

**Building brand advocacy for a sustainable brand through corporate storytelling and a  
customer journey improvement**

RESEARCH REPORT

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## BUILDING BRAND ADVOCACY THROUGH CORPORATE STORYTELLING

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**List of abbreviations**

B2B.	Business-to-business
B2C.	Business-to-consumer
CX.	Customer experience
KG.	Knowledge gap
LSQ.	Literature search question
RQ.	Research question
SQ.	Search question
TA.	Target audience



### Summary

This research report was conducted for the client Roetz-Bikes. To increase brand visibility and brand awareness, the brand wants to drive brand advocacy among its customers. Therefore, the leading advice question central to this research is: "How can we improve Roetz-Bikes' customer journey to increase brand advocacy?". Roetz-Bikes' main communication issue is identified as the post-purchase phase of the customer journey, during which it does not optimally engage the customer. Furthermore, it does not communicate its corporate story in a consistent and compelling manner. The main research question driving the research is: What are the key factors influencing the brand advocacy of a sustainable bicycle developer?

Desk research and field research revealed that, in order of assumed importance, these key factors are customer satisfaction, credible and consistent value-based corporate storytelling, brand trust, brand love, and the establishment of an emotional relationship with the customer. Customer satisfaction with the product is consistently the strongest predictor for brand advocacy. Corporate storytelling was found to be strongly associated with recommendations made by customers, especially customers who prefer sustainable goods. These customers are likeliest to recommend a brand when it has a corporate story which they consider memorable and interesting. Multiple links were found between the narration of a value-based corporate story and the establishment of advocacy. Furthermore, research indicated that the post-purchase communications are likeliest to drive advocacy, followed by pre-purchase communications. Finally, it was revealed there are internal inconsistencies on the content and narration of the corporate story, which may complicate the external messaging.

Based on these results, the recommendations for the advice report are that Roetz-Bikes should clarify internally and externally its value-based corporate story, in order to better communicate its unique social and sustainable character. Its pre-purchase communications should highlight the product's unique backstory and profile Roetz-Bikes as a unique brand within its field. Its post-purchase communications should consistently seek to build an emotional bond with the customer, provide post-purchase care and service, and continuously include the corporate story and values, in order to drive brand love and advocacy.

**CHAPTER I**

## Introduction

### Background of the problem

Roetz-Bikes is a for-profit, sustainable social enterprise which designs and builds bicycles on the principle of circular economy. Founded in 2011, its production takes place in their Amsterdam-based 'Fair Factory', where it trains and employs underprivileged candidates with poor job prospects to become bicycle technicians. Administratively, the factory and its employees fall under a standalone foundation, the Roetz-Bikes Fair Factory Foundation. The new bicycles are produced partially using old bicycle components, which are sourced from abandoned bicycles. Its products are sold on the B2B and B2C markets (Roetz-Bikes, n.d). As it has continued to expand its network of corporate clients and its B2C sales, Roetz-Bikes has grown from a small start-up to a 'scale-up' company, which currently employs 16 employees at its headquarters and a flexible amount of temporary and long-term employed bicycle technicians at its factory (Roetz-Bikes, n.d).

### Situation analysis and communication problem

Based on research done by the client, B2C customers may have a problem reaching Roetz-Bikes and often don't consider it when searching for a bicycle (Personal communication, n.d.). In order for Roetz-Bikes to reach new consumers, increasing the advocacy and word-of-mouth advertising among current customers and Roetz-Bikes' owners may be necessary. Word-of-mouth advocacy is a powerful driver of sales, as almost 75% of consumers identify it as a key influencer in their purchasing decision (Bulbul et al., 2014). Furthermore, customer advocacy is known to increase a company's visibility and brand recognition (Thomas, 2016).

Additionally, the current post-purchase phase does not actively involve the customer in the sustainable story. Rather, the provided information is purely related to the order and the sustainable brand is not emphasized. As discussed in Customer Journey Mapping: Lead the Way to Advocacy, it is likely that streamlining this aspect of the customer journey, and thus the customer experience (CX), will pay dividends in referrals and advocacy, as companies which actively manage their customer journeys have higher rates of customer referrals and overall

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advocacy (Minkara, 2016). The organization intends to improve its customer journey and seeks to increase its customer advocacy, in order to increase the number of customers finding the company and bicycles sold.

There is some data available on the current customer referral activity: based on analysis of internal customer satisfaction and feedback data, one Roetz-Bikes customer will likely recommend the brand to an average of 1.51 other people. The client possesses limited knowledge of the way people currently find the brand, their opinions on the customer journey or their awareness of its sustainable mission.

### **Advice question**

Based on the problem analysis, the following advice question is proposed: "How can we improve Roetz-Bikes' customer journey to increase brand advocacy?". This advice question aims to solve the client's communication issue of a poorly managed customer journey, which may be a cause of a lower total amount of advocacy and word-of-mouth advertising. The desired end result of the research is a communication advice for a customer journey process which improves the customer's overall purchase experience and strengthens positive attitudes related to the brand's mission and values, in order to increase advocacy and word-of-mouth advertising. Improving brand advocacy and word-of-mouth advertising will strengthen Roetz-Bikes' competitive position, allow it to reach higher levels of visibility and name recognition, and eventually drive higher amounts of B2C sales. As discussed in the Advice Report chapter *Evaluation*, advocacy is a variable that is measurable to the organization.

### **Research objective**

The objective of this research is to develop a communication strategy that will increase brand advocacy and word-of-mouth advertising among Roetz-Bikes customers by:

- analyzing the three stages of the customer journey (pre-purchase, purchase, post-purchase) and their impact on advocacy on Roetz-Bikes
- understanding the impact of corporate storytelling on advocacy

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- understanding the impact of customer service messaging on advocacy
- examining best practice examples of customer journeys and brand advocacy

In order to achieve this objective, the research presented in this paper aims to answer the following research question and sub-research questions.

### **Research questions**

RQ: What are the key factors influencing the brand advocacy of a sustainable bicycle developer?

- SQ1: How does the pre-purchase customer journey influence brand advocacy of a sustainable bicycle developer?
- SQ2: How does the purchasing experience influence brand advocacy of a sustainable bicycle developer?
- SQ3: How does the post-purchase customer journey affect brand advocacy of a sustainable bicycle developer?
- SQ4: How does corporate storytelling influence brand advocacy of a sustainable bicycle developer?
- SQ5: What are best practice examples of customer journeys and brand advocacy?

### **Paper outline**

The preliminary target group for this research are potential Roetz-Bikes customers; consumers who fall within the age range of 25-40 and have an interest in sustainable products and/or social enterprises. The research will focus on Roetz-Bikes' Dutch customers, as the client currently conducts most of its business within the Netherlands. Because Roetz-Bikes does not have an adapted international strategy, it is presumed that the research results are applicable to its entire customer base. A combination of desk research and field research methods, consisting of a questionnaire and interviews, will be used to conduct the research.

The research report consists of a literature review of the problem and key concepts, resulting in knowledge gaps and in-depth research questions. The research methodology discusses the conceptual and technical research design, including the operationalization, sampling, reliability, and validity. The results section analyzes and discusses the research results, concluding with answers to the research questions. Finally, the findings, limitations and possible improvements of the research are discussed.

**CHAPTER II**

## Literature Review

### Introduction

The literature review is conducted to analyze and compare existing data on the topic of developing brand advocacy and word-of-mouth advocacy advertising within the context of the customer journey and corporate storytelling. Using an integrative literature review approach, the review will provide an overview of existing knowledge on the topic and help answer a series of literature research answers, thereby revealing existing gaps in knowledge. These gaps will then lead to field research (Russell, 2005). Based on Roetz-Bikes' situation and the research objective, the following key concepts will be analyzed: *brand advocacy*, *customer journey*, and *corporate storytelling*.

### Key concept I - Brand advocacy

*LSQ1: What are the key factors influencing brand advocacy?*

Brand advocacy can be defined as a combination of customer-motivated behaviors, including proactively recommending the brand and defending the brand against detractors, intended to maintain the customer's relationship with the brand and promote it to others (Wilder, 2010). The data suggests that key factors influencing brand advocacy are customer trust, customer satisfaction and customer engagement/brand affection.

As demonstrated by Roy (2014) and Urban (2005), customer trust generated during or after the purchase is a strong predictor for brand advocacy, and can be established through transparency, consistency, and reliability. Moreover, Afridi (2018) states that customer trust is the strongest and most important element in establishing brand advocacy. Overall customer satisfaction is directly linked to the generation of brand advocacy (Fullerton, 2010; Mosavi, 2011; Pandey et al., 2008). Customer satisfaction can lead to 'affective commitment' to a brand, which then results in advocacy behaviors (Fullerton, 2010). Thirdly, customer engagement activities by the brand, such as post-purchase outreach, two-way social media communications and the publication of user-generated content (UGC), help generate brand advocacy (Brodie et



al., 2011; Calder et al., 2009; Liu et al., 2017, Moliner et al., 2018). Specifically, by investing in its relationship with customers, a company can generate sentiments of brand affection. Similarly to customer satisfaction, this causes customers to experience brand love and interconnectedness with the brand, as well as a sense of responsibility to support it (Aron et al., 1992, as cited in Wilder, 2010).

The importance of brand affection is well-established: Calder et al. (2009), Fred et al. (2015), and Liu et al. (2017) emphasize its direct link to advocacy. Customers may become self-professed fans of a brand, which is a strong predictor for advocacy behaviors (Aron et al., 1992, as cited in Wilder, 2010).

### **Key concept II - Customer journey management**

*LSQ2: How can customer journey management influence brand advocacy?*

Customer journey management, or customer journey mapping, is a term that is often used in tandem with or extension of the phrase 'customer experience management' and relates to the purposeful management of the overall experiences of a customer while engaging with a company (Lemon & Verhoef, 2016). Richardson (2010) discusses the concept of customer journey management explicitly in the context of increasing the customer's satisfaction, describing an optimized "cradle to grave" arc of customer experience from pre-purchase to post-purchase. Srivastava & Kaul (2014) also stress that proactive customer journey management can improve overall customer satisfaction.

Kuehnl et al. (2017) argue that customer journey management has both a utilitarian (functionality-based) and a hedonic (emotion-based) effect on customers, supporting the notion that an effective and emotionally convincing customer journey leads to an increase in trust and affection among customers. Minkara (2016) directly ties customer journey mapping to an increase in brand advocacy, arguing that a managed customer journey results in higher rates of customer referrals and word-of-mouth advertising. Clinehens (2019) makes a similar claim, stating that a good customer journey produces vocal brand fans.

### *LSQ3: What are the key characteristics of effective customer journey management?*

In their meta-analysis of customer journey mappings, Følstad et al. (2015) establish that effective customer journey mappings are conducted on basis of reliable customer data, and include identification of a customer persona, touchpoints, distinct steps, and potential problems, as well as experience reports. The importance of reliable data is described by Berendes et al. (2018), as well as Micheaux & Bosio (2018), who describe how a data-driven customer journey can assist in understanding the importance and impact of each individual step of the journey. In addition to these elements, Clinehens (2019) argues that a clear overarching goal must be set in order for a customer journey to succeed.

Aside from the inclusion of distinct steps, touchpoints, potential problems and reliable data, the importance of holistic, cohesive branding and tonal consistency throughout the customer journey is also established in literature (Calder et al., 2009; Halvorsrud & Kvale, 2017; Varnali, 2018). The customer should experience that each step of the customer journey is consistent with the brand's value proposition, brand language and brand image, and thus presents a coherent overall experience (Halvorsrud & Kvale, 2017).

### *LSQ4: What are best practice examples of customer journey mapping and brand advocacy?*

Clinehens (2020) argues that best practice examples of excellent customer journey mappings include the companies IKEA and Build-a-Bear. She identifies the element of 'co-creation', a form of two-way engagement with the customer throughout the journey, as the reason for their success. Co-creation of the product or service generates a sense of ownership and pride of the brand which results in advocacy (Clinehens, 2020). This suggests that the client's service of online personal bicycle customization may well be strategically advantageous. Another brand with an exemplary customer journey is Uber, which has identified and solved all prominent pain points, thereby offering convenience, and also employs a rating system which generates trust (Gingiss, 2018). Airline company JetBlue has become a leader in customer journey management by heavily investing customer satisfaction, emphasizing cooperation and empathy (Radu, 2021).

### **Key concept III - Corporate storytelling**

*How can corporate storytelling be used to stimulate brand advocacy?*

Corporate storytelling is a form of corporate communications which can be defined as the strategic utilization of compelling stories to create coherence concerning the company's brand, identity and development (Hühn et al., 2014). Doing so can increase customer trust in the brand (Copeland & De Moor, 2018; Li et al., 2019; Pulizzi, 2012), and allow it to communicate about its corporate values in a way that generates affection and respect for the brand among customers (Nyagadza et al., 2020). As described previously, brand trust and brand affection are strong predictors of brand advocacy among customers. Additionally, storytelling allows a company to emphasize corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities in a credible, memorable manner. (Asefeso, 2014), and enhance its CSR reputation (Gill, 2014). Gill (2014) describes how corporate storytelling heightens the credibility of CSR activities, and may also be used to engage employees with the company's mission and story, making them more enthusiastic advocates. CSR can be a driver for brand advocacy among customers (Pai et al., 2013; Xie et al., 2019).

Papadatos (2006) describes how storytelling may be used to generate an emotional connection between the brand and the customer, leading them to identify with the brand and refer others to it. Storytelling is thus described as a powerful tool to generate deep, lasting and value-based positive attitudes towards a brand, resulting in advocacy.

### **Conclusions and knowledge gaps**

An analysis of the literature shows that the three key concepts (*brand advocacy, customer journey management, corporate storytelling*) have been extensively studied and documented. However, within the context of the Roetz-Bikes case, certain knowledge gaps remain.

**Brand advocacy** is described in literature as the natural result of certain positive customer experiences or key factors. The most commonly described key factors are customer trust, customer satisfaction, customer engagement and brand affection. According to the data,

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advocacy often goes hand in hand with 'affective commitment' to a brand, experienced by a combination of an optimal purchasing experience and some form of emotional connection to the brand. However, the data is widespread and based on a broad range of case studies, often mostly unrelated to the bicycle industry. Therefore, their applicability to Roetz-Bikes' case is not a given. Furthermore, there is no consensus which of these key factors is the most important, and the sources contradict each other on this topic. Field research is required to resolve the first knowledge gap:

**KG1.** Key factors leading to brand advocacy for a sustainable bicycle brand

**Customer journey management** is rarely tied directly to advocacy in the existing literature. Rather, a series of 'key benefits' of customer journey management are described, most of which overlap with the previously described drivers of brand advocacy: trust, satisfaction, engagement, and affection. Which of these benefits is the strongest driver remains to be analyzed. Only one source directly connected customer journey management to an increase in advocacy. Additionally, the data is inconclusive and sparse on the individual importance of various phases in the journey. Rather, the importance of coherence and consistency throughout is stressed. Analysis of best practice examples shows the importance of engagement, convenience, and trust, as well as the establishment of an emotional connection between the brand and the customer. Field research can shed light on the following knowledge gaps:

**KG2:** Key benefits of customer journey mapping most likely to generate brand advocacy

**KG3:** Phase of the customer journey most important in generating brand advocacy

**Corporate storytelling** is not linked directly to advocacy in most of the available data, similarly to customer journey management. Rather, benefits of the practice are described which

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may deliver advocacy. Specifically, the impact on brand trust and brand affection is described, as well as the impact of CSR topics in storytelling. However, there appears to be no data directly linking storytelling to advocacy. Essentially, customer journey management and corporate storytelling are considered tools or methods to improve the customer's overall experience, and a subsequent increase in advocacy can only be assumed. Field research is required to answer the fourth and final knowledge gap:

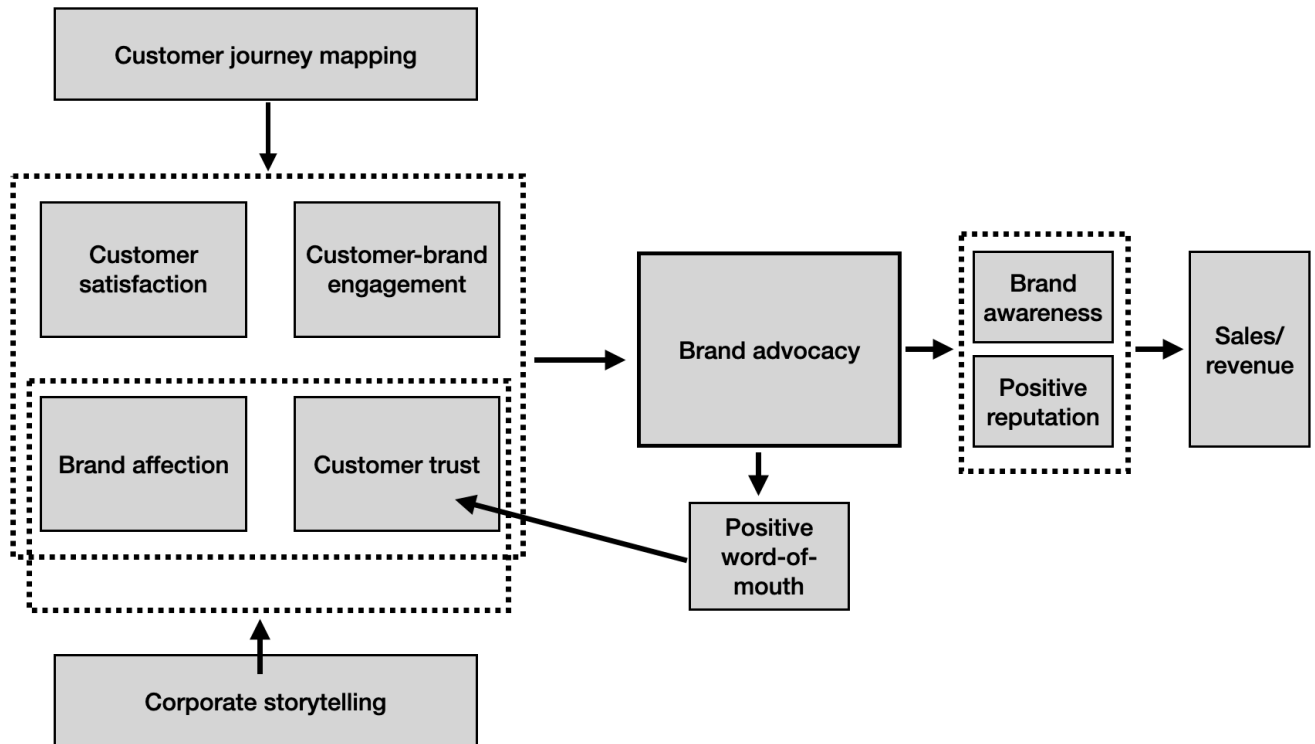
**KG4:** Effect of corporate storytelling on brand advocacy for a sustainable bicycle brand

### **Conceptual framework**

All the key concepts and their relations are displayed in figure 1. According to Ravitch & Riggan (2012), the conceptual framework explains the main things to be studied, such as key factors, constructs and variables, and the presumed relationships among them, in visual form. As demonstrated in the conceptual framework, there are four key variables (customer satisfaction, customer-brand engagement, brand affection and brand trust) which are the strongest predictors for brand advocacy.

**Figure 1**

*Conceptual framework*



**CHAPTER III**

## Methodology

### Introduction

In the following section, the conceptual research design is outlined, consisting of the research questions, objectives, and operationalization. Furthermore, the technical design of the field research is discussed, including the research strategy, research methods, and research validity and reliability.

### Conceptual research design

#### ***Research questions and objectives***

Based on the literature review, four knowledge gaps became apparent. Based on these gaps, the in-depth research questions are now apparent, which will guide the further field research. The in-depth research questions are:

1. Which combination of positive customer experiences leads to brand advocacy among Roetz-bikes customers?
2. Which key benefit of customer journey mapping is most likely to generate brand advocacy?
3. Which phase of the customer journey is the most important in generating brand advocacy among Roetz-bikes customers?
4. Can corporate storytelling be used to generate brand advocacy for Roetz-Bikes?

The overarching, central research question, based on the knowledge gaps, is as follows:

*CRQ: Which key factors and strategies can drive brand advocacy for a sustainable bicycle brand?*



### ***Operationalization***

In order to reduce error and conduct research which is measurable, replicable and rational, the research questions require operationalization (Weaver, 2008). These abstract concepts are: positive customer experiences, brand advocacy, and corporate storytelling. "Positive customer experiences", which encompasses the key concepts customer trust, customer satisfaction, customer-brand engagement and brand affection, will be operationalized per concept, as each of these concepts is abstract and not quantifiable. They have been defined and divided into indicators which are measurable by variables. Furthermore, questions are described which can be used to analyze these concepts.

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Positive customer experiences: customer trust, customer satisfaction, customer-brand engagement and brand affection (tables 1, 2, 3 and 4).

**Table 1**

### *'Customer trust' operationalization*

Knowledge gap:	Key factors leading to brand advocacy for Roetz-Bikes	
In-depth research question:	Which combination of positive customer experiences leads to brand advocacy among Roetz-bikes customers?	
Abstract concept:	Customer trust (positive customer experience)	
Indicators	Variable	Questions
Belief that company's products are reliable	Type: Belief	
	Measurable entity: Rank from most important (1) to least important (6)	How important is this belief to you when determining whether to trust a brand?
Satisfaction with previous purchases	Type: Attitude	
	Measurable entity: Rank from most important (1) to least important (6)	How important is this experience to you when determining whether to trust a brand?
Belief in truthfulness of company statements	Type: Belief	
	Measurable entity: Rank from most important (1) to least important (6)	How important is this belief to you when determining whether to trust a brand?

**Table 2**

### *'Customer satisfaction' operationalization*

Knowledge gap:	Key factors leading to brand advocacy for Roetz-Bikes	
In-depth research question:	Which combination of positive customer experiences leads to brand advocacy among Roetz-bikes customers?	
Abstract concept:	Customer satisfaction (positive customer experience)	
Indicators	Variable	Questions
Enjoyment of purchasing experience	Type: Attitude	
	Measurable entity: Rank from very positive (1) to very negative (6)	How would you describe the experience you had while you were making your purchase from the organisation?
Satisfaction with provided service	Type: Attitude	
	Measurable entity: Rank from very much (1) to not at all (6)	How satisfied are you with the service that was provided to you while you were purchasing from the organisation?
Positive opinion on purchase	Type: Attitude	
	Measurable entity: Rank from very positive (1) to very negative (6)	How would you describe your opinion on the product you purchased, considering its price, quality and overall features?

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**Table 3**

*'Customer-brand engagement' operationalization*

Knowledge gap:	Key factors leading to brand advocacy for Roetz-Bikes	
In-depth research question:	Which combination of positive customer experiences leads to brand advocacy among Roetz-bikes customers?	
Abstract concept:	Customer-brand engagement (positive customer experience)	
Indicators	Variable	Questions
Post-purchase customer communications by brand	Type: Behavior	How often are post-purchase customer-communications conducted?
	Measurable entity: Occurance and character of such communications	What kind of post-purchase communications are conducted by the organisation?
Two-way social media communications	Type: Behavior	Do two-way social media interactions take place between the organisation and customers?
	Measurable entity: Occurance and character of such communications	Do we respond to comments, posts and messages from customers on our social media platforms, and if so: how?
Publication of user-generated content	Type: Behavior	
	Measurable entity: Occurance and character of such publications	Is user-generated content, such as submitted photos featuring the products, published by the organisation?
Collection of customer suggestions and feedback	Type: Behavior	
	Measurable entity: Occurance and character of such communications	Are customers asked for their feedback on products, services or developments? If so, when and using which channels and methods?

**Table 4**

*'Brand affection' operationalization*

Knowledge gap:	Key factors leading to brand advocacy for Roetz-Bikes	
In-depth research question:	Which combination of positive customer experiences leads to brand advocacy among Roetz-bikes customers?	
Abstract concept:	Brand affection (positive customer experience)	
Indicators	Variable	Questions
Personal association with the brand	Type: Attitude	
	Measurable entity: Degree to which customer sees the brand as representative of themselves: Rank from very much (1) to not at all (6)	Would you say that this brand represents who you are and what you stand for?
Positive emotions associated with the brand	Type: Attitude	Do you associate this brand with happiness?
	Measurable entity: Rank from very much (1) to not at all (6)	Do you associate this brand with comfort?
		Do you associate this brand with good memories?
Feeling of loyalty to the brand	Type: Attitude	
	Measurable entity: Rank from very much (1) to not at all (6)	Is it likely you'd switch to another brand that sells this product? Would you describe yourself as loyal to this brand?
Degree of emotional attachment to the brand	Type: Attitude	Do you feel like this brand is "the brand for you"?
	Measurable entity: Rank from very strongly (1) to not at all (6)	Do you feel like there's a meaningful bond between you and the brand? Do you feel an emotional closeness to this brand?

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Operationalization for *brand advocacy* and *corporate storytelling* (figures x and x)

**Table 5**

## 'Brand advocacy' operationalization

Knowledge gap:	Key factors leading to brand advocacy for Roetz-Bikes	
In-depth research question:	Which combination of positive customer experiences leads to brand advocacy among Roetz-bikes customers?	
Abstract concept:	Brand advocacy	
Indicators	Variable	Questions
Recommendation of the brand to others	Type: Behavior	Have you recommended the brand to someone you know?
	Measurable entity: Occurance of the behavior (recommending the brand to friends, families and/or acquaintances)	Would you tell someone to try the brand? Would you tell other people what you like about the brand?
Sharing of positive customer feedback/reviews	Type: Behavior	Have you left positive reviews of the brand online?
	Measurable entity: Occurance and character of such communications	Have you given positive feedback to the brand on social media or elsewhere? Have you posted positive opinions or feelings about the brand or its products on social media or elsewhere?
Defending the brand against detractors	Type: Behavior	Is it likely you'd defend the brand if you heard someone say something negative about it? Is it likely you'd correct someone if they criticized the brand unfairly?
	Measurable entity: Rank from very likely (1) to not at all likely (6)	

**Table 6**

## 'Corporate storytelling' operationalization

Knowledge gap:	Effect of corporate storytelling on brand advocacy for Roetz-Bikes	
In-depth research question:	Can corporate storytelling be used to generate brand advocacy for Roetz-Bikes?	
Abstract concept:	Corporate storytelling	
Indicators	Variable	Questions
Inclusion of narrative elements (beginning, middle, end)	Type: Attribute	Does the corporate story have a clear beginning, middle and end?
	Measurable entity: Inclusion of narrative elements and a clear story arch, with a distinct beginning, middle and end. Description of the company's history in such form	Is the corporate story told in a narrative form?
Inclusion of corporate value proposition	Type: Attribute	Does the corporate story include our corporate values?
	Measurable entity: Inclusion of the stated corporate values as integral and essential part of the corporate story	Are our corporate values central and essential to the corporate story?
Use of emotive, compelling language	Type: Behavior	Is the corporate story told in a way that appeals to the emotions of the listener?
	Measurable entity: Use of language that can be described as emotive and compelling, rather than clinical and businesslike.	Is the corporate story told in a way that will inspire the listener?

## **Technical Research Design**

### ***Research strategy***

In order to holistically assess the complex dynamic between Roetz-Bikes and its customers, a case study approach was the most suitable (Schell, 1992). The entire customer journey, rather than a single action or element, is assessed in relation to brand advocacy. The case study approach allows the research to assess a phenomenon within its real-life context from an explorative viewpoint, such as the generation of brand advocacy (Schell, 1992). For this research, it was necessary to determine which elements in a customer journey could lead to brand advocacy, which requires an in-depth understanding of the organization's target audience.

### ***Data collection methods***

A combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods was used in the field research. An online questionnaire was used to gather insights on the importance of different customer journey phases and experiences, as well as general attitudes regarding online purchasing and advocacy. After that, interviews were conducted based on the insights from the quantitative research. This sequential explanatory research design results in a more thorough overall research approach (Ivankova et al., 2006).

### ***Questionnaires***

An online questionnaire was conducted among a group of 205 potential Roetz-Bikes customers, falling within the denominators of its TA: age and preference for sustainable products and/or social enterprises. The age parameter excluded respondents below 18 and above 65 from partaking. Using control questions at the start of the interview, respondents were filtered. The questionnaire was entirely anonymous, which generally promotes honest disclosure among respondents, thereby increasing research validity (Murdoch et al., 2014). The first questionnaire's purpose is to form a solid understanding of the elements which drive customers to become vocal fans and advocates of a brand, examining each phase of a purchase journey.

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Using battery questions, the respondents were asked to respond to a variety of suggested situations and shopping experiences. To prevent mental tiring, the majority of the questionnaire consists of such battery questions.

After analysis of the first questionnaire, a second questionnaire was conducted among a group of 60 respondents. Additional information was required to understand the different prospective target audiences. The respondents were asked to indicate the likelihood of them purchasing a bicycle fitting Roetz-Bikes' description in various price ranges, as well as demographic and behavioral questions, in order to strengthen the TA profile descriptions.

### ***Semi-structured interviews***

In addition to the quantitative research, qualitative research in the form of semi-structured interviews was conducted. Four interviews were held within the company, with the founder/CEO, the General Manager, the Office/Communications Manager and the Digital Marketing Analyst. These interviews served to analyze the current attitudes and insights held by the leadership and employees of the company, aiding in forming a complete picture of the situation. The interviews were used to deduce the employees' familiarity with the corporate story and values. Additionally, the marketing/communication employees were questioned about their understanding and experience regarding the customer journey. This combination of multiple research methods provides both depth and breadth and should help answer the research questions (Punch, 2005). Semi-structured personal interviews are a valuable data collection method, as they allow for flexibility in questioning leading to higher-quality responses, and allow new topics or insights to emerge during the interview process (Wiid & Diggines, 2010).

### ***Data analysis***

Using intelligent verbatim transcription, which focuses on the understood meaning rather than the exact expression of the respondent and may exclude hesitations, pauses and grammar errors, the interviews were transcribed. Intelligent verbatim transcription is described by Hadley (2017): "We do not need the full clutter of a transcript. We need an account that accurately represents (...) the statements of the interviewee". After transcription, the transcripts were analyzed in triangulation with the questionnaire results and the literature findings. The quantitative data was analyzed by comparing the data filtered to represent various respondent groups. Mean averages were compared using a t-test, to assess the significance of any differences.

### ***Sampling***

Primarily, the distribution of the questionnaires took place using voluntary response sampling, in which respondents complete the questionnaires voluntarily based on their own interest in it (Punch, 2005). Using convenience sampling, the questionnaires were distributed on dedicated academic survey exchange websites (SurveySwap and SurveyCircle), which allowed for the filtering of respondent and efficient respondent acquisition during the research phase (Etikan et al., 2016).

### ***Validity and Reliability***

As defined by Saunders et al. (2009), validity can be described as the appropriateness of the methodology and results, and therefore the degree to which the research can be potentially generalized for a larger audience. Using three data-collection methods (i.e., the literature review, semi-structured interviews and two questionnaires), a plurality of data was established. This triangulation strategy allowed for a holistic approach to the research and compensated for some of the flaws in research methods, namely the absence of data generated among actual Roetz-Bikes customers (Saunders et al., 2009). Other factors decreasing the validity include the hypothetical nature of some of the questionnaire questions, which demanded some level of imagination from the respondents. As for the quantitative research, there is a risk

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of respondent bias among the staff, who feel connected to the brand and are likely unable to be fully objective.

Reliability is the extent to which the data collection techniques and analysis procedures will yield consistent findings (Saunders et al., 2009). Some contradictions and irregularities were found within the questionnaire results, implying that at least some respondents did not answer all questions truthfully. Thus, somewhat similar findings might occur, were the research to be repeated. Furthermore, there could be an issue in the equivalence between different interpretations of the data, as measured by the inter-rater reliability (Heale & Twycross, 2015). The quantitative data required a certain level of contextual interpretation, and certain responses may be rated differently by another researcher, in case of a repetition of this study. Considering that the research steps are outlined and included, another researcher could likely produce similar results if they were to repeat this process, bearing in mind the described limitations to reliability.



**CHAPTER IV**

## Results

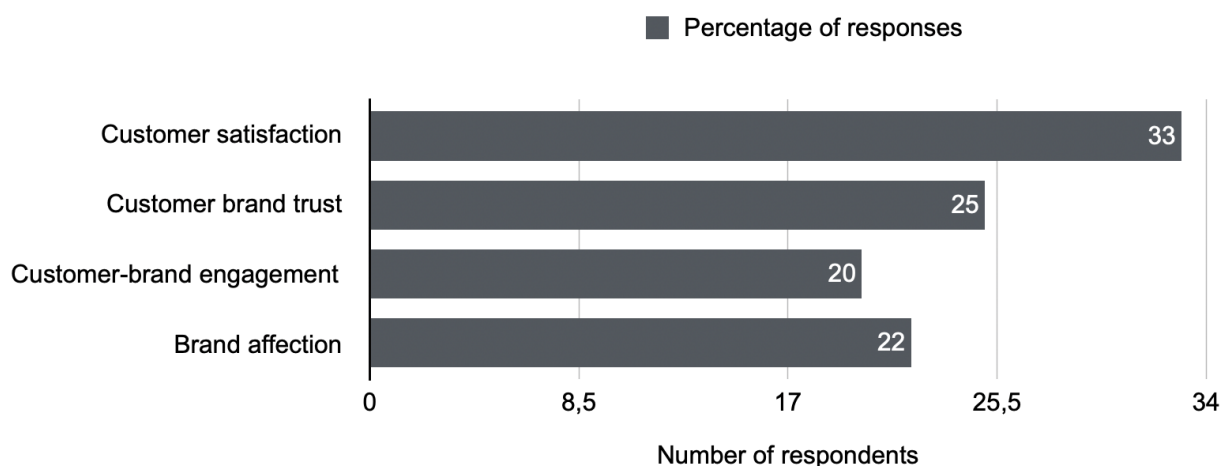
### KG1: Key factors leading to brand advocacy for a sustainable bicycle brand

#### *Positive customer experiences*

Out of the four main positive customer experiences or 'key factors', customer satisfaction (33%) weighs the most heavily in choosing to recommend a brand, followed by brand trust (25%) and brand affection (22%), with customer-brand engagement (20%) being the least important factor (see figure 2).

**Figure 2**

*Statistics for 'key factors in generating brand advocacy'*



In a series of statements, "the brand fulfilled its promises in terms of service and product quality" ranked the highest in importance, with 51% of respondents (105) naming it 'extremely important' in their decision to recommend a bicycle brand to someone. This data suggests that a customer's satisfaction with the quality of the product is the key factor most likely to lead to brand advocacy. Interviewee 1 (May 5, 2021) states: "People that like our product, *love* our product (...) 'cause it's special. And that gives them the feeling they are special when they are riding the bike.", describing both brand affection and customer satisfaction as common reasons for recommendations.

*Male vs. female respondents*

As shown in table 7, female respondents rated *customer satisfaction* (31%) the highest, followed by *brand affection* (23%) and *customer-brand engagement* (23%). Meanwhile, male respondents rated *customer satisfaction* (35%) and *brand trust* (33%) the highest, with low scores on *customer-brand engagement* (15%) and *brand affection* (17%).

**Table 7**

*Statistics for 'key factors in generating brand advocacy'*

Responses	Customer satisfaction	Customer brand trust	Customer-brand engagement	Brand affection
<b>Men</b>				
Total	33/95	31/95	15/95	16/95
Relative share	35%	33%	15%	17%
<b>Women</b>				
Total	34/108	21/108	24/108	25/108
Relative share	31%	19%	22%	23%

This illustrates that both functional (e.g. product quality, trust in product) and emotional (e.g. customer-brand engagement and brand affection) experienced benefits can contribute to brand advocacy, with male customers leaning more towards the functional benefits and female customers towards the emotional benefits. *Customer satisfaction* appears to be the common denominator. This is reflected in the interview with Ms. Straver, Office/Customer Care Manager: "I think delivery of the orders is the most important thing for customers [regarding recommendations], that's where you can see their satisfaction" (Interviewee 3, May 5, 2021). Meanwhile, Mr. Nolet, General Manager, describes the importance of *customer-brand engagement* for Roetz-Bikes: "We are quite close to our customers. We are approachable (...) and we hear back, this also makes that people feel they belong to our family and our community" (Interviewee 1, May 3, 2021).

**KG2: Key benefits of customer journey mapping most likely to generate brand advocacy***Customer convenience, emotional connection, and co-creation*

As demonstrated in KG1, certain key positive customer experiences may lead to brand advocacy for Roetz-Bikes. Other elements of customer journey mapping, such as *customer convenience*, the establishment of an *emotional connection* between the brand and the customer and the element of *co-creation and customization* may also play a role in the generation of brand advocacy. 61% of respondents (125/205) state that an easy, enjoyable, and hassle-free ordering experience is very or extremely important to them when choosing to recommend a brand. As for the establishment of an emotional connection, 53% of respondents (109/205) state that feeling emotionally connected with the brand, and not feeling like a number, is very or extremely important to them when choosing to recommend a brand. Thus, it can be stated that *convenience* and an *emotional connection* are strong predictors of advocacy.

However, the findings suggest that the element of *co-creation* of product, a best practice established in literature, does not weigh heavily with the target audience, with 38% (78/205) ranking it not at all or slightly important. The mean averages, with 3 reflecting the middle point 'moderately important', are demonstrated in table 8.

**Table 8***Mean averages of customer journey benefits regarding brand advocacy*

Variable	Mean average
Customer convenience	3.68
Emotional connection	3.50
Co-creation and customization	2.94

Additionally, Mr. Wilmott, Digital Marketing Analyst, describes how the 'Configurator' tool is not a big draw for Roetz-Bikes social media visitors: "I don't think it [comes up a lot], actually (...) not many people highlight how amazing the configurator tool is" (Interviewee 2, May 3, 2021).

*Demographic comparison*

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The responses of different demographic subgroups regarding the importance of *customer convenience*, *emotional connection* and *co-creation and customization* in establishing advocacy were compared. While there were no significant differences between the male and female respondents on these variables, some significant differences were found between age groups. As shown in table 9, young adult (18-34) respondents valued an *emotional connection* quite low with  $M = 3.29$  whereas older adult respondents (34-55) responded with  $M = 3.98$  ( $p = .001$ ). Young adult respondents valued *co-creation and customization* with  $M = 3.04$ , while older adult respondents valued it  $M = 2.73$  ( $p = .044$ ). This data may prove useful in the establishment of targeted communications.

**Table 9**

*Demographic comparison of mean averages*

Variables	Gender		P-value
	Men	Women	
Customer convenience	3.59	3.75	.262
Emotional connection	3.55	3.45	.503
Co-creation and customization	2.9	2.97	.643

*a/b denote a p value <.005*

Variables	Age groups		P-value
	18-34	35-55	
Customer convenience	3.73	3.55	.238
Emotional connection	3.29 <sup>a</sup>	3.98 <sup>b</sup>	.001
Co-creation and customization	3.04 <sup>a</sup>	2.73 <sup>b</sup>	.044

*a/b denote a p value <.005*

Ms Straver explains how the majority of customer communications relate to order queries, and oftentimes the order process requires customer service assistance: "Sometimes they cannot place an order online, because they want to order some special specifications. Then they come into the info box. Yeah, there are a lot of questions (...) I think it's almost always about the order" (Interviewee 3, May 5, 2021). Similar queries are also common on social media: "I love this, can you help me with this or that. I want to order this" (Interviewee 2, May 3, 2021)

**KG3: Phase of the customer journey most important in generating brand advocacy***Phase statistics*

To ascertain the impact of corporate communications during the three different customer journey phases on the generation of brand advocacy, respondents who had recently recommended a brand were asked to select a described phase which had the most impact on their choice to recommend. The pre-purchase (38%) and post-purchase (38%) phases were rated equally highly, while the purchase phase was rated lowest (26%). The highest-rated phase overall was the pre-purchase stage of information distribution and product description (see table 10).

**Table 10**

*Statistics for customer journey phases impact on advocacy*

	Phases					
	<i>Pre-purchase : Compelling corporate story drew in customer</i>	<i>Pre-purchase : Distribution of interesting product information</i>	<i>During purchase : Clear product/ service specifics communication</i>	<i>During purchase : Ease of answering questions while purchasing</i>	<i>Post-purchase : Engaging + informative order- related communication</i>	<i>Post-purchase : Brand updates customer about itself, shares updates</i>
<b>Responses</b>						
<b>Total</b>	15/138	38/138	21/138	12/138	27/138	26/128
<b>Relative share</b>	11%	27%	15%	9%	19%	19%

There are other indications that communications during the post-purchase phase may be instrumental in establishing brand advocacy for a sustainable bike. When presented with the statement '*When I order something expensive, I want to receive more detailed and extensive information about my purchase compared to when I buy a low-price, everyday product*', 66% of respondents (137/205) agreed, while only 7% (17/205) disagreed (see table 11).

**Table 11**

*Statistics of "When I order something expensive, I want to receive more detailed and extensive information about my purchase compared to when I buy a low-priced, everyday product"*

Responses	Agreement scale				
	Strongly disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Strongly agree
Total	6/205	9/205	53/205	87/205	50/205
Relative share	3%	4%	26%	43%	24%

Moreover, 61% (124/205) of respondents rated *"The brand checked in after I purchased, to see if I'm happy and offer support"* as very or extremely important when choosing to recommend a brand.

**Table 12**

*Statistics of "The brand checked in after I purchased, to see if I'm happy and offer support"*

Responses	Importance scale				
	Not at all important	Slightly important	Moderately important	Very important	Extremely important
Total	10/205	16/205	55/205	49/205	75/205
Relative share	5%	8%	27%	24%	36%

The qualitative data confirms that the post-purchase phase is likely the most important in generating advocacy. Mr. Nolet states: "[most people become advocates due to] delivery, and after-sale service and care" (Interviewee 1, May 3, 2021). When asked which phase of the customer communication is received the most positively, Ms. Straver states "if they have something wrong with the bike, like claims, like they miss something. Or there's something wrong with the bike (...) I think the delivery of the orders is the most important thing. That's where you can see their satisfaction." (Interviewee 3, May 5, 2021).

Mr. ter Hoeven, founder and CEO, states that most recommendations are based in the post-purchase phase: "(...) the strongest trigger for people is the design" (Interviewee 4, May 11, 2021).

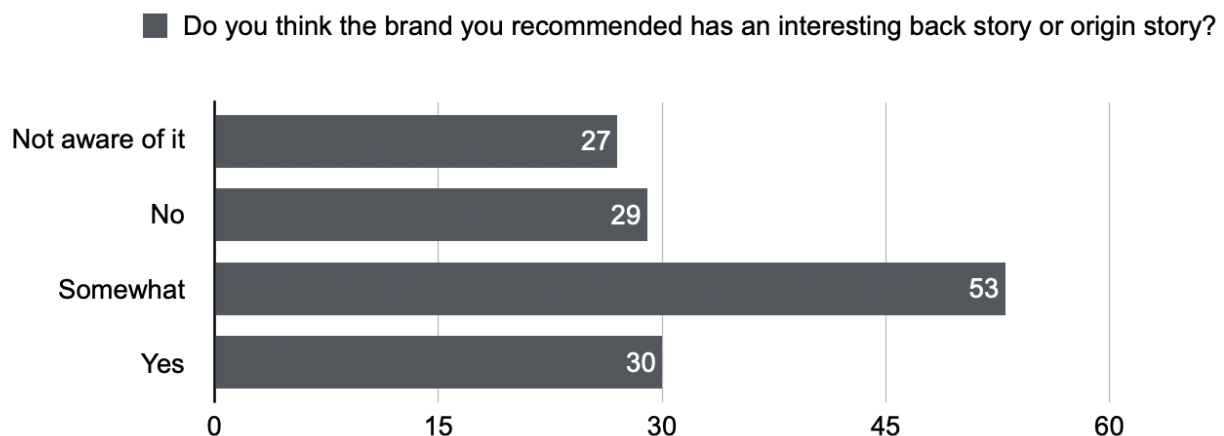
**KG4: Effect of corporate storytelling on brand advocacy for a sustainable bicycle brand**

*Corporate storytelling*

Of the 139 respondents who could remember a brand they had recently used and recommended to someone they knew, 60% (83/139) remembered its backstory and thought it was interesting. Meanwhile, 19% (27/139) were unaware of the corporate story, and 21% (29/139) thought the brand did not have an interesting backstory (see figure 3). This demonstrates that respondents were more likely to have recommended a brand with a memorable and/or interesting backstory.

**Figure 3**

*Brand recommendations vs. interesting back story*

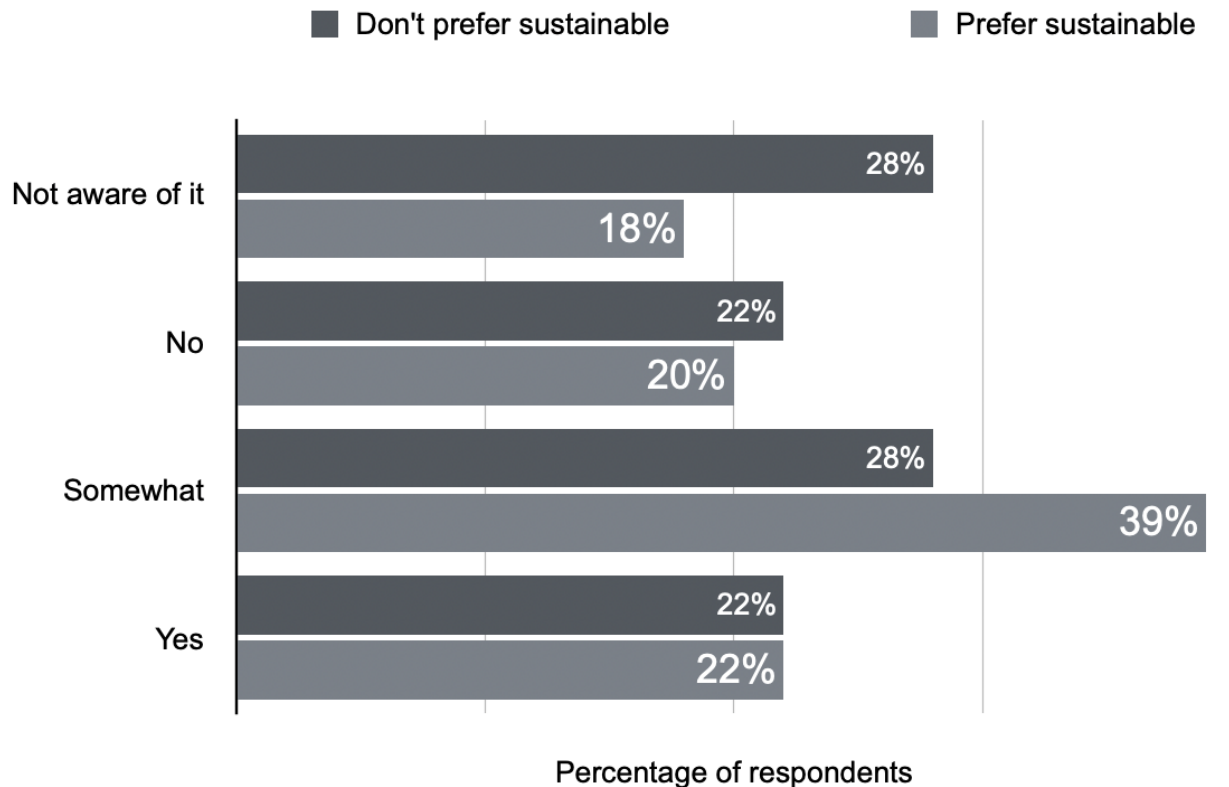


Respondents who prefer sustainable brands over non-sustainable brands are more likely to remember the backstory of a brand they recently recommended than respondents with no such preference. Of the 169 respondents who prefer sustainable products and had recently recommended a product, 61% (73/120) responded with 'Yes' or 'Somewhat' to '*Do you think the brand you recommended has an interesting backstory or origin story?*'. Of the 18 respondents who don't prefer sustainable products and had recently recommended a product, this number was lower: 50% (9/18), as shown in figure 4.



**Figure 4**

*Comparison of 'awareness of corporate story' vs. 'Sustainable preference'*



## *Internal awareness of corporate story*

Qualitative research revealed that among those directly and indirectly responsible for corporate communications, there is no clear consensus on the corporate story. When asked to recount the corporate story, Mr. Nolet and Mr. ter Hoeven, founder and CEO, offered descriptions of which were similar in theme and chronology: the inspiration behind the company's ideation, the steps taken over the course of its development, and the leading values behind it. Mr Nolet (May 3, 2021) describes:

“ It was inspired by the automotive industry, by remanufacturing (...) the founder of Roetz, who has a mechanical engineering background, he wanted to look for ways to apply the same method [of remanufacturing] into a traditional Dutch sector, which is cycling.

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(...) Later in the origination of the company, the social mission was added. Because apparently, or as it resulted, bicycle production suits itself very well for redeveloping people and shifting their skillset into a different field. Because without much background information or skills, you can become a very good bike mechanic. “

Whilst more in-depth, Mr. ter Hoeven's account is almost identical to Mr. Nolet's. Mr. Nolet and Mr. ter Hoeven also describe the three core values of the company in the same way. Mr. Nolet (May 3, 2021) states: "We say we want to create second chances for resources, and for talent. But also prove that we're not compromising quality. So we make a damn good bike which looks very slick (...)", mentioning the three core values of *resource circularity*, *social enterprise*, and *superior product quality*. Meanwhile, Ms. Straver and Mr. Wilmott describe the corporate story quite differently. Both mention *resource circularity*: "The origin story is (...) to offer a bike that is more circular by recycling frames and creating designer bikes out of them" (Interviewee 2, May 3, 2021). Additionally, Ms. Straver also mentions *social enterprise*. However, neither described the background story and inspiration of the company or its third value (*superior product quality*).

### *Background, goals and mission*

In response to the statement "If a brand tells me about their background, goals and mission, I would be more likely to recommend them to someone", 46% (94/205) of respondents agreed, while only 12% (24/205) disagreed. This is reinforced by analyses conducted by Mr. Wilmott, who stated: "(...) mostly I think [our customers] like the story. They figure out these are these hard-working, struggling people who become our bike makers and are making the bikes. Plus, they're making them in a way that's circular. I think that's the big reason why" (Interviewee 2, May 3, 2021).

When asked about the role of social media in telling the corporate story, he said: "But through our social media, we really try to build the customer advocacy. And we do that by communicating our message of sustainability and circularity. And we've seen good results when promoting ourselves as a social enterprise" (Interviewee 2, May 3, 2021).

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Mr. ter Hoeven (May 11, 2021) describes a "motion" effect of advocacy through storytelling:

"with every bike we make, we set things in motion. For every bike we make, we pick up and old, discarded bike from the city [and] we start a process. And this process turns this old bike (...) into a very new, shiny designer bike. The way that bike is transformed teaches people how to build bikes, but also creates labor. (...) And in the end, we also make a customer very happy (...) who then communicates these values into the world"

### **Additional findings: Target Audience**

A second questionnaire was conducted to further clarify the prospective Roetz-Bikes target audiences. The findings are attached in Appendix E and discussed in the advice report.

**CHAPTER V**

## **Conclusions & Implications for the Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

Next, the in-depth-research questions, the sub-questions and the overall research question are answered using the desk- and field research. The limitations of research, potential improvements and implications for the advice recommendations are also discussed.

### **Conclusions**

The in-depth research questions are discussed first.

#### ***1. Which combination of positive customer experiences leads to brand advocacy among Roetz-bikes customers?***

The literature review revealed that the key factors driving brand advocacy are customer satisfaction, brand trust, brand affection and customer-brand engagement. The questionnaire demonstrated that for a sustainable bicycle brand, the most important driver is customer satisfaction with the product. This is confirmed in the qualitative research by three of the respondents. Brand trust, brand affection and customer-brand engagement are all relatively close behind customer satisfaction. It is advisable that all four variables are implemented in a communication strategy aiming to drive advocacy.

#### ***2. Which key benefit of customer journey mapping is most likely to generate brand advocacy?***

The literature suggests that an effective and well-planned customer journey can improve the customer's overall experience, boosting advocacy. The two benefits associated with customer journey mapping that were found most likely to do so, were customer convenience and the establishment of an emotional connection between the customer and the brand. "Co-creation" of the product was found to be unlikely to drive advocacy.

**3. *Which phase of the customer journey is the most important in generating brand advocacy among Roetz-bikes customers?***

The quantitative and qualitative data suggests that the pre-purchase phase, namely the phase in which the customer discovers and first engages with the brand, and the post-purchase phase, are the two phases most likely to drive advocacy. Roetz-Bikes can lay the groundwork for brand advocacy in the way it promotes and profiles itself, and strongly increase brand advocacy by engaging with the customer post-purchase in a helpful, engaging manner.

**4. *Can corporate storytelling be used to generate brand advocacy for Roetz-Bikes?***

The research demonstrates that consumers were much likelier to have recommended a brand recently if they knew about that brand's corporate story, and found it interesting or compelling. This is even more the case for consumers who prefer sustainable goods. However, the literature is clear on the importance of a coherent, consistent corporate story which is memorable to both the organization's staff and its customers. Analysis of the quantitative data demonstrates that the staff responsible for communication is not consistent on the key aspects of the corporate story, and not all members are equally aware of it. The corporate values are shared with the customer (and resonate with them) but there isn't one clear strategy in place to do so. Most likely, corporate storytelling can be used to generate brand advocacy, but this requires consistency and thus improvements in the internal awareness of the story.

**Overall conclusion**

The sub-questions and central research question are discussed.

***SQ1: How does the pre-purchase customer journey influence brand advocacy of a sustainable bicycle developer?***

Based on the desk- and field research, the pre-purchase phase of the journey is the second most impactful in generating brand advocacy. Prospective customers often associate communications during the pre-purchase phase with making a brand recommendation.

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Specifically, this phase can be used to start a positive relationship with the customer and begin communicating the corporate story to generate trust and interest.

### ***SQ2: How does the purchasing experience influence brand advocacy of a sustainable bicycle developer?***

The desk- and field research indicates this phase is less impactful in generating brand advocacy than the pre-purchase and post-purchase phase. However, customer do value certain key factors associated with this phase, such as convenience, in making the choice to recommend a brand. Within this phase, Roetz-Bikes should focus on providing a hassle-free and efficient purchasing experience, which falls mostly outside the realm of communications advice.

### ***SQ3: How does the post-purchase customer journey affect brand advocacy of a sustainable bicycle developer?***

The desk- and field research demonstrates that this phase is the most important in generating brand advocacy for a sustainable bicycle. By engaging with the customer and communicating its values and corporate story, the brand can establish a long-term relationship that is likely to lead to feelings of brand pride and brand love, and thereby brand advocacy.

### ***SQ4: How does corporate storytelling influence brand advocacy of a sustainable bicycle developer?***

Customers, namely those who prefer sustainable goods, are much likelier to have recommended a brand recently if they knew about that brand's corporate story, and found it interesting or compelling. As described before, corporate storytelling directly influences brand advocacy.

### ***SQ5: What are best practice examples of customer journeys and brand advocacy?***

Some best practice examples include companies which offer product co-creation, which is described in literature as a strong predictor for brand advocacy. However, field research suggests this is unlikely to have an influence on the client's customers. Other examples include

excellent customer experiences, often highlighting values such as convenience and empathy, as best practice cases. These benefits are described to contribute to brand advocacy.

### **Central research question**

***What are the key factors influencing the brand advocacy of a sustainable bicycle developer?***

Key drivers of brand advocacy, as established in literature, also apply to the product segment of sustainable bicycles: customer satisfaction with the product, followed by brand trust, brand love, and brand engagement. This is confirmed by the qualitative research. Mapping out the customer journey to improve the customer experience and investing in a relationship with the individual customer through high-quality customer communication, also drive advocacy. The importance of consistently telling the corporate story, based on the ethical values which make the brand unique, cannot be understated. The qualitative data demonstrates that a brand with a memorable corporate story is likelier to be recommended, and prospective customers value it in making a brand recommendation. In order of supposed importance, the key factors are customer satisfaction, credible and consistent value-based corporate storytelling, brand trust, brand love, and the establishment of an emotional relationship with the customer.

### **Discussion**

#### ***Improvements and suggestions***

Minding the discussed limitations, several improvements are suggested. Further research should involve Roetz-Bikes' current customers, as their importance and relevance regarding the brand and purchasing experience outweighs prospective customers'. This research should ideally stretch from the pre-purchase to post-purchase phase, allowing comparative analysis. Additionally, respondents from all of Roetz-Bikes' target audiences should be reached next time.



### ***Implications for the recommendations***

This research report is followed by an advice report detailing a communications strategy seeking to increase brand advocacy among Roetz-Bikes' customers. Its findings are presumed representative and are the basis of this strategy. The findings suggest Roetz-Bikes should clarify internally and externally its value-based corporate story, in order to better communicate its unique social and sustainable character. Its pre-purchase communications should highlight the product's unique backstory and profile Roetz-Bikes as a unique brand within its field. Its post-purchase communications should consistently seek to build an emotional bond with the customer, provide post-purchase care and service, and continuously include the corporate story and values, in order to drive brand love and advocacy among its customers. In doing so, the client will deploy an advocacy strategy that is truly holistic and will result in long-term, committed and vocal fans of the brand.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Project Proposal



Nick Vojvodic -  
Research Proposal



**Appendix B: Interview guides**



Interview Guides  
Roetz-Bikes.docx

## Appendix C: Questionnaire

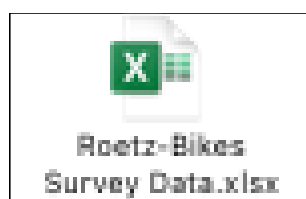
*Qualtrics questionnaire 1 screenshots:*



*Qualtrics questionnaire 2 screenshots:*



*Excel dataset questionnaire 1:*



*Excel dataset questionnaire 2:*



## Appendix D: Interviews

*Interview transcript 1: Laurens Nolet*



Interview Laurens  
Nolet (1).docx

*Interview transcript 2: Henry Wilmott*



Interview Henry  
Wilmott (2).docx

*Interview transcript 3: Sanne Straver*



Interview Sanne  
Straver (3).docx

*Interview transcript 4: Tiemen ter Hoeven*



Interview Tiemen  
ter Hoeven

*Interview recordings can be accessed in the following online folder:*

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1aznIkuFIHEEXAO4mSDUvc5Xu8R3K-fa-?usp=sharing>

**Appendix E: Target audience analysis**



Roetz-Bikes Target  
Audience

**Appendix F: Report received by assignment provider document**



Research Report  
and Advice Report