2003) article about a successful manufacturing company, which built its brand as a new business during the 1990s. The author stresses the importance of building a strong brand image and to create brand values. It is important to find the values that can have a positive impact on the brand personality. Such values include ambitions, courage, honesty, and logic (Boyle, 2003). Another article that has studied the challenges when building a corporate brand image is Rode and Vallasters (2005), who studied startups in their two first years as active businesses. The authors explored how corporate identity is created by looking at four different processes during the brand building; corporate culture (that includes the values of the company), corporate behavior (that is how human resources are managed), corporate design (that is the visual aspect, i.e. name and logo) and corporate communication (that is how the founders help employees to reach organizational goals). These four processes together create the corporate brand image. Witt and Rode (2005) also studied how startups build their brand images and brand identities. Witt and Rode (2005, p. 279) state that a positive corporate image “*is of practical value, especially for start-ups trying to establish themselves in their markets*”. They also argue that internal branding activities, that is building the corporate brand identity, are at least as important as external branding, that is building the corporate brand image.

### **3.4 DIGITAL MARKETING**

Before explaining how startups can brand themselves through social media, digital marketing needs to be explained. The marketing environment has changed enormously since the beginning of the 21<sup>th</sup> century due to technology and internet (Keller, 2009). Wymbs (2011, p. 94) defines digital marketing as “*the use of digital technologies to create an integrated, targeted and measurable communication which helps to acquire and retain customers while building deeper relationships with*

*them*". Digital marketing can be divided into one-way communication channels and two-way communication channels (Heini & Heikki, 2015). The digital channels that have a one-way communication include websites, banner advertising, and search engine optimization (SEO). The digital channels that have a two-way communication include company generated blogs and social media (*ibid.*). Since this thesis is focusing on how startups use social media as a branding tool, social media will be described in a subchapter below.

### 3.4.1 SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media can be described as "*a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content*" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). The authors describe six types of social networks; social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn), content communities (e.g. YouTube), blogs (e.g. Twitter) collaborative projects (e.g. Wikipedia), virtual game worlds, and virtual social worlds. One can assume that social networks, content communities and blogs are the only social networking sites used for branding activities. A social networking site is a platform where users can create a personal profile and invite friends to have access to this profile. Users can also send messages to each other. A content community is described as a community where the users can share media content between each other. A blog is described as a platform that provides the possibility of interaction with others through the addition of comments (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Kietzmann *et al.* (2011), identify seven functional blocks of social media; identity, conversations, sharing, presence, relationships, reputation and groups. The authors state that the power has been taken from the corporations to the individuals in terms of marketing, which creates a big challenge for the corporations. To overcome these challenges, corporations need to understand the behavior on these digital channels (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011).

Today social media is seen as a norm for companies when marketing themselves (Geho & Dangelo, 2012), and there are several studies that describe the relationship between social media and branding (Alalwan, Rana, Dwivedi & Algharabat, 2017). To connect these parts, the next section will describe the relationship between branding and social media.

### **3.5 SOCIAL MEDIA BRANDING**

In this section, we are going to present the relevant literature about four crucial main outcomes that startups' social media branding practices can lead to; *brand awareness, engage and influence customers, attract new employees, and reputation.*

#### **3.5.1 BRAND AWARENESS**

According to Keller (2003, p. 730) brand awareness “*is related to the strength of the brand node or trace in memory as reflected by consumers' ability to recall or recognize the brand under different conditions*”. Social media can be effective to companies of all sizes to build brand awareness (Bija & Balas, 2014). Bija and Balas (2014) further state that the most important goal for marketers is to reach brand awareness. Since marketers see social media marketing as a more targeted type of advertising, social media is considered as being highly effective when building brand awareness (Bija & Balas, 2014). To generate awareness is the key purpose of using social media for startups (Chen *et al.*, 2017), and some of the benefits for companies from the use of social media are to increase awareness (Jones *et al.*, 2015). Further, Bruhn *et al.* (2012) state that both positive and negative user-generated communication on social media can lead to brand awareness, but not necessarily the attitude towards the brand. The authors argue that the marketers in a company need to identify the source of the awareness to have an impact of the outcome. Further, Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides (2011) argue that managers of small firms should try to establish brand awareness as a first step to stand out from competitors, and social media is an important part of this.

### 3.5.2 ENGAGE AND INFLUENCE CUSTOMERS

Startups need to implement better social media strategies, as it can enhance the engagement of existing and potential clients (Akula, 2015). Nisar and Whitehead (2016) emphasize the use of social media among companies, and especially to SMEs because of their limited budget, to help them engage and listen to their customers. By doing so, they encourage them to be long term advocates of their brand. Their findings conclude that there is a significant positive relationship between brands, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, and that being active on social media can help companies to obtain this. These findings go in line with both Ashley and Tuten's (2015) and Bruhn *et al.*'s (2012) articles, who also stress the importance for companies to use social media. Bruhn *et al.* (2012) also argue that companies even can influence their customer's conversations via social media, and therefore they should see social media as an essential component in their marketing mix. Further, Srinivasan, Bajaj and Bhanot (2016) state that social media can help startups influence consumers' purchase decisions.

### 3.5.3 EMPLOYER BRANDING

The importance of human capital in startups, which can be described as employer branding, is also a field that has been studied lately (Moser, Tumasjan & Welp, 2017; Tumasjan *et al.*, 2011). Both articles state that startups face challenges, such as being new at the market, when recruiting new talent. To overcome these challenges, it is important that the startups promote their unique and attractive job attributes. Examples of such job attributes can be an attractive company culture, or founders with extensive work experience (Moser *et al.*, 2017; Tumasjan *et al.*, 2011). According to Tumasjan *et al.* (2011), social media is an effective tool for startups and small companies to attract new employees and recruit new talent. The authors state that startups can communicate recruitment messages on web communities and use social media to create a positive presence, which can attract potential employees. This goes in line with both Kaur, Sharma, Kaur and Sharma's (2015) and Madia's (2011) findings. The authors state that employer branding on social media is important for any company, and should be added to their overall recruitment process to find the

right candidates for a certain job. Further, Sivertzen, Nilsen and Olafsen (2013) state that social media may play a key role in attracting and recruit new employees.

### 3.5.4 REPUTATION

Another aspect of brand building in startups that have been studied, is how startups can build a strong reputation among stakeholders (Petkova *et al.*, 2008; Fischer & Reuber, 2007). Reputation can be described as “*the stakeholders’ collective knowledge about and regard for the firm in its organizational field*” (Petkova *et al.*, 2008, p. 320). Petkova *et al.* (2008) identified a difference between generalized and local reputation. The authors define generalized reputation as large groups of distant stakeholders, and local reputation as small group of local stakeholders. Four types of investments used in the reputation-building process were found; symbolic activities (e.g. attending trade shows, providing information about the new technology etc.), human capital (e.g. recruiting experts etc.), product development (e.g. high quality products etc.) and social capital (e.g. building relationship with customers or partners).

According to Karimi and Naghibi (2015), social media branding can help build reputation for startups. Further, the authors state that social media should be an essential part for every business’ marketing strategy. Researchers have also stressed the importance of building reputation as it increases sales. According to Cesarani and Consoli (2015), a good web reputation can also help startups to acquire new customers. This goes in line with Musa *et al.*’s (2016) findings, were they state that social media marketing for SMEs is vital to increase the company profits and customer satisfaction. The authors also argue that reputation is considered an essential factor when building a firm’s brand. In addition, Chen *et al.* (2017) argue that social media is important for startups in the brand building process when they are building their reputation. The authors state that, since reputation is predicted by previous performance of a company, it is even more important for startups to have content strategies on social media because they have limited previous performance. Finally, Kietzmann *et al.* (2011) emphasize that if companies can analyze and

understand social media activities, they can more easily get an understanding in how to build their reputation.

### **3.6 SUMMARY OF THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

There are many reasons why KI startups should brand themselves through social media channels, which can be put in different contexts of branding. By having a clear branding strategy, startups can overcome challenges, such as being new to the market and having limited resources (Witt & Rode, 2005; Rode & Vallaster, 2005; Eggers *et al.*, 2016; Bresciani & Eppler, 2010). To build brand awareness (Michaelidou *et al.*, 2011; Chen *et al.*, 2017), influence and engage customers (Srinivasan *et al.*, 2016; Akula, 2015), to attract and recruit new talent (Moser, Tumasjan & Welppe, 2017; Tumasjan *et al.*, 2011), and to build reputation (Petkova *et al.*, 2008; Fischer & Reuber, 2007; Karimi & Naghibi, 2015; Chen *et al.*, 2017), are some of the contexts in branding. Table 3 provides an overview of the relevant literature.

**Table 3.** The overview of relevant literature

<b>Item</b>	<b>Context</b>	<b>Authors</b>
<b>Brand Awareness</b>	In general	Keller (2003)
	In social media	Bija & Balas (2014), Bruhn <i>et al.</i> (2012), Jones <i>et al.</i> (2015)
	In social media & startups	Chen <i>et al.</i> (2017), Michaelidou, Siamagka and Christodoulides (2011)
<b>Influence &amp; Engage Customers</b>	In social media	Bruhn <i>et al.</i> (2012), Nisar & Whitehead (2016), Ashley & Tuton (2015)
	In social media & startups	Srinivasan <i>et al.</i> (2016), Akula (2015)
<b>Employer Branding</b>	In social media	Sivertzen <i>et al.</i> (2013), Madia (2011)
	In startups	Moser <i>et al.</i> (2017)
	In social media & startups	Tumasjan <i>et al.</i> (2011), Kaur <i>et al.</i> (2015)
<b>Reputation</b>	In social media	Kietzmann <i>et al.</i> (2011)
	In startups	Petkova <i>et al.</i> (2008), Fischer & Reuber (2007)
	In social media & startups	Chen <i>et al.</i> (2017), Karimi & Naghibi (2015), Cesaroni & Consoli (2015), Musa <i>et al.</i> (2016)

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## 4. EMPIRICAL METHOD

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*In Chapter 4, the empirical method is presented. We start by explaining our explorative design, followed by our qualitative strategy. The chapter then continues with how the data were collected and handled. Finally, the ethical considerations of this thesis are presented.*

### 4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN AND STRATEGY

The research design is the general plan on how a researcher will answer the research question (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). According to Saunders *et al.* (2012) there are three different research designs; explanatory, exploratory, and descriptive. An exploratory study is valuable when the researcher wants to understand something and gain new insights (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Hence, our study is exploratory considering that we want to explore how social media is used in the process of building a corporate brand for KI startups, and as this is a rather unexplored field. An advantage of an exploratory research design is that it is flexible and adaptable. During exploratory research, it is namely important to be willing to change the direction as new insights and data are acquired. Further, it is possible that exploratory research may be unnecessary to follow up (*ibid.*).

A descriptive study wishes to portray an accurate profile of persons, an event, or a situation. Further, a descriptive study can be a forerunner or an extension to an exploratory or explanatory study (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). Hence our study could, except of being exploratory, be argued to be partially descriptive in the sense of a pilot study in form of a questionnaire. However, the questionnaire is not aimed to portray an accurate profile of the phenomenon that is studied in this thesis. The purpose of an initial questionnaire, as a means for a pilot study, was foremost to collect suitable contacts for our subsequent interviews. In addition, the purpose was also partially to get an initial understanding of a more extensive sample of KI startups. Thus, our aim has not been to describe this sample in detail. Therefore, even if our



methodological choice of using a pilot study in form of a questionnaire partially functioned as a forerunner for the interviews, the study is entirely exploratory.

There are mainly two research strategies; quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research focuses more on quantifying and analyzing data objectively. A qualitative research focuses more on interpreting words, meaning how individuals subjectively perceives their social realities (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We have strived to conduct our study and thesis through a qualitative strategy. It would be challenging to quantify and analyze data objectively, since our research is aimed to explore and understand the gap of how different KI startups use social media when building brands. In addition, our aim and research question imply that we need to interpret how KI startups subjectively perceive the role of social media branding to them to answer our question efficiently. Regarding the qualitative empirical methods, we have chosen to conduct an initial questionnaire as a pilot study, and semi-structured interviews for our main study. Before a more detailed argumentation and explanation of our chosen methods are given, it is valuable to mention that the questionnaire is not part of its own quantitative strategy. The methodological choice of conducting a pilot study with a questionnaire is merely a forerunner for the main study of interviews. Supportive to this, Teijlingen and Hundley (2001) state that a pilot study can be a preparation for the main study since a pilot study can collect preliminary data for the main study. Thus, our questionnaire is part of the qualitative strategy.

## **4.2 THE PILOT STUDY**

In this section we are going to describe the empirical method for the pilot study of this thesis. The pilot study was conducted to get an initial understanding of how KI startups use social media, and to collect participants for the interviews. The initial understanding from the pilot study was supportive as we were able to efficiently determine which social media channels that were emphasized by KI startups in a branding context. This was beneficial for us as we aimed to reach KI startups which differed in certain dimensions. The most major reason was that we wanted to interview KI startups that use different social media channels for similar branding purposes, as our desire was to not limit our study to only one specific channel. It was

also helpful as we minimized the risk of focusing on channels that would perhaps be rarely emphasized by KI startups.

#### *4.2.1 QUESTIONNAIRE*

The pilot study of this thesis contains a web based questionnaire (Appendix A). The advantage with a questionnaire is that it is easy to get access to it and we can collect correct data, while the disadvantage is that it can be hard to control the veracity in the answers (Denscombe, 2016).

The questionnaire consists of 16 questions. Out of these 16 questions, the first seven questions were background questions, and included questions such as which year the company was founded, which industry the company was operating in and which social media platforms the company had an account on. It was important to have a control question about when the company was founded, since companies founded before 2010 were excluded. The reason why these companies were excluded from the study is because we consider a KI startup as eight years or younger, which is aligned with Burger-Helmchen's (2008) criteria of KI startups. We chose to have the background questions first. The reason was that respondents are more likely to finish the questionnaire by asking less complex and uncomplicated questions first (Denscombe, 2016).

After the background and control questions, eight closed questions about branding in social media were provided. These closed questions were provided to get the initial understanding of what the role of social media practices for branding building in KI startups is. A closed question is a question where the respondent only can choose one or more alternatives, without developing his or her answer (Bryman & Bell, 2015). We chose to have closed questions in this part due to the advantages of such questions. One advantage with closed questions is that they can be pre-coded, which simplifies the analysis. Another advantage of closed questions is that it enhances the comparability between answers, which makes it easier to compare different respondents. Further, closed questions also make it easier for respondents to complete

a questionnaire. However, there are also disadvantages of closed questions which were considered, such as the loss of spontaneity and that respondents would interpret questions differently (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Four of the questions were statements about how efficient the KI startups valued social media usage to build brand awareness, to influence and engage customers, to attract new employees and to obtain reputation. The other four questions were statements about to what extent the KI startups use social media to build brand awareness, reputation, to attract new employees and to influence and engage customers. These eight questions were answered by a 7-point Likert scale, where the respondents valued in the extent they agreed with, or disagreed with, the statement. 1 was “strongly disagree, while 7 was “strongly agree”. Finally, the last question was an open question where the participants in the questionnaire could leave their contact information if they were willing to participate in an interview for our main study at a later stage. This question was essential since one of the main reasons for conducting the pilot study was to collect participants for our main study.

#### **4.2.2 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS**

For this thesis, startups from the area of Skåne, Blekinge, Gothenburg, Stockholm, Luleå, and Umeå were selected. By choosing these regions we got a spread from southern to northern Sweden. The startups were found on the internet via websites of incubators, which was efficient to find KI startups. From the information on the incubators’ websites and the startups websites, we could decide whether the startups were knowledge-intensive or not based on the definition in *Chapter 3.3*. In addition, we told the respondents what type of startups we were looking for within the covering letter that was sent out together with the questionnaire. We specifically asked the startups to only answer if they were knowledge-intensive in regard to extensively relying on knowledge gained from academic education and experience. This assured us even further that the companies who answered understood which type of startups we were requesting, and that they could determine whether they were KI startups if unsure. Startups that were not knowledge-intensive were excluded from the study. All the sampled KI startups were imported to an Excel-document with contact information that had been found on the incubators or companies’ websites. In total,

we sent the questionnaire to 374 KI startups. In table 4, there is a more detailed overview of the response rate.

**Table 4.** Responses and non-responses

<b>Response frequency</b>	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Population	374	100
Number of included responses	73	19,5
Number of excluded responses	4	1,1
Number of non-responses	297	79,4

#### 4.2.3 DATA COLLECTION METHOD

The questionnaire was made with *Google Forms* and was sent to the sample of 374 KI startups by email on April 23<sup>rd</sup> and April 24<sup>th</sup> 2018. The questionnaire was open between April 23<sup>rd</sup> and May 4<sup>th</sup>. To increase the response rate (Bryman & Bell, 2011), we sent a reminder on April 26<sup>th</sup>. On the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> of May, the questionnaire was sent out to another 104 participants to increase empirical data. In the cases where the founder's email address was public on either the incubator or company website, we decided to send the questionnaire to him or her with the hope to increase the response rate. In the cases where the founders' email-address could not be found, the email was sent to the general info-mail of the company. Since the study was in Sweden, the questionnaire was in Swedish. However, the questionnaire has been translated to English (Appendix A), since it is the linguistic requirement of this thesis.

#### 4.2.4 DATA ANALYSIS

The computer program SPSS Statistics was used for the analysis of the data from the questionnaire. Since the focus was to use the questionnaire as a forerunner for the interviews, mainly descriptive statistics are provided. Firstly, we calculated how frequent the different social media networks were used. Secondly, we calculated the mean value, one by one, in the four questions about social media usage. In Table 5 there is an overview of the use of the different social media channels while Table 6 provides an overview of the social media usage of the sampled KI startups.

**Table 5.** Respondents' social media accounts

Social media	Responses	Percent
LinkedIn	62	84,9
Facebook	57	78,1
Twitter	34	46,6
YouTube	32	43,8
Instagram	30	41,1
Other	2	2,7
No social media accounts	2	2,7

**Table 6.** The respondents' social media use

Question	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
<b>Q5:</b> Our company uses social media to build brand awareness	73	5,21	2,141
<b>Q6:</b> Our company uses social media to influence and engage customers	73	4,60	2,247
<b>Q7:</b> Our company uses social media to attract new employees	73	3,85	2,132
<b>Q8:</b> Our company uses social media to build reputation	73	4,79	2,154

### 4.3 SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

This qualitative thesis contains semi-structured interviews. It was decided on forehand that the semi-structured interviews were going to take place after the questionnaire. In a semi-structured interview, the researcher has a list of themes and key questions to be covered. However, the questions should be questions that open up for discussion, and additional questions may be needed to explore the research question (Saunders *et al.*, 2012). It is of importance to remember that the interviewer should not ask leading questions, and that he or she tries to use the language that is relevant to the respondents that are being interviewed (Bryman & Bell, 2011). For example, we did not ask specifically about brand awareness, if they influence and engage their customers, if they use social media to attract employees, or reputation in a social media branding perspective. We rather asked few major questions that were more open, which were initially placed within a certain theme. However, the answers of our questions turned into further sub-questions and statements. In this way the respondent could develop his or her ideas and comments, which is an advantage

of semi-structured interviews (Denscombe, 2016). As we let the respondent develop the answers in this way, it enabled us to access additional themes. The disadvantages with semi-structured interviews, are that it is time demanding (*ibid.*), and that lack of standardization in semi-structured interviews can lead to lack of reliability (Saunders *et al.*, 2012).

#### 4.3.1 THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

For the semi-structured interviews, an interview guide was used (Appendix B). As all respondents were native Swedish respondents, or spoke Swedish fluently, the interview was in Swedish. However, just like the questionnaire, the interview guide has been translated to English to live up to the linguistic requirements of this thesis.

The interview guide consists of twelve main questions. The questions were divided into three different sections; background questions, questions about branding, and finally questions about social media. The first section of the interview guide, the background questions, are questions about the respondent him/herself and the company they are representing. These questions can be seen as warm-up questions, which make the respondent more comfortable (Denscombe, 2016). The first part also contains questions about knowledge-intensity, where the respondent answers questions like how they convince stakeholders to use their service or product. The second part, the questions about branding, deals with questions about how the company brand themselves, how it brands itself through social media, and what the advantages (or disadvantages) are with social media branding. The focus here is to get answers which can be connected to previous research about brand awareness, reputation, employer branding, and how the company influences and engages customers. The third, and last, part contains questions about social media, such as the importance of being active on these channels.

#### 4.3.2 SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

The selection of interview participants was partially based on the answer of the last question of the questionnaire (Appendix A). The last question was a question where

the participants could answer if they were interested in participating in an interview. If they were interested in an interview, they could write an email-address so we could contact them. 13 KI startups answered that they were interested in an interview, and due to the limited time we only had the opportunity to conduct six interviews with participants from Skåne and Umeå. Based on the answers, we selected three KI startups from the medical industry, one from the transport industry, and two from the management consulting industry. The aim of the selection was to choose six different companies, which differed in the contexts of which social media channels they use, to which segment they are selling their product or service to; B2B, B2C or both, and which industries they belong to. The reason for this selection was that we want to understand how different social media channels are used in a branding context, if the usage of social media differed in regard to what customer groups the KI startups have, and between different industries that the KI startups belong to. Thus, to get a broad overview of the role of social media for KI startups in a branding context.

We decided to interview by telephone. The reason for this was that all KI startups that we contacted for an interview preferred to be interviewed this way. The benefits with a telephone interview are that it is cheaper, but also that asking sensitive questions by telephone will be more effective because the interviewer is not physically present (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Because of the limited time and resources for this thesis, telephone interviews were the natural choice. On the other hand, when doing personal interviews face-to-face, the interaction between the interviewer and respondent is higher than it would have been if the interview took place over phone or internet (Gillham, 2008). Table 7 will provide an overview of the six different respondents and interviews.

**Table 7.** Interview participants

Nr	Name	Type of company	Segment	City	Length of interview	Date
1	Startup A	Medicine & Health	B2B	Umeå	32 min	7 <sup>th</sup> May
2	Startup B	Medicine & Health	B2B, B2C	Malmö	37 min	8 <sup>th</sup> May
3	Startup C	Medicine & Health	B2C	Malmö	31 min	8 <sup>th</sup> May
4	Startup D	Transport & Logistics	B2B, B2C	Ängelholm	45 min	9 <sup>th</sup> May
5	Startup E	Management Consulting	B2B	Lund	33 min	11 <sup>th</sup> May
6	Startup F	Management Consulting	B2B	Malmö	38 min	14 <sup>th</sup> May

#### 4.3.3 DATA COLLECTION METHOD

The interviews took place on six different occasions (Table 7). For the telephone interviews we used the mobile application *TapeACall Pro* to record the interviews, but also a second mobile phone in case there were any technical problems. The participants were informed about the recording prior the interview through an information letter that was sent out to all respondents, and also by phone before the actual interview started. All participants accepted to be recorded. When doing a qualitative research, nearly all researchers record the interview and transcript it later (Bryman & Bell, 2011), which was also done in this thesis.

#### 4.3.4 TRANSCRIPTIONS

A transcription of an interview enhances the opportunity to make detailed searching and comparisons of data (Denscombe, 2016). The transcriptions of the six interviews took approximately 15 hours to transcript and composed 37 pages of content, which were transcribed by ourselves. Despite it is time consuming to transcribe, there is an advantage of transcribing the interviews by ourselves since it is possible to analyze the data already in the transcription process. Analyzes and interpretations can be deepened in other ways than if the transcriptions were made by someone else (Ahrne & Svensson, 2011).



After the transcriptions were completed, we first separately read the transcriptions. We then discussed our findings and read the material together. The reason for this was to get a more detailed and nuanced overview of the empirical data.

#### 4.3.5 DATA ANALYSIS

When analyzing the data from the interviews we used a thematic analysis, which is one of the most common approaches to qualitative data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). A thematic analysis lets the researcher search for specific themes within the collected data, which in this case is the semi-structured interviews. The themes should be categorized and related to the study's research focus (*ibid.*).

Thematic analysis is a strategy to use when searching for repetitions, similarities and metaphors within the collected data. In this thesis, we decided to find sentences and phrases from the six interviews that could be related to our four main themes: brand awareness, influence and engage customers, employer branding and reputation, and how these are used in a social media branding aspect. The sentences and phrases within each theme were color coded with a specific color. Beside these main themes, we also extracted interesting sentences and phrases that could be related to further themes. After the sentences and phrases were extracted and put in context to our main themes, they were condensed and coded. Codes that were coherent could then be developed into sub-themes of our different main themes. Noted sub-themes that were irrelevant for our study were sorted out.

#### 4.3.6 TRUSTWORTHINESS

Qualitative studies should be evaluated by different criteria from those used in a quantitative study (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Bryman and Bell (2015) argue that trustworthiness is made up by four different criteria; credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. The first criteria, credibility, refers to if the findings make sense and if they are believable. In this thesis, people with insight and knowledge about their respective company's marketing strategies were interviewed to gain credibility. The questions asked to the interview persons were also open

questions, which mean that we did not force the interview persons in a certain direction to get the answers we wanted. The second criteria is transferability. Transferability refers to if the study can be applicable to other studies (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Denscombe, 2016). The aim of this study is to get an understanding of how the KI startups in this thesis use social media as a branding tool, and the findings cannot be generalized. Instead questions should be raised about in what extent and how likely it is that the findings can be found in other cases (Denscombe, 2016). The third criteria, dependability, refers to record keeping of recordings, drafts, analysis, transcriptions and other important things for the study, in case peers would need to review the material (Bryman & Bell, 2015). All drafts of the thesis, transcriptions and recordings of interviews are safely stored on our computers. The fourth and last criteria of trustworthiness is confirmability. Confirmability refers to that researchers should act in good faith and be complete objective in their research (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Denscombe, 2016). When analyzing the interviews, we tried to be as objective as we possible could be. We also had an open sense and tried to be open for findings that were not expected to be found in this study (Denscombe, 2016).

#### **4.4 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

It is of utmost importance to discuss the ethical aspects in a study. A researcher is expected to approach a study in an ethical way (Denscombe, 2016), and according to Bryman and Bell (2011) there are four ethical principles which need to be considered; whether there is harm to participants, whether there is lack of informed consent, whether there is an invasion of privacy, and whether deception is involved. The questionnaire that was sent to the startups was voluntary, and it was also voluntary to provide us with contact details in the last question (Appendix A). In the letter to the startups, we also let them know that all the data that were collected were handled confidentially by us.

It is also of importance that the selected participants for the interviews remain anonymous, and therefore their names are replaced with letters to differentiate them. An interview letter was sent out, and before every interview we had a short introduction about our study and let the interview persons know that they did not have

to answer questions that they did not feel comfortable with. We also told the interview persons that all data is handled confidentially by us, and that the transcription of the interview will be stored safely.

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## 5. FINDINGS

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In this part, the findings from the interviews are presented. We will provide the findings of how and why social media is used in the contexts of branding which we have focused on; brand awareness, influence and engage customers, employer branding, and reputation. We will also present insights of social media usage by KI startups that can be related to specific research about companies characterized by knowledge-intensity. Finally, we will summarize our findings from the interview and present a table of the most common reasons for how and why our sample of KI startups use social media as a tool in the brand building process.

### 5.1 BRAND AWARENESS

Overall, increasing brand awareness was the most emphasized reason why the respondents use social media. Both startup A and D emphasized that they publish and share content on Facebook, “just to be seen”. Startup F also stated that both Facebook and LinkedIn are efficient for these kind of activities when trying to be seen. Startup F, but also startup C and D, further meant that they were visible for the right target groups on Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn respectively. The following quote is from one respondent, when talking about the importance and efficiency on reaching out to be seen by the right target group on Twitter:

*“I think it is easier to reach our potential customers, persons with depression, on Twitter. [...] I think there is more people that suffer from depression on Twitter than on Facebook and LinkedIn.” - Office Manager, Startup C*

Another aspect, emphasized by startup C and D, is that their companies try to create an interest of themselves on social media by posting content relevant for their target groups to increase the awareness of their companies. One respondent said the following quote when talking about posting interesting content on Twitter to spread the awareness of the company:

*“We convey it, the information, the scientific information about depression and treatment for it” - Office Manager, Startup C*

Further, another respondent stated the following when also talking about posting interesting content, but on Facebook:

*“For me it was important to post an image or a video very early to show that we are for real now. Now it's possible to sit in it, steer it, and drive it.” - Founder, Startup D*

Startup A, B and F were also emphasizing that if people see and hear about your brand on social media, it simultaneously establishes. Startup B specifically mentioned that they use Facebook and Instagram to try to “establish themselves”. Startup F said that they use Facebook and LinkedIn for this purpose. Startup F further mentioned, related to the previous emphasis of relevant target groups, that LinkedIn is a suitable platform for them to create visibility by commenting other professionals posted content. Startup A resonated similarly to startup F, regarding visibility creation as a specific reason for why startup A uses LinkedIn. However, startup A elaborated and said that when she contacts a potential customer, she did not want it to be the first time that the customer hears about the company, and therefore is LinkedIn used in different ways to spread awareness. One respondent provided the following quote about how networking on LinkedIn helps them spread their brand, and make future customers aware of the company before she actually reaches out to them:

*“The thing is, when I come and talk to the company and then book a meeting and talk to them, I do not want it to be the first time they hear about us and our company name.” - CEO, Startup A*

Another aspect of being present on social media channels is that it may provide visibility without actively using it. This statement was provided by startup C when talking about the importance of having a Twitter account. Startup D had a similar explanation when talking about the company’s Facebook account, and meant that even if you are not active and do not post anything, you still have a visibility for potential customers. Startup C and D thus emphasized that when they are offline, social media channels still partially increase brand awareness.

To summarize, to build brand awareness is the main reason why the KI startups in this study use social media. All the respondents stated that they use social media in a brand awareness context. However, the different KI startups used different social media channels when trying to build awareness. For example, Facebook is the most common social media channel to use, but LinkedIn was seen as a more serious platform. According to the respondents, LinkedIn is used in a more professional context when building awareness, while the posted content on Facebook, and also Instagram, not necessarily needs to be considered serious. One respondent uses Twitter as the only social media platform because the company's target group was active there. Therefore, the respondent did not mention anything about posting different content on different social media platforms. Table 8 provides an overview of which startups from the interviews use which social media channels when building brand awareness.

**Table 8.** Which social media channels are used to build brand awareness

Social Media Channel	Startup A	Startup B	Startup C	Startup D	Startup E	Startup F
LinkedIn	✓				✓	✓
Facebook	✓	✓		✓		✓
Instagram		✓				
Twitter			✓			

## 5.2 INFLUENCE AND ENGAGE CUSTOMERS

Influencing and engaging customers were also extensively emphasized reasons why the KI startups of our sample use social media. Just like brand awareness, all respondents mentioned that they use social media to influence and engage customers through different activities. Startup A stated that LinkedIn is an effective platform when booking customer meetings since the company's potential customers mostly are present on LinkedIn. The respondent said the following when she discussed the efficiency of booking customer meetings on LinkedIn:

*“I have actually booked customer meetings on LinkedIn. [...] I have booked 40 customer meetings the last year on LinkedIn. Good customer meetings.”- CEO, Startup A*

Both startup E and F said that their companies use LinkedIn to affect potential customers. Startup E stated that their customers are able to see that their company has competent and experienced employees on LinkedIn, which startup E mentioned as an efficient way for them to promote sales. A similar statement was done by startup F, who stated that they use LinkedIn to convince customers about their quality, and consequently make these customers prefer them instead of their competitors. One respondent said the following when talking about their branding activities of customer communication on LinkedIn:

*“We have worked quite a lot with LinkedIn posts to keep in touch and talk about what we are doing, so that the understanding of what we do and what we can offer increases.”- Regional Manager, Startup F*

Startup B had a similar approach, but in a B2C and influencer marketing perspective, when using Instagram and Facebook. He frequently mentioned that the company hires influencers and tries to find trustworthy ambassadors or influencers that like the product and communicate it on Instagram and Facebook. Thus, influence customers together with influencers on social media.

*“You must have credible ambassadors, witnesses, who can say that they have used the product and that it works. [...] So we need to find the right profiles that believe in our product. That is our number one priority. We will never work with a profile that is just thinking of making money.”- CEO, Startup B*

Further, startup D states that his company only uses Facebook as it enables them to directly talk with potential customers, which consequently create curiosity and response. Similarly, but with another channel, startup C said that Twitter is more frequently used than Facebook and LinkedIn, as Twitter attains most response and engagement from their potential customers. The respondent said the following about why they focused on using Twitter instead of other channels when communicating with customers:

*“It is very easy to reach out and get response, way easier than LinkedIn and Facebook. [...] And I have noticed that if I post the same content on Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter, Twitter is the channel that results in most response.” - Office Manager, Startup C*

To summarize, to influence and engage customers were also seen as a main reason for using social media by the respondents. Just like brand awareness, it differs in which social media channels the different KI startups use. The respondents use almost the same channels to influence and engage customers as they use when building brand awareness. However, two of the respondents emphasized that LinkedIn was a better option when it comes to influence and engage customer, than Facebook. In Table 9, there is an overview of which KI startups from the interviews use which social media channel to influence and engage customers.

**Table 9.** Which social media channels are used to influence & engage customers

Social Media Channel	Startup A	Startup B	Startup C	Startup D	Startup E	Startup F
LinkedIn	✓				✓	✓
Facebook		✓		✓		
Instagram		✓				
Twitter			✓			

### 5.3 EMPLOYER BRANDING

The emphasis of social media usage in an employer branding perspective, such as attracting new employees, differs between the respondents. The main reason, stated by startup A, E and F, for using social media to attract new employees, is that the companies could easily visualize their attractive working environments and decent working conditions. The following quote is from one respondent when talking about the importance of mediating their culture, and how it is efficiently mediated through Instagram to attract employees at present times:

*“To show that we have foosball tables, hockey or soccer on TV, and a well-stocked fridge with beer. [...] If you can read about it and see it, then you*



*understand that we have a good culture where everyone is feeling fine and are happy.” - Project Manager, Startup E*

Further, startup A talked about employer branding activities through social media from a more local and prospective view. She emphasized the importance of being recognized by the local inhabitants, which they use Facebook to manage. According to startup A, Facebook is more suitable for them to use than LinkedIn when attracting new employees. However, they were not recruiting at the moment. The respondent said the following about how they use Facebook to locally reflect the company as an attractive working place for potential employees:

*“Even though we do not have any customers right here, we want to be seen here, so that the public here thinks we are a good company to work for and that we have decent working conditions and stuff like that. [...] I mean, to the day that we need more people.” - CEO, Startup A*

Similar to startup A’s prospective view, startup F emphasized the importance of posting content on LinkedIn that are relevant for additional target groups than only their professional customers. When talking about the importance of different kind of target groups perception of their company and their activities, the respondent stated the following quote:

*“Professional customers’ perception of us as a company and what we do is important, but of course the perception of potential colleagues as well. We want to get their eyes on us, so that they see us as a potential employer, so that we are able to employ when we grow.” - Regional Manager, Startup F*

Startup E emphasized employer branding activities most of all respondents, and stated that the company’s main focus on social media is to attract new employees. According to startup E, their social media channels are used more for this purpose than it is to attract customers. The respondent said the following when reflecting upon their prioritization of employees in relation to customers:

*“We can say that 70% of our efforts on social media is towards the potential employees, to convince them to work for us. The rest 30% is to convince the customer, maybe.” - Project Manager, Startup E*

In addition, startup E emphasized that it is important to interact with potential employees on Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn. He stressed the importance of being where their potential employees currently are, and exemplified with age groups. The respondent said the following:

*“You have to move where the potential employees are right now. That is why social media is important, everyone is there. Not only young, but older as well, but it is just that they are hanging on different places.” - Project Manager, Startup E*

To summarize, to attract new employees was a reason why three of the KI startups use social media. The respondents used mainly LinkedIn for this context, but also Facebook and Instagram. One respondent stated that they are using different channels for different kind of content when trying to attract new employees. For example, the company wants to be perceived as a serious company on LinkedIn, while they want to show their culture in a relaxed manner on Instagram and Facebook. One of the respondent also emphasized the importance of being present on Facebook to be able to attract new employees in the future. Table 10 provides an overview of which KI startups from the interviews use which social media channels to attract new employees.

**Table 10.** Which social media channels are used to attract new employees

Social Media	Startup A	Startup B	Startup C	Startup D	Startup E	Startup F
LinkedIn	✓				✓	✓
Facebook	✓				✓	
Instagram					✓	
Twitter						

## 5.4 REPUTATION

Building reputation on social media was approached by five out of six respondents during the interviews. According to startup A and F, showing references of well-known companies within their industries on LinkedIn create good reputation for the

company. Startup F stated that they use LinkedIn to show that they have cooperation with famous high-tech companies. Further, one respondent stated that sharing references of cooperation with big pharmaceutical companies on LinkedIn, helps building their corporate brand as it increases their reputation:

*“To be able to say: ‘We cooperate with the big pharmaceutical companies’. The credibility and reputation for us will raise if we see it from a customer view, which in itself builds our corporate brand.” - CEO, Startup A*

In addition, another respondent stated the following about sharing references through LinkedIn:

*“However, if we use existing customers that are renowned and try to use them as references, it will also be quite effective to evoke a bit of curiosity and get in through the door so to say...” - Regional Manager, Startup F*

Startup D stated that Facebook is an effective tool when counteracting critics, and make them understand that their company contributes to something positive. According to the respondent, being able to directly handle criticism, people’s response can have a self-reinforcing effect and increase the reputation by receiving more ‘likes’ on Facebook which others can see:

*“It is a good idea to get over a critical mass to get a self-reinforcing effect. Something like that. It takes time to get there, and I do not know exactly how many ‘likes’ you need to make it work. It is the thought of coming somewhere...” - Founder, Startup D*

One respondent further stated that she believes it is not their product itself that is sold through social media, it is rather the company’s reputation that sells. Startup A said the following about how her company uses LinkedIn to build reputation which is a prerequisite for selling:

*“We are selling our reputation and really not a product. We are selling the trust to use our product. So, it is really something that we are focusing on, we do not want to be like: ‘SELL, SELL, SELL!’, but instead “look, this is what we do, we have data that shows that, and people that confirms this.” - CEO, Startup A*

To summarize, building reputation was a reason why three KI startups use social media. LinkedIn is the channel which most of the respondents use when building reputation. Table 11 provides an overview of which KI startups from the interviews use which social media channels to build reputation.

**Table 11.** Which social media channels are used to build reputation

Social Media	Startup A	Startup B	Startup C	Startup D	Startup E	Startup F
LinkedIn	✓					✓
Facebook				✓		✓
Instagram						
Twitter						

## 5.5 KNOWLEDGE-INTENSIVE BRAND PERCEPTION

The perhaps most interesting insight were that some respondents try to use social media to build credibility and to mediate their sometimes complicated services or products, so that their target groups perceive them and their brand in a certain way. One example is the following statement when stressing the importance of being perceived as a “serious” company in the customer's eyes on Twitter:

*“Seriousness. We want to be seen as serious as possible, we want it to be perceived as a safe medical technology product. We would rather not be associated with being a startup.” - Office Manager, Startup C*

Another statement, by startup F, was that credibility is a prerequisite for selling their complicated services, and that it is important to have a two-way communication when mediating credibility. The respondent said the following when talking about why two-way communication is important in this context, and how their LinkedIn usage enables this more efficiently than compared to certain traditional marketing activities:

*“Being able to interact with companies in our industry, or actually our whole network, through LinkedIn is an advantage... compared to, for example, a newspaper ad. [...] We do not sell individual hours. We deliver to anyone who has decided to change how they work. It's quite complicated sales and, in*

*addition, it's a great deal of confidence when someone makes that decision.” - Regional Manager, Startup F*

A further and related statement was made by the respondent, when talking about their desired outcome of their LinkedIn content:

*“This kind of company is in principle based on absolute competence, that you have to have to succeed... But you need to also be able to describe or convey this, and how to do it to give some kind of credibility. We try to do this...” - Regional Manager, Startup F*

Similarly, to startup F, startup E emphasized that the company put efforts into conveying how knowledgeable they actually are in relation to others through certain activities on LinkedIn:

*“We try to prove our knowledge in the industry. For example, we write and share a lot of articles about the consultancy industry and the finance industry, but also about financial competences. That is, what concerns financial skills or the consultancy industry. We show what we do.” - Project Manager, Startup E*

Thus, startup E and F meant that it is not enough to simply possess the knowledge as they do and believe that others will understand this and consider hiring them. Hence, they emphasized certain tools for creating a certain credibility, and that LinkedIn is a major tool for them to communicate this to their stakeholders.

## **5.6 ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA**

The respondents frequently expressed themselves positively towards the usage of social media throughout the interviews. Advantages such as wide reach, efficiency of reaching target groups, and low costs were commonly stated. The advantages were also occasionally stated in relation to other channels that can be used within branding. For example, startup D and F emphasized that social media channels imply benefits that traditional channels are not able to provide. Startup D mentioned that the costs of social media usage are much less in relation to the costs of traditional channels, such as TV commercials, and that it is hard to identify other efficient channels than social media. Startup F similarly discussed the efficiency of social media in

comparison to traditional channels, and said the following in regards of an efficient discussion:

*“You cannot have a good discussion there, it's more like an advertisement. You have to make sure to be seen at other places.” – Regional Manager, Startup F*

Despite that advantages of social media were commonly stated, the respondents also stressed some disadvantages of using it. For example, both startup B and D indicated that one disadvantage was that there is too much information on Facebook, which sometimes makes it hard to be recognized by potential customers. This is what one respondent stated when talking about why they focus on social media communication instead of traditional channels, but still expressed his concern regarding the amount of information on Facebook and Instagram:

*“It's a jungle, social media. There is garbage there, there is a lot of garbage there. People who are unserious.” - CEO, Startup B*

Startup E and F emphasized the disadvantage of being transparent. Both respondents stated that they try to be as transparent as possible on social media, but they also stressed the potential drawbacks of their honesty on social media. Startup E was concerned about which channel to use for different kinds of content and behavior. He said that his company uses LinkedIn for more serious or professional content, while Instagram and Facebook are used for more unserious but utmost honest content:

*“You expose a lot of things. You can do that on both Instagram and Facebook, but not LinkedIn. On LinkedIn we do professional marketing stuff. But on Instagram we can show an after work and champagne tasting and then post it. It's amateur content in a certain way and can irritate a lot of people, maybe.” - Project Manager, Startup E*

Further, startup C and D stated that social media channels can increase unnecessary workload. Startup C expressed her concern that customers may contact the company on Twitter when they have complaints or need help, instead of using the intended contact information that are announced for these errands on the company's website. She meant that the company wants to help all customers, but it could be hard to answer all customers and control what is being said about them on Twitter. Another

statement, made by startup D, is that you almost seem forced to post something on Facebook so people do not forget about the company:

*“It takes a little... Actually you have to post something to exist, so that people do not forget about you. Sometimes it's tough when it does not happen as much as you want to show. You don't want people to believe you've died or something like that. That the company just disappeared.” - Founder, Startup D*

## **5.7 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS**

To summarize the findings of this thesis, we noticed that all the four elements; brand awareness, influence and engage customers, employer branding and to build reputation were emphasized within social media branding by the KI startups in this study. The elements of brand awareness and influence and engage customers were most emphasized. The elements of employer branding and reputation was least emphasized. Despite the respondents mostly saw benefits with social media usage in while building their corporate brand, they also expressed some disadvantages or potential drawbacks. An example of these is that there is sometimes too much information on the social media networks. Another example was that too much exposure of the company, even if transparency were emphasized by the respondents, can lead to negative criticism. A third example was that social media makes them feel forced to sometimes post something to show that the company still exists.

Further, there were interesting insights from the interviews regarding desired perceptions of the respondents' companies and brands worth presenting. These findings were that the respondents used social media to mediate their knowledge about their product, service or their industry, and also to build trustworthiness. Table 12 provides an overview of which activities the KI startups from the interviews executed on social media, and for what purpose.

**Table 12.** Overview of activities and purposes

<b>Element</b>	<b>Social Media</b>	<b>Activities &amp; Reasons</b>
Brand Awareness	LinkedIn	Activities: <i>post serious content</i> Reasons: <i>to be seen, create visibility, to establish the company, to reach right target group</i>
	Facebook	Activities: <i>post and share content</i> Reasons: <i>to be seen, create interest, to establish the company, create visibility offline</i>
	Instagram	Activities: <i>cooperation with influencers</i> Reasons: <i>to establish the company</i>
	Twitter	Activities: <i>post serious content</i> Reasons: <i>to reach right target group, create interest, create visibility offline</i>
Influence & Engage Customers	LinkedIn	Activities: <i>book customer meetings, promote sales, networking</i> Reasons: <i>efficiency, affect potential customers, affect professional customers</i>
	Facebook	Activities: <i>uses customers as ambassadors, talk with customers</i> Reasons: <i>create curiosity and response</i>
	Instagram	Activities: <i>cooperation with influencers</i> Reasons: <i>to gain trust</i>
	Twitter	Activities: <i>post and share content</i> Reasons: <i>it is easy to get response</i>
Employer Branding	LinkedIn	Activities: <i>post serious content</i> Reasons: <i>attract professionals</i>
	Facebook	Activities: <i>visualize decent working conditions</i> Reasons: <i>attract local employees</i>
	Instagram	Activities: <i>visualize culture</i> Reasons: <i>attract young talent</i>
Reputation	LinkedIn	Activities: <i>use well-known partnerships as references, prove their knowledge</i> Reasons: <i>to build credibility, to build reputation</i>
	Facebook	Activities: <i>counteracting critics</i> Reasons: <i>to gain understanding that the company contributes to something positive</i>



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## 6. DISCUSSION

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*In this chapter, we will discuss our findings from the interviews. As our research question was to explore the role of social media in the corporate branding process of KI startups, we will discuss our findings regarding how and why the KI startups in this study use social media to brand themselves. The discussion is coherent with the four branding elements; brand awareness, influence and engage customers, employer branding, and reputation. Lastly, a discussion about further interesting findings will also be provided.*

### 6.1 BRAND AWARENESS

Brand awareness was the one of the two most mentioned reasons why the KI startups in this study use social media in the branding process. All the respondents stated that they want to be seen and recognized by people. A possible reason for why such statements were made could be that the KI startups that were interviewed were all relatively young and unknown companies. Therefore, their statements might be based on their current stage as a startup which could imply less recognition by their stakeholders. Less recognition would also most likely have negative impacts on the development of their current stages. For example, less recognition may challenge them to increase sales. Thus, such circumstances could be the reason for the emphasis on awareness. This coherence could be related to what Chen *et al.* (2017) state, who mean that building brand awareness through social media is a key purpose to startups. However, building brand awareness is probably crucial for startups in several activities as well, but social media might have been emphasized by our sample due to the efficiency of social media, which is explained as valuable to particularly startups. For example, Bija and Balas (2014) state that building brand awareness on social media is highly effective for any company, and Bresciani and Eppler (2010) mean that social media is particularly efficient for startups due to a possible extensive reach and potential low costs. Therefore, the sample of KI startups in this study may have noticed particularly the extensive reach, but also other possibilities of using social media as equally fruitful to them as for startups in general. Such or similar

advantages of social media as a channel was also discussed throughout the interviews by the respondents. Thus, they have already considered and actively used it into their branding activities where the aim is to attain awareness.

Further the respondents used different social media channels for different activities to build brand awareness. In comparison to other social media channels, LinkedIn was more seen as a platform used for professional communication and where the KI startups post more serious or professional content. They probably meant that certain channels are used based on certain aims of branding activities. Meaning that activities that can be perceived in certain manners requires the usage of a certain social media channels. Bruhn *et al.* (2012) state that marketers must find the source of the increased awareness that have a desired impact on how the brand should be perceived in people's eyes. Therefore, it is possible that the respondents may have, like Bruhn *et al.*'s (2012) statement, identified LinkedIn as an important source of increased brand awareness regarding being perceived as professional or serious, which was generally desired by some respondents. In addition, it is arguable that LinkedIn is the most efficient social media channel that increases brand awareness in a professional or serious manner since LinkedIn could commonly be regarded as a professional network. However, it is possible that KI startups in relation to other types of companies have a stronger need for LinkedIn and its professional setting due to different reasons. For example, their knowledge intensity may require them to be more active on LinkedIn and act professional or serious as their stakeholders often might be professionals and themselves also active on especially LinkedIn.

Facebook was the most mentioned channel in the context of building brand awareness. However, Facebook, and other channels, were stated to be used in a more general aim than LinkedIn. For example, one respondent mentioned that they post content on Facebook to show that they are for real. It did thus also seem important just to be seen regardless of how the brand awareness is perceived. One can assume that such statements regarding Facebook is due to that Facebook may have a wider user segment than LinkedIn, for example. Thus, they may not be equally required to create awareness on Facebook or other channels as if LinkedIn is used. The aim of building awareness on Facebook is therefore perhaps not meant to affect how the

brand is perceived in certain ways by stakeholders. Rather it is possible that the aim is only to be seen by as many as possible. Therefore, a certain impact on the brand except of mere awareness did not seem to entirely affect the KI startups choice of social media channels in the context of brand awareness.

Therefore, the potential wide reach of social media may have an impact on that social media was emphasized to build brand awareness. However, a combination of wide reach and identification of suitable channels seem to be of importance when building brand awareness as the aim was both to be seen in certain manners and to only be seen as much as possible. This since the KI startups emphasized certain channels over others when building brand awareness that need to be perceived in certain manners, and certain channels when the aim was only to be seen. If such combination is attained, social media may play a significant role for these KI startups and perhaps other KI startups when building brand awareness. That is the recognition by relevant stakeholders and recognition in general most likely has positive implications for the KI startups' further development.

## **6.2 INFLUENCE AND ENGAGE CUSTOMERS**

To influence and engage customers was also one of the two most emphasized reasons why the KI startups in this study use social media in their branding processes. The KI startups in this study were all in their early stage of development and can thus be argued to have limited resources. Supportive to this, Eggers *et al.* (2016) mean that startups have limited resources, which probably would include startups that are knowledge-intensive. Therefore, it is not surprising that influencing and engaging customers was one of the most emphasized elements within social media branding. The limitation of resources may expressly have an impact over their focus of customers, which most likely could increase sales and ultimately the level of resources. This reasoning is like the discussion about brand awareness. However, as awareness probably is a prerequisite for influencing and engaging customers, it is arguable that the specific need of sales for startups affects such firms' emphasis on both these branding elements. Further, the respondents' emphasis of customer communication in the context of specifically social media correspond to Srinivasan

*et al.* (2016), who mean that social media can help startups to influence consumers purchase decisions. Thus, our findings indicate that social media can be equivalently used by KI startups as for startups regarding influencing and engaging customers.

The respondents in the interviews emphasized that social media made it easier to directly communicate with customers on the different platforms, such as getting response and booking actual customer meetings on LinkedIn. The respondents may have meant that the two-way communication was important for them, and as social media enables this, it is a reason for why they use social media. When companies have direct communication with customers, it can be assumed that it is easier to influence and engage them compared to other channels which may only provide one-way communication. For example, it is easier to have a dialogue with the customers on social media, which is supported by Bruhn *et al.* (2012). In addition, Heini and Heikki (2015) state that social media enables a two-way communication between the customer and the company. Therefore, it seems possible that social media branding activities enables KI startups as well to have a dialogue, since this was also emphasized as beneficial to attract customers by some of the respondents. It is valuable to mention that the potential of dialogues might thus be equivalently beneficial for the customers. The easy access to communicate with a company, and one's own choice to do so on social media channels, may be positive to the customers. Such comfort for the customers and the efficiency of two-way communication may have implications for why the KI startups emphasized and use social media to influence and engage their customers.

Interestingly, the sample did also enlighten the less benefits of traditional marketing channels in comparison to social media channels regarding the communication with customers, for example. One major reason for not seeing the benefits with traditional marketing channels was that such channels are more expensive to reach potential customers in comparison to social media channels. One respondent stated that social media is more valuable as it provides a potential wide reach for a relatively low cost in comparison to TV commercials. The respondent meant that posting the same content on social media would reach more customers and simultaneously be less

expensive than if the same activity would be performed through the example of TV commercials. Thus, social media channels may have been specifically emphasized when communicating with customers due to their newness, scarce resources and the inefficiency of other channels. This reasoning is further aligned with Bresciani and Eppler (2010), who mean that social media has the potential of being a low-budget branding tool and provide an extensive reach. The authors mean that it is specifically valuable for startups as they generally are challenged by limited resources.

Therefore, the respondent's statements regarding the benefits of social media in a context of customer communication partially corresponds to previous research about social media in the contexts of startups and companies in general. The possibilities of a dialogue with an extensive network and relatively low costs as stated for startups, may be equally beneficial for KI startups as these were mentioned by our sample themselves. In addition, the distinct emphasis regarding specifically influencing and engaging customers in the context of social media may be dependent on the fundamental characteristics of startups, which could be relatively alike to our sample of KI startups. Thus, limitations of resources could imply a need of sales and ultimately a preference for customer-oriented activities, such as social media branding activities.

### **6.3 EMPLOYER BRANDING**

Attracting new employees through employer branding activities in the context of social media was discussed by three respondents during the interviews. The respondents said that they wanted to show that the companies working conditions were decent. Unsurprisingly, LinkedIn was the most used social media platform regarding attracting new employees, as it was generally emphasized as a more professional or serious network than other social media platforms. LinkedIn's primary function can be argued to focus on the users' professional network, which might make it easier for companies to search for potential candidates for their vacancies. It can be argued that one major reason why the KI startups in our study are using LinkedIn is that LinkedIn is more efficient and easier than other channels

for companies to approach potential candidates, and convince them to choose their company. These findings go in line with Tumasjan *et al.*'s (2011) findings, who argue that social media can be used by startups to directly target potential employees. On the other hand, one respondent emphasized that Instagram and Facebook are more suitable social media channels when it comes to exhibit their relaxed culture. The respondent said that exhibiting their relaxed culture on Instagram and Facebook can reach a younger target group and convince talents to work for them. Therefore, this respondents' KI startup used additional channels for employer branding activities. This statement about being able to show the company's culture in aligned with Moser *et al.* (2017) and Tumasjan *et al.* (2011), who state that social media can be used by companies to visualize attractive company attributes, such as the culture of the company. The authors also state that such activities are especially important for startups because of their newness. Thus, the general characteristic of startups may equally have impact on this KI startup's choice of visualizing the company's culture on social media. Further, it can be argued that Instagram and Facebook are platforms which are more appropriate for a more relaxed content, such as after works which are not directly job related, compared to LinkedIn. A potential reason for such an argument is that the professional environment of LinkedIn may make it more important to consider what to say, post and share, and so forth, to retain a professional image. However, it is not possible to exclude that the respondent who emphasized different channels for different activities was due to lack of knowledge regarding differences of social media channels. It is perhaps possible that any of the activities that were performed could be performed through one channel if one fully understands the implications of certain content and certain channels, for example. It is thus rather hard to make any inference from one respondents statement in this regard.

In addition, startups in general can efficiently use social media to attract employees, which also seemed partially corresponding to our sample. One can argue that it is even more important or beneficial that KI startups use social media to attract employees. This as KI startups in comparison to startups in general may have a more distinct need to find the right person for the right job as KI startups rests on the foundation of skilled employees. For example, Starbuck (1992) states that companies that are knowledge-intensive are heavily constituted by a workforce that is considered

as experts. Thus, the specific need of skilled employees may have impacted some of the respondents' distinct emphasis of employer branding activities on social media as such channels are said to offer the possibility for such activities. In addition, the need of skilled employees may also be why the respondents emphasized specifically LinkedIn. The respondents may expressly have identified this channel as more efficient to find more skilled employees compared to both social media channels and other types of channels. For example, the professional setting that LinkedIn generally is perceived as being surrounded by, may be based on that professionals or similarly skilled workforce are active within this channel.

Another interesting finding was that KI startups with more employees, used social media more frequently to attract new employees than KI startups with fewer employees. The respondents that worked for a company with fewer employees did not talk as much about how they attract new employees through social media as the respondents who worked for a company with more employees. Thus, the role of social media regarding employer branding seemed less important for smaller KI startups. A reason for not using social media to build their employer brand and attract new employees may depend on that the KI startups with few employees are in an even earlier development stage than the KI startups with more employees. They may thus not yet have had the possibility to hire additional employees. For example, the limitation of resources due to minor sales would most likely have an impact that prevent them from hiring further employees. Thus, a consideration of engaging in employer branding activities on social media may not yet have been made. A possible implication of this may ultimately be that the role of social media regarding employer branding differs to KI startups as well as it probably would for other types of startups due to challenging circumstances that surrounds startups. Thus, the resources that the KI startups who did not emphasize employer branding may have prioritized their current resources for other branding activities on social media at present time. For example, this might imply why there was a more distinct emphasis on brand awareness and influencing and engaging customers compared to employer branding.

## 6.4 REPUTATION

The last of the four branding elements, reputation, was stated by three KI startups as a reason for using social media in a branding purpose. The respondents mentioned that one of the activities for building reputation was to show that they cooperate with big and well-known companies within their industry, which in itself would contribute to the corporate brand. These findings are relatable to Petkova *et al.* (2008), who state that startups should build relationship with partners, and that partnerships with well-known companies can signal social status and recognition. It can be argued that a company's social status and recognition impacts the reputation of a company positively, which ultimately increases the value to stakeholders. As partnerships may have such an impact on the reputation, this may be why the respondents emphasized the importance of showing their partnerships as a social media branding activity. That social media was mentioned as a channel to show partnerships, has most likely to do with the extensive reach of social media as the possible reach was frequently emphasized throughout the interviews. The reach would most likely enable the KI startups to show their partnerships to an extensive network which otherwise would not be able see this.

Another respondent emphasized that being able to face a critical mass on Facebook can have a self-reinforcing effect. It was probably meant that the respondent believes it is possible to manage the reputation on social media channels efficiently as it allows the company to directly respond to criticism, in this case on Facebook. For example, criticism on social media may be negative and public to others, but the two-way communication that social media channels enables may be an efficient solution for such challenges. The respondents statement may then be based on a belief that it is strengthening for the reputation as others can see that this company handles the criticism even if it is negative. In addition, criticism on other channels that does not provide a two-way communication would arguably be challenging to control, while social media channels may partially enable control of criticism which has positive implications for the reputation.



Further, the respondents that emphasized reputation building activities on social media seem to have recognized their need of reputation in order to sell due to their newness on the market. For example, a respondent specifically said within the context of social media that it is the reputation that are sold and not the product. Thus, the respondent seemed to emphasize social media usage because the reputation on such channels are crucial. That social media could be important in regards of reputation is aligned to Cesaroni and Consoli (2015) and Musa *et al.* (2016), who mean that social media can be an efficient tool to build a good web reputation for small businesses. However, it is further arguable that a good reputation on social media as with other platforms is crucial to increase sales for especially startups that provide knowledge-intensive products or services. Alvensson (2001) and von Nordenflycht (2010) state that a certain reputation is important in order for companies that are knowledge-intensive to sell due to the complexity of such firms' products and services. It may thus not be odd that some of respondents emphasized reputation-building activities on social media. For example, one respondent said that they share customer references on LinkedIn to create curiosity amongst potential customers. The respondent likely meant that the possibility of sharing references on social media can create better reputation. The respondent also said that it is a lot more confidence involved when hiring their services due to a certain complexity of the sales process. These two statements were made in different contexts, but as the same respondent stated them they could be connected to Alvenssons (2001) and von Nordenflychts' (2010) statement about the importance of reputation. This as the respondent both stressed reputation building activities through social media and stressed the challenge of selling complicated services. Thus, such potential similarities between existing research about KIFs and KI startups may be why some of the other respondents emphasized reputation on social media as well. Regardless of whether this is the case as it is hard to draw any conclusion from such small sample, social media reputation may have the potential of being beneficial for KI startups regarding the complexity of their products and services.

However, all the respondents did not mention reputation-specific activities during the interviews. A reason for why some respondents did not specifically emphasize reputation may most likely be that they perceive that anything they do affects their

reputation. A fundamental argument for this would be that every activity that they are practicing are meant to be perceived as something positive by others, since it is doubtful that any company would sought for bad perceptions and reputation. Thus, reputation may be highly dependent and managed by activities that was emphasized during the three other elements of social media branding for our entire sample. From this point of view, social media activities may have an important role for the element of reputation. However, the findings appeared insufficient to make any explicit statements regarding what role distinctive reputation building activities on social media have.

## **6.5 KNOWLEDGE-INTENSIVE BRAND PERCEPTION**

Some of the respondents frequently stressed the importance of building a brand that becomes perceived as serious, credible and knowledgeable. The importance of such perceptions influenced all the four elements of brand building and different coherent activities for how they communicate and mediate themselves on social media. Some of these activities which will be discussed in detail further below. The respondents mentioned that it is important to gain these perceptions, partially as their brands are new, but also as they provide complicated products and services which sets certain requirements. The desired perception is also possibly knowledge-intensive specific. Meaning that the knowledge-intensive startups have a higher need and not only desire for certain perceptions. These social media activities that affect their brand perceptions can be related to research about the specific challenges of KIFs. The research has stressed the importance of engaging in quality-assuring activities beyond the product or service as clients cannot evaluate the quality of such output due to lack of knowledge. That is why KIFs need to affect the perception of others from certain activities to be able to sell (Alvesson, 2001; von Nordenflycht, 2010). However, these authors have a rather general view of how such activities take shape. Thus, it is possible that different social media branding activities, such as the examples below, could be more defined activities which are beneficial for KI startups in this regard.

Two respondents emphasized that despite they are skilled and experienced, there is a need of conveying that they possess the competences that are desired by clients.

When talking about how they convey this in connection to social media branding, LinkedIn was emphasized. They stated that LinkedIn enables them to convey an idea of what they do, but perhaps more importantly how they can do it. They seemed to mean that they need to convey themselves in ways that clients initially think is appropriate for such companies to look like. If they succeed to convey themselves how their clients believe they should appear as, increased sales could be reached. When discussing why specifically LinkedIn are used for this, they stated that it enables them to efficiently post and share content that are perceived as “knowledgeable”, which transcends to the customer perception of their entire company and brand. That the respondents expressed a need of conveying themselves as skilled and experienced could be related with Alvesson (2001) and von Nordenflycht (2010). These authors mean that KIFs should feed an image or appearance that is consistent with what their clients associate as knowledge-intensive. Thus, as these respondents valued LinkedIn when affecting the customer-perception of themselves, it may be possible that certain content being shared and posted on LinkedIn shapes and feed their brand images. These contents may then in turn have a quality-assuring effect on the corporate brand. Meaning that the KI startups may post content that their client associate as valuable which eventually transcends to the corporate brand, and in turn generate sales, for example. Regarding the emphasis of specifically LinkedIn as a channel in this context, it is perhaps once again due to the access of potential clients and that these two KI startup’s specific target groups are LinkedIn users. However, other social media channels cannot be excluded from this reasoning, since other channels may facilitate the same benefits for KI startups with other target groups. For example, a further respondent mentioned that they, like the two respondents above, post content that is perceived in a serious way. However, this respondent emphasized Twitter as suitable to them due to that their target groups were found on that social media channel.

Lastly, a respondent also stressed the importance of conveying a credible company brand through social media to be able to sell. However, the specific emphasized activity was the networking with stakeholders on social media. Accordingly, LinkedIn was seen as a key tool as it facilitates efficient two-way communication which enhances the level of credibility and ultimately increase sales. The emphasis

on social media networking could be related with Alvesson (2001), who states that KIFs must manage their relationships carefully as knowledge is a social construction and dependent on the perception of others. This means that KIFs must build healthy relationships through certain activities to be recognized as knowledge-intensive and valuable to others. Therefore, it is possible that this respondent has identified their need of credibility due to their intensity of knowledge, and more importantly that it is possible to gain from relationships on LinkedIn. Thus, networking on social media and LinkedIn could be a potential activity to make the customers perceive this KI startups' brand as valuable due to the knowledge-intensity of the company. One can also assume that managing relationships on social media would be helpful for not only KI startups, but for other companies as well, to affect brand perceptions positively. Hence, it is difficult to state whether this respondent mentioned the efficiency and need of networking because of being knowledge-intensive or just as any company. However, the respondent may have emphasized the networking on social media due to the extensive access of networks on such platforms. Social media channels such as LinkedIn, which provides access to a professional network, may be particularly valuable for this KI startup as well for other KI startups when building relationships. Partly because of that relevant target groups, such as professionals, may be found on LinkedIn. However, it is perhaps even more valuable as LinkedIn and other social media channels could provide a network that would otherwise not be accessible for newly established companies. For example, established companies may already have attained an extensive network that perceives such companies and brands as credible, knowledgeable or similar. Therefore, this KI startup and potentially other KI startups may receive relatively much value from building relationships, and ultimately certain brand perceptions on social media than established companies would have.

In sum, some of the respondents stressed their need of a corporate brand or image that is partially similarly perceived. Different social media channels and activities were said to be efficient to convey such perceptions. These activities could be related to what researchers, such as Alvesson (2001), have emphasized as counteracts for KIFs' challenges. Thus, even if the existing research process established companies, there might be distinct similarities between such firms and startups. Further, this may

imply that social media branding activities can be a narrower example of such activities as stated in the general existing research. This more defined example of social media branding activities which seemed to play a significant role for the challenges of most of our sample, may therefore perhaps have the possibility to play a significant role for additional KI startups. However, all respondents did not mention social media branding activities that can be related to such existing research. One reason may be that they desire or need other perceptions of their brands. For example, two KI startups in our sample were not selling to professional customers. Therefore, they might not have experienced these challenges of communicating their brands, as such customers might not require seriousness, credibility and knowledgeable in that sense. This might also imply why LinkedIn, which was regarded as a professional social media channel by other KI startups, was less emphasized by these two KI startups in general. Another reason for why such specific perceptions was not emphasized into their social media branding activities by these two KI startups could be dependent on their current stage. Meaning that, due to their newness, they have not yet discovered that it is a knowledge-intensive specific challenge that might be needed to be tackled, and that social media branding activities potentially can tackle this challenge. It is thus valuable to remember that the related existing research is generally based on KIFs and not KI startups.

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## 7. CONCLUSION

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*The final chapter, Chapter 7, starts with a summary of this thesis which briefly presents our main conclusions regarding the role of social media in a branding context for KI startups. The chapter then continues with the theoretical and practical contributions. Finally, the chapter ends with the limitations of this study and suggestions for further research.*

### 7.1 SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

The purpose of this thesis was to understand how KI startups in Sweden use social media to build their corporate brand. Much of the literature regarding startups in the context of social media branding, process startups in general terms. Therefore, a research gap was identified in how startups that are knowledge-intensive use social media within the branding process. A theoretical framework was provided to get a broad overview of relevant fields within this context. We decided to focus on four corporate branding elements, which are identified as main reasons for startups when building their corporate brand; brand awareness, influence and engage customers, employer branding, and reputation. To answer our research question, a qualitative approach was selected. As a pilot study, an initial questionnaire was sent to 374 different KI startups in Sweden. The purpose with the pilot study was to get an overview of how KI startups use social media in a branding context. The pilot study was also conducted to collect participants for our main study; the interviews. By contacting KI startups that had expressed their interest of participating in an interview through the questionnaire, six KI startups were selected for semi-structured telephone interviews. As already mentioned, the semi-structured interviews were the main study of this thesis, and enabled us to answer our research question; What is the role of social media practices for brand building in KI startups?

The findings of this thesis indicate that the sample of KI startups valued certain branding elements higher than others while considering their social media usage in a branding context. The elements of brand awareness and engaging and influencing

customers were most frequently stressed by all respondents as reasons for using social media while branding themselves. The elements of employer branding and reputation was thus less emphasized by the respondents. It seems possible that the characteristics of being a startup affected their prioritization of building brand awareness and influencing and engaging customers. As the sample most likely had limited recognition, sales and resources in relation to what established firms generally have, may have affected their focus of visibility and sales which ultimately probably increase resources.

Brand awareness was often mentioned as something that was desired to build through the usage of social media branding activities. The extensive reach of social media may have affected their emphasis of brand awareness on social media as the KI startups then can be visible to many stakeholders. It further seemed important to the KI startups that the variety of channels, which can be used in different manners, is a reason for why social media was emphasized within the element of brand awareness. However, it seemed only partially important for respondents that the brand awareness is built in certain manners on certain channels. General awareness was also mentioned as important to attain. Therefore, the role of social media seemed important regarding brand awareness as social media both can attain certain awareness, such as professional, for relevant stakeholders, but also general awareness to any stakeholder.

Influence and engage customers was like brand awareness, frequently stressed in a social media branding perspective. That influence and engage customers was emphasized may be due to that startups focus on this element in general as such firms have small resources. For example, being new and not having any substantial sales probably makes the sample of KI startups focusing on customers as those are a prerequisite for sales and increase of resources. Social media branding was specifically emphasized in this context due to that two-way communication is efficient on social media both for themselves, but probably also for the customers. The efficiency of two-way communication, reach of customers and low cost was put in relation to other, more traditional, channels which might be less efficient. Thus, our findings may indicate that social media implies an important role in the brand

building process regarding influencing and engaging customers due to advantages of social media in comparison to other channels.

Employer branding activities on social media was less emphasized in comparison to the prior two elements. In general, employer branding activities may be less emphasized due to the current resources. As startups are said to have less resources compared to established firms, it may be a reason why this element is less prioritized in comparison to the prior two elements. This since the prior two elements can be argued to increase resources more directly for the sample of KI startups. In addition, the KI startups that emphasized social media in an employer branding context were those with most employees. Thus, it is possible that they were in a later development stage which implies more resources and need for further employees. An inference of this may be that social media practices have the potential of gradually constituting a more important role for the KI startups as they develop. For example, skilled employees may be efficiently reached and attracted through social media channels, which was stated by some of the respondents. However, if the current stage does not enable the recruitment of further employees, social media may not be an important part in such brand building processes.

The branding element of reputation was clearly stressed by some respondents as important in the context of social media activities. Social media was likely mentioned as efficient in this regard due to wide reach and two-way communication. Thus, the reputation could be built and managed efficiently. It is possible that the reputation activities were stressed as knowledge-intensive companies are in specific need of reputation building activities to sell, and as social media can enhance reputation. However, it is hard to exclude that reputation was not emphasized due to just being a company, as any type of firms would benefit from good social media reputation. However, it is challenging to state the role social media have in the branding element of reputation regarding specific reputation activities. It is reasonable that company reputation is considered yet subtle within any social media activity by all respondents. For example, it is likely that reputation is affected by activities within the three prior elements. From this point of view, social media practices have an important role in the reputation element. However, it is challenging to make any explicit statements of



activities that is only meant for the reputation element. It was perhaps the emphasis on doing good on social media in general that affects the element of reputation.

Therefore, our findings indicate that social media practices may partially constitute an important role for KI startups in a branding context. As the focus was more about brand awareness and influencing and engaging customers, the role of social media in these branding elements are more obvious. Employer branding activities seemed potentially beneficial but not as important at the current stage as a startup. However, social media in the element of employer branding may likely receive more focus gradually as the KI startups develops and attains a clear need and possibility of further employees. The role of social media in the reputation element is challenging to conclude in regards of explicitly reputation building activities. However, as reputation may most likely be affected by any branding activity on social media, this element is probably considered by all the respondents nevertheless.

In addition, a further interesting finding that was worth to consider was that social media branding activities seemed to have the potential of functioning as a counteracting tool for the challenges of companies that are knowledge-intensive. Previous research has stated that such companies need to engage in certain activities that makes them to be perceived in certain ways, which is required to sell knowledge-intensive output. Most of the respondents meant that branding activities on social media helps them to be perceived as knowledgeable, credible and serious, which they meant were crucial to attain. Thus, it could be possible that social media branding activities have the potential of being a more defined example to counteract knowledge-intensive specific challenges in relation to the general activities as stated within existing research. If this is possible, social media activities in a branding perspective would constitute an important role for KI startups as it would increase sales that otherwise could be hindered due to knowledge-intensity.

## 7.2 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

This thesis has some theoretical contributions. By approaching a rather unexplored category of startups in the social media branding context, it extends the research of branding in startups. Theoretically, this thesis aimed to gain insights of how and why KI startups use social media within the corporate branding process. To the best of our knowledge, no study has been conducted which specifically focuses on KI startups and their social media usage in the brand building process. Previous research has rather focused on startups in general.

This thesis most valuable theoretical contribution is that our findings are aligned to previous research about social media, branding and startups. It seemed that the findings from our thesis' sample of KI startups could be applied to previous research that has focused on startups in general. Bresciani and Eppler (2010) have stated that social media has the potential of providing an extensive reach and being a low-cost branding tool, which is especially suitable for startups. Our findings indicated that social media similarly has the potential of being an important role in the branding process for our sample of KI startups as to startups in general. Similarities of social media branding seemed thus to be apparent between startups in general and these KI startups, while differences were not as apparent. Therefore, despite that KI startups differ to general startups characteristically, these differences may not have obvious impact whether social media is used in a branding purpose. Further, there were also clear examples of alignments within all the four main branding elements that this thesis focused on. These alignments indicate that the role of social media may play an important part for KI startups like it does for other types of companies. Firstly, Chen *et al.* (2017) stated that brand awareness is the most common reason for startups to build their brand. This statement was confirmed by our study's context as the sample of KI startups most emphasized brand awareness for using social media. Secondly, Bruhn *et al.* (2012) argue that social media can be used to influence and engage customers. To influence and engage customers through social media was also one of the two most emphasized elements and main findings in this study, which pinpoint to that the statement may be applicable to KI startups as well. Thirdly, despite that employer branding was less emphasized, some of the KI startups were

positive to the efficiency of employer branding activities on social media and therefore performed such activities. This is aligned with Tumasjan *et al.* (2011), who state that using social media is effective to attract new employees for startups. Fourthly, respondents stressed that building reputation was an important dimension that they considered while using social media in branding activities. This is similar to Cesaroni and Consoli (2015) and Musa *et al.* (2016), who mean that social media can be an efficient tool to build a good web reputation for small businesses.

These main examples of how our findings are similar to existing general research may imply that general research about social media branding and startups can be stretched to narrower types of companies or startups. In this case KI startups. Therefore, our thesis moderately indicates that general research about startup branding would not be of less value when understanding specific types of startups. For example, it may be arguable that general research about startups is applicable to any type of startup to some extent as this research does not intentionally exclude certain startups. Therefore, the emphasis on social media usage as a key role for branding may be true for KI startups and other categories of companies as well. However, it is challenging to promise such statements without any further exploration of the field. Thus, our research regarding KI startups should have added value to the existing research as our sample indicated that social media has a similar role in the branding process as it has for general startups.

### **7.3 PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS**

This study indicates that certain social media usage in the branding process may facilitate corporate brand images that are relevant in regard to the knowledge-intensity of startups. Meaning that specific challenges that occurs because of knowledge-intensity may be counteracted by social media branding. Therefore, we suggest that other KI startups that desire certain perceptions of their brands, such as being serious, knowledgeable or credible, consider using social media in the process of conveying such images. However, it is important, similarly to the KI startups in this thesis, to first recognize the social media channels perceived as relevant by their customers, that is where their customers or other groups are found. When these

channels are identified, careful management of relationship should be made, and content that reflects their needed image to their customers should be posted or shared. Social media channels without relevant stakeholders and content which may not be perceived as knowledgeable should be considered whether to use and post at all. These suggestions correspond to Kaplan and Haenlein (2010), who state that the choice of social media channels should be carefully based on where a company's target group can be reached and what is relevant to communicate towards these.

## **7.4 LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

This thesis has some limitations, which is important to emphasize. Firstly, only KI startups from Sweden were included, which implies a limitation regards to the geographical breadth of this thesis sample. Of the six KI startups in this thesis, five were from the Skåne area, which also implies a further limitation as it may not proportionally cover a Swedish context. Secondly, only six interviews were conducted, which is insufficient to attain a broad picture of the phenomenon and to make any certain statements about. A final limitation of this study is that the brand elements discussed in this thesis can be hard to separate from each other as they are somewhat interrelated.

Future research could consider a similar study as this, but with a more extensive sample when conducting qualitative interviews, both in aspects of number of respondents and a more scattered geographical area within Sweden. Another suggestion is to conduct a similar study in another country to see if it differs to our study with a Swedish context. For example, to conduct a study in a country that is sociocultural different to Sweden, which are not considered as a knowledge economy.

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## APPENDIX A – THE QUESTIONNAIRE

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1. Which year was your company founded?
  - a. 2018
  - b. 2017
  - c. 2016
  - d. 2015
  - e. 2014
  - f. 2013
  - g. 2012
  - h. 2011
  - i. 2010
  - j. Before 2010
2. In which town is your headquarters located in?
3. How many employees have your company?
4. How many on your company works with marketing?
5. In which industry are your company mainly operating in?
  - a. IT
  - b. Medical and health
  - c. Finance
  - d. Education
  - e. Media
  - f. Travel
  - g. Food
  - h. Environment
  - i. Retail
  - j. Entertainment
  - k. Other (which)
6. To whom are your company selling your product/service to?
  - a. B2B
  - b. B2C
  - c. Both B2B and B2C
7. Which of the following social media channels are your company having an account on?
  - a. Facebook
  - b. Instagram
  - c. Twitter
  - d. LinkedIn
  - e. YouTube
  - f. Our company does not have any social media accounts
  - g. Other (which)

8.1 Our company is using social media to build awareness

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

8.2 Social media is effective to building awareness

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

9.1 Our company is using social media to build reputation

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

9.2 Social media is effective to build reputation

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

10.1 Our company is using social media to attract new employees

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

10.2 Social media is effective to attract new employees

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

11.1 Our company is using social media to influence and engage customers

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

11.2 Social media is effective to influence and engage customers

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

Strongly disagree

Strongly agree

13. Would your company be able to participate in a brief interview about how startups use social media? If yes, please write an email address below so we can contact you. Thanks in advance!

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## APPENDIX B – THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

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### Background questions

1. Can you tell us about yourself? About your background and what role you have at the company.
2. Can you tell us about the company in general?
3. What kind of knowledge has been necessary to produce your product/service?
4. How do you work to make sure the clients understand the product/service and how do you convince them about it?
5. Are there any challenges when it comes to communicate your service/product?

### Branding on social media

6. How is the corporate brand important for the company?
7. How do you generally work with brand building in the company?
8. How is it important for the company to work with the image, how the company wants to be perceived in the customers' eyes?
9. How does the company use social media in the brand building process?
10. Which are the advantages when building the corporate brand on social media, and are there any disadvantages?

### Social media

11. How active are the company on the company's social media accounts?
12. How important do you think it is to be present on social media?