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LAKESIDE AUTOMOTIVE Ltd.: DIGITAL EMPLOYEE RECOGNITION AMID ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

Kun Huo and Ann Peng wrote this case solely to provide material for class discussion. The authors do not intend to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a managerial situation. The authors may have disguised certain names and other identifying information to protect confidentiality.

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Katri Sidhu, the dealership facilitator at Lakeside Automotive Ltd. (Lakeside), was perplexed. The usage report generated from the Thumbs Up system seemed to contradict the personal feedback provided by the employees. While the report’s statistics showed that employees had increased their usage of Thumbs Up since the dealership adopted it in June 2016, some employees had commented that the tool was “a waste of time.” The Thumbs Up system was designed for the managers and employees to recognize others’ good work by sending digitalized badges, and it promised to be a useful tool to engage the employees in the digital age. The implementation of the Thumbs Up system was also intended to facilitate the relocation and expansion of the dealership early in 2019; by then, the majority of the company’s internal communications would be conducted virtually. Should Lakeside Automotive continue to implement the Thumbs Up system? Sidhu found herself wavering and unable to decide.

KATRI SIDHU

Sidhu had obtained a bachelor’s degree in commerce with a major in accounting from the University of Guelph, in Ontario. Later, she graduated with a master of science degree in the international business program from Ivey Business School at Western University. Sidhu had worked in the dealership’s accounting department for two years before commencing work on her Ivey degree. After working on a compliance project in Singapore for two years, she was lured back to Lakeside by both its family business environment and the opportunity to practise business management.

As the dealership facilitator at Lakeside, Sidhu had many responsibilities. She supported the sales and service departments across all six brands that the dealership sold, mainly through projects related to customer experience, such as implementing customized human resources (HR) solutions, which included the Thumbs Up application (app). In addition, she worked with vendors, auto traders, and Google advertisements in an effort to strengthen Lakeside’s marketing both on and off the Internet. Lastly, she helped to facilitate the dealership’s compliance with policies of the manufacturers, a key function that maintained good relationships and supply agreements with the automakers.

LAKESIDE AUTOMOTIVE: COMPANY BACKGROUND

Lakeside Automotive Ltd. (Lakeside) was a family-owned auto dealership group that operated in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). The company was founded in 1965 by Matteo DiBiaggio, who was the father of the current owners, Angelo and Anthony DiBiaggio. Under the Lakeside banner, six separate dealerships sold and serviced six automobile brands: Honda, Hyundai, Subaru, Volvo, Jaguar, and Land Rover. The Honda, Hyundai, and Subaru dealerships were close to each other at the lakeside, while the three premium brands (Volvo, Jaguar, and Land Rover) were located in a different part of the GTA. Lakeside had been successful through more than five decades in the market. The elder DiBiaggio believed that the key to long-term success was cultivating close personal relationships, both with customers and with employees. Each Friday, he met with and talked to his front-line employees, sales staff, and service personnel, and thanked them for their contributions to the firm. As a result, compared with the rest of the industry, Lakeside had enjoyed higher employee satisfaction and longer tenure over the past many years.

The children of Matteo DiBiaggio, Angelo and Anthony, were keen to maintain the success and the reputation of the business but needed to overcome several difficulties since Matteo’s retirement in 2017. First, due to the expansion of the dealership over the years[[1]](#footnote-1) and the lack of investment in human resource management systems (HRMS), the paperwork involved with managing personnel additions, terminations, vacations, and bonus pay was slow and error-prone. Second, the younger DiBiaggios did not want to spend all of their time in the dealerships and wanted to pursue other interests while managing the business. Thus, they were looking for alternative methods to track activities in the dealerships so that they could step in when necessary. Third, responding to the growth of the GTA automotive market, Lakeside had been planning to expand by relocating its Honda, Hyundai, and Subaru dealerships. Unlike the current location, where the management team could interact with the employees frequently and in person, the individual dealerships would be farther apart from one another.

THE CANADIAN AUTOMOTIVE RETAIL INDUSTRY

Canada was a thriving market for automotive manufacturers and retailers. According to Statistics Canada, in 2016, more than 33 million vehicles were registered in Canada, of which 22 million were passenger vehicles. Given Canada’s population of approximately 36 million, car ownership per capita was 0.6 per 1,000 people (Statistics Canada 2018).[[2]](#footnote-2) A Scotiabank report showed that passenger car sales had increased by 23 per cent since 2014, and that more than 2 million passenger vehicles were expected to be sold in 2018.[[3]](#footnote-3) The Scotia bank report further suggested that Ontario made up for over 40 per cent of Canadian retail sales, and this level was expected to hold for 2018 and beyond.[[4]](#footnote-4) In Southern Ontario, strong sales were generated by a significant appreciation of property values. As house prices trended up, consumers were able to borrow against their property values to finance vehicle purchases.[[5]](#footnote-5) The GTA region was the largest municipal market for cars in Ontario and Canada. A 2011 report showed that the GTA region had at least 1.1 million cars, and that number had grown substantially, given that the region’s population continued to expand.[[6]](#footnote-6)

IBISWorld reported the Canadian automotive retail industry would have an annual revenue of $125.2 billion in 2017.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, this industry was incredibly fragmented. Only one company, AutoCanada Inc., had more than 1 per cent of the market share, while independent owners such as the DiBiaggios accounted for the rest of the market. The industry was nevertheless highly profitable with a profit-to-revenue ratio of 2.6 per cent and a return on equity that was more than 20 per cent over the period of 2012–2017.[[8]](#footnote-8) As of 2017, Canada had 3,744 dealership groups, which employed a total of 141,616 workers.[[9]](#footnote-9) IBISWorld projected the industry would continue to grow over the next five years, given the stable employment trends, growing household disposable income, and strong corporate profit levels.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Although profits were strong, dealerships were on the verge of both technological and social changes. The *Globe and Mail* documented that in 2018, 44 per cent of car buyers expected to make their purchase decision over the Internet rather than visiting the dealership.[[11]](#footnote-11) This trend coincided with a growing number of younger buyers entering the car market; *Forbes* estimated that, by 2020, 40 per cent of the market would consist of millennials.[[12]](#footnote-12) While visits to car dealerships dropped, those who walked through the doors were much more likely to buy, as they had already done their research on the Internet. In response, many dealerships in Toronto had been placing product experts in showrooms to answer detailed questions about the car models available.[[13]](#footnote-13)

TALENT MANAGEMENT IN DEALERSHIPS

Industry experts concluded that having a knowledgeable and dedicated staff was key to continued success in the automotive retail industry. However, the industry was having difficulties retaining staff. The *Automotive News*, citing research by the National Automobile Dealers Association, reported that the average employee turnover rate in US dealerships for all positions was 40 per cent in 2015, up from 35 per cent in 2011, and that the average turnover rate for salespersons was a shocking 67 per cent.[[14]](#footnote-14) The losses from high turnover could be immense for two reasons. First, almost all auto manufacturers required new dealership sales staff to attend product and brand training. Such training investment by the dealership was largely wasted as a result of high staff turnover. Second, dealership revenue often came from repeat customers with whom the salespersons had established personal connections. High turnover risked losing those connections and therefore led to lower sales.

At the same time, dealerships were having difficulty attracting talented younger workers. Salespersons’ compensation was primarily from commissions, which varied week to week. This compensation structure also resulted in stiff competition among co-workers. While some thrived in such environments, many university and college graduates reported that they would rather work in a lower-pressure environment such as Starbucks.[[15]](#footnote-15) Nonetheless, as current employees were nearing retirement, a dealership would need to tackle the challenge of attracting, training, and retaining younger workers. This need was particularly urgent for Lakeside, as its business was expanding.

A DIGITAL SOLUTION? THE THUMBS UP APP

In 2015, Lakeside engaged DigitalHR to streamline its HR management. Based in London, Ontario, DigitalHR was a medium-sized technology company specializing in designing and maintaining cloud-based HRMS. DigitalHR’s management believed that technology could be used not only to manage the workplace but also to improve worker engagement and performance. Similar to their father, Angelo and Anthony DiBiaggio had always believed that recognizing employees for work accomplishments could be as important as pay in terms of fostering employee commitment. Since the brothers did not always have time to talk to all 222 of their employees, digitization offered a potential solution to this problem. After some discussion and based on the inputs from Lakeside’s management, DigitalHR decided to develop Thumbs Up. In return, Lakeside would be the test site for the Thumbs Up system, which might be marketed toward future HRMS customers.

Sidhu had been involved with Thumbs Up since the initial stages of development. The concept behind Thumbs Up was quite simple. Employees accessed the Thumbs Up app under the existing HRMS. Inside the app, they could send a digital badge to a colleague (or a group of colleagues) to compliment the recipient for a good deed or work achievement. For example, a manager could congratulate a salesperson for satisfying a difficult customer, or salespeople might thank a peer for taking care of their customer while they were occupied with other tasks. To send a badge, employees selected from a variety of colourful choices and attached a personalized message to the badge (see Exhibit 2). The sender might also designate how many people would receive the badge and how many others would be tagged on the message so that the worthy deed was visible to more people.

Unlike the traditional handshake approach that could work only in person, Thumbs Up could be accessed anywhere and anytime from a computer or a smartphone. The badges sent and received stayed in the employees’ profiles, and management could view usage statistics such as the type and frequencies of badges sent by each employee. Sidhu was pleased with the tracking feature. In the past, the owners and the HR department had little knowledge on whether or not an employee had gone above and beyond the call of duty to serve a customer or to help out a colleague, unless the supervisor reported the incident. With Thumbs Up, employees could recognize each other and provide good stories to celebrate. Sidhu saw the Thumbs Up app as a tool to assess employee engagement levels in real time.

Over the past two years, the collection of badges in Thumbs Up had grown to include fun badges that celebrated birthdays and work anniversaries, and “one-liners” that employees found amusing. Usage statistics had grown significantly year by year, although there were large monthly variations (see Exhibit 3). Usage also differed between employees versus managers. Thus, Sidhu wondered how to interpret these patterns.

SIDHU’S LOVE WITH THUMBS UP

Sidhu frequently used Thumbs Up to recognize group accomplishments such as completing required training and meeting or exceeding manufacturers’ customer service standards. For example, in the previous week, Lakeside had dramatically shortened its response time to online inquiries, and Sidhu sent everyone on the sales team a congratulatory badge. She believed that the personal repository of badges could be motivating in itself:

Whenever I get good news or I get something that’s fantastic in my email, I move it to a “Good News” folder and then I can go back to look at my good news. So when I go to my history app I can see all of the thumbs-up I ever gave anyone and I can see all of the thumbs-up people gave me. It’s just a really great place for me to go. These are my victories.

In the future, Sidhu had also considered using Thumbs Up in two other avenues. First, Thumbs Up could be modified to be more closely linked to employees’ day-to-day jobs so that they would be more engaged with using the app. She believed that having consistent follow-ups with employees, seeking their feedback, and making adjustments were important to involve employees in the changes. Second, Sidhu wanted to use Thumbs Up data in employees’ performance reviews. Although data from Thumbs Up would not be a direct input to employee bonus and promotion decisions, they could supplement supervisor assessment and employee self-assessment.

More importantly, Sidhu saw Thumbs Up as a tool to manage communications when the dealership expanded. The three dealerships currently located in one location would, in the future, have separate buildings, making face-to-face communications more difficult among managers in different dealerships.

As we’re growing, the group is getting bigger and we’re going to be spread across three separate buildings. So that’s where things for me personally would get a little bit more difficult, and the thumbs-up or having a digital way of communicating with the team is really important for me.

ENCOUNTERING PUSHBACK

Change was never smooth, whether it occurred in large or small organizations. Sidhu had, along with DigitalHR, organized a series of training sessions for employees to learn how to use the software. She had also obtained verbal commitment from Angelo and Anthony DiBiaggio, who would lead by example by using the tool to send their own recognition messages. Many employees balked at the idea of sending recognition using an app, and some negative reactions surfaced and circulated around the company. To better understand the issues, DigitalHR conducted interviews among some representative employees at Lakeside.

David Smith

Smith was a salesperson in his early 50s. He had worked for Lakeside for five years and had been at the dealership since the inception of Thumbs Up. His attitude toward the app, however, was mostly negative. Smith was a strong believer in the superiority of using physical objects as tokens of appreciation and preferring verbal communications over electronic ones. Not surprisingly, he rarely used Thumbs Up and did not see a future for this app at Lakeside. Several of his comments included:

If somebody helped me out, instead of sending a badge to them electronically, why not print it out and give it to them personally? If you were to receive a print copy, you get to have a drawer of cards which you look at it from time to time. You can even make a folder and leave it on your desk and customers can even look through it and say, “Wow, this guy is a good worker.” Also, [with print copies] you can be sure that the person has received it. I’m not letting it go through the email and not knowing whether it has been opened.

I’d rather have a manager who’s just across the desk from me, walk over to me and tell me, “Hey, great job selling three cars today,” instead of getting a badge on my email, which I might not open until two days later. I mean you can go in your phone [to check it] but I turn that off because what happens is I often get a thumbs-up but that is not for me, I am just getting tagged on messages by people I don’t even know. [Smith points to his cell phone] See, I open it up and it says somebody from Land Rover [dealership] tagged you on a message that says “Thank you for cleaning the lot.” But the message is not to me.

However, when asked whether he enjoyed still receiving an electronic badge from a manager or a colleague, Smith was affirmative:

The times I do get it, it’s good. Sometimes they made funny ones with tags and try to make you smile. I like them. But I don’t want to receive a badge just because a colleague or manager is forced to give them out. Those are not genuine.

Samuel Okafor

Okafor was a salesperson in his late 20s. He was from Nigeria and had worked for Lakeside since 2014. Similar to Smith, Okafor had been at Lakeside since Thumbs Up was introduced. Different from Smith, his attitude toward the app was mostly positive. He believed that the app provided an effective way to get things done even when he was not in the dealership:

I had a deal that was going to fall through, but for some reason, my manager was able to talk to [the customers] and then they reconsidered and went ahead with it. He sends me an email to let me know. With the app, I can just go quickly to my phone and send him a thumbs-up and tag my colleagues in it just to show my appreciation. So that’s the good thing.

Okafor also thought that the app could complement face-to-face interaction:

. . . my sending [a thumbs-up] ensures that my colleagues see that I appreciate what [my manager] did [to help me]. It is more like getting all of my colleagues to say “Thank you” to my manager. But at the end of the day, I would still go to him, out of courtesy to say, “Thank you” face-to-face. I believe that there’s a place for Thumbs Up and that there is a place for face-to-face. The two ways [of communicating] do not conflict.

On how to make the app work better, Okafor pointed to the abuse of the app’s tagging function. While tagging people could save a person’s time compared with messaging multiple people, its implementation had led to issues:

We are not using it the way we are supposed to. See, we have six dealerships. Something happens at Jaguar, and the person tags everybody in the company. But I don’t know who he is talking about so it doesn’t make me excited, and I just go through them and quickly press erase. This takes away the good essence of Thumbs Up.

Alex Frederick

Frederick was a more recent hire with eight months of experience in a sales position. In his mid-20s, he was an adept user of technology. Frederick was initially active on Thumbs Up but his enthusiasm for the app had declined over time. In addition to pointing out the tagging issues voiced by Smith and Okafor, he was also disappointed by the lack of mobile functionality in the app and pointed to some potential improvements:

. . . most times too I don’t even log onto the portal. If there is some way the Thumbs Up app could be incorporated into a [real] app on your phone for example, that’d be a lot easier to use. Currently, you have to log into the company website on your phone and [it becomes a hassle].

. . . it’d be pretty cool if you could include a picture file. Let’s say I help out with a car [sale], and my colleague would be able to go to the car and take a picture of it and then post it alongside a badge that says, “Good job, this is the car that you sold,” and then write a little paragraph. I am a visual learner and they’d like to see unique pictures. The pre-existing badges in the app can get a little boring.

Ron Patel

Patel was the manager of the service, parts, and rental cars departments of the Subaru and Hyundai dealerships. He was in his late 50s, had been at Lakeside for five years, and supervised 33 workers. Patel’s assessment of Thumbs Up was both positive and negative. As a manager, he supported the mandate to evolve the organization and to use new tools to boost employee engagement. But he had also received resistance from his direct reports:

In the service department especially, there are people who have been working here for 40 years. A lot of the older tenured employees have a great sense of loyalty. Personal contact and the handshake [mean] so much to them. For people who have been around more than six or seven years, the personal contact and handshakes [were] the expectation. A manager back then would shake hands with the technicians or salespersons and say, “Thank you very much.” Every Friday the owner would also come in and personally express his gratitude to the employees.

Now, our people are told that they need to do it in a new way and need to get to a website. Perhaps that was just a mindset. But to change the culture, to change their thinking, to change the way they have been accustomed to at Lakeside does not make much sense to me.

In addition, Patel pointed out significant differences in the work environment between his department and the new-car sales departments:

We actually discourage our employees to be on the phone while working on the cars. You can lose the focus if you leave a bolt loose, the engine costs $10,000. So that’s a danger there.

In terms of individual recognition, Patel favoured instant verbal communications but recognized the value of Thumbs Up in some circumstances:

. . . if my people are doing well, I will provide the instant recognition on the spot. For example, I may say, “Hey guys, come. So far, the past four hours have been excellent, very good workflow, customers all happy, and there’s nobody waiting in the waiting area.” If I see a technician doing a good job, I would definitely approach him right away and say, “Thank you very much,” and loud enough that his peers would listen to my compliment and they learn what is good behaviour. A thumbs-up would not work very effectively in this situation. If I come back to office to send a thumbs-up and the person accesses the system two days later, I lose the moment and it does not give much impact.

If there’s a birthday coming up, or a baby coming in one of our employees’ life, we want to celebrate together. We can send a thumbs-up because this is not as time-sensitive as other scenarios.

Toward the end of the interview, Patel showed a text he sent to an employee that showed his personal touch and sincerity. He read:

Good morning Richard. Today’s a very special day for Lakeside’s success history. Your contribution to this auto group’s success speaks the highest volume. Your dedication, honesty, and hard work speaks for itself. . . . Thanks to you for being such a valuable friend. Please pass on my regards to your lovely wife and parents. Such a milestone of 20 years. Regards.

The aforementioned Richard was appreciative and stopped by Patel’s office to thank him. Patel expressed doubt that a Thumbs Up badge would have had the same impact.

Pascal Rahal

Rahal was a new-car sales manager for one of the brands. He was in his late 30s and he had been in the position for two years. Rahal came to Lakeside with a non-auto background, having previously worked as a finance manager at Rogers Communications Inc., a large Canadian telecommunications company. Rahal’s initial enthusiasm for Thumbs Up was high, partly because he had good experience with a similar app at Rogers:

The digital generation is growing. I think this was a great way for me and my team at Rogers to communicate when I see something happening with the salesforce while I’m upstairs in a meeting or on a conference call. But the team I worked in had 2,500 employees. Currently, we are only a small dealership. It takes me literally two or three minutes to send a badge whereas it takes me 10 seconds to gather my guys up and say, “Hey guys, great job.”

Further, Rahal was discouraged by the lack of reciprocity on behalf of his employees. Although he sent many badges, he received few. The lack of badges coming from employees had, at times, made him wonder whether he had done something wrong. But after talking to his employees it was apparent that things were fine. Pascal was frustrated with the mandated number of badges he had to send, though no such quotas were applied to non-managerial employees:

Today I got a reminder that it has been 57 days since I sent a badge. But I say, “Good job” to my people every day. We just spoke verbally about what they did, and then I got to reinforce them, “Hey, don’t forget to send me your thumbs-up before we leave.” It becomes something that you’re doing just for the sake of using the app.

Rahal believed in the need for digital innovation but also recognized that people in the automotive industry tended to be less tech-savvy. Thus, how to manage digital change with the current workforce had become a significant challenge.

REACTIONS FROM DIGITALHR

The management at DigitalHR was surprised by the feedback from the Lakeside employees. Aside from the actual results, which showed that the Thumbs Up usage increased from approximately 100 per month to 200 per month, many of the new badge designs were actually from suggestions by Lakeside employees. In addition, DigitalHR’s management and employees liked the product so much that they used it themselves (see Exhibit 3). However, the employees at DigitalHR comprised mostly programmers, designers, and sales associates.

WHAT’S NEXT

As she sat in her office, rolling a toy Land Rover across her desk, Sidhu contemplated the roadblocks to her vision for Lakeside. The automotive market in Canada remained strong but the demographics of the buyers and their purchasing behaviours were changing. To respond to these changes, Lakeside needed to attract young and talented employees and to train current employees to be accustomed to digital technologies. At the same time, the incredible loyalty of the current and often long-tenured employees was what made Lakeside’s culture so strong and special. Given Lakeside’s current circumstances, what was the role of Thumbs Up in promoting employee engagement? Would it be advantageous to incorporate the data from Thumbs Up into employee evaluation decisions? Such a change would certainly require the greenlight from the owners who would want to see a strategic roadmap. Sidhu made herself a mochaccino and began to strategize.

Exhibit 1: Sample Badges from the Thumbs Up App

**Category: Recognition Badges**



**Category: Motivational Badges**



**Category: Fun Badges**



**Category: Special Occasion Badges**



Source: Images obtained from the Thumbs Up app developed by DigitalHR. Used with permission.

Exhibit 2: Lakeside automotive’s Badge Usage Statistics

Panel A: Frequency and Types of Badges Sent, August 2015 to December 2017

Panel B: Types of Badge Sent, by User Type

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Employee Level** | **Registered Users** | **% of Total** | **Motivation + Recognition Badges** | **Fun + Special Occasion Badges** | **Total** | **% of Total** |
| **Employee** | 309 | 89.83% | 1,026 | 461 | 1,487 | 38% |
| **Supervisor** | 35 | 10.17% | 1,990 | 405 | 2,395 | 62% |

Source: Created by the case authors using data from company files.

Exhibit 2 (continued)

Panel C: Examples of Comments Accompanying the Badges

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Sender** | **Receiver(s)** | **Badge** | **Category** | **Comment** |
| **E95** | E31, E115 |  | Recognition | Thank you for taking care of the lot and keeping it in order for us! |
| **S20** | E125 |  | Motivational | You are an animal on the floor (with customers) |
| **E96** | E60 |  | Fun | Graham you are officially excluded from taco Tuesday for that last chubby comment you made. Any and all chocolate privileges have also been revoked. May you learn from this moving forward. |
| **S103** | S20 |  | Special Occasion | You didn't think I forgot did you?? Happy birthday you old fart. question: what were the dinosaurs like??? just wondering |

Source: Created by the case authors using data from company files.

Exhibit 3: DigitalHR’s Badge Usage Statistics

Panel A: Frequency and Types of Badges Sent, December 2015 to December 2017

Panel B: Types of Badge Sent, by User Type

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Employee Level** | **Registered Users** | **% of Total** | **Motivation + Recognition** | **Fun + Special Occasion** | **Total** | **% of Total** |
| **Employee** | 43 | 84.31% | 1,427 | 769 | 2,196 | 67% |
| **Supervisor** | 8 | 15.69% | 867 | 222 | 1,089 | 33% |

Source: Created by the case authors using data from DigitalHR.

1. Jaguar and Land Rover were added to the group in 2014, and Volvo was added in 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Road Motor Vehicle Registrations, by Type of Vehicle,” Statistics Canada, 2018, accessed July 5, 2018, www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=2310006701. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
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4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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8. Ibid.; Gomes, op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Peters, op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Peters, op. cit. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
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14. Amy Wilson, “Employee Turnover Costs Dealers Billions,” *Automotive News*, January 23, 2017, accessed August 8, 2018, www.autonews.com/article/20170123/RETAIL06/301239850/employee-turnover-costs-dealers-billions. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)