



SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS  
AND MANAGEMENT  
Lund University

## The Pursuit of Status

Social Identity Construction in the Interview Process

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## Abstract

- Title:** The Pursuit of Status: Social Identity Construction In The Interview Process
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- Authors:** Martin Lennernäs and Filip Manfredsson
- Advisor:** Robert Wénglen
- Key Words:** Employee Branding, Employer Attractiveness, Graduates, Social Identity Theory, Status, War for Talent
- Purpose:** Based on a job seekers perspective, the purpose of this study is to explore influences of status and social identity upon perceived employer attractiveness as a product of the job seekers interactions within the interview process and her social informal network.
- Methodology:** Based on a social constructionist stance we have conducted an exploratory qualitative study
- Theoretical Perspectives:** Social identity theory forms the theoretical framework backed up with research on recruitment processes and social influences
- Empirical Foundation:** The empirical base is eight deep interviews with graduate job seekers
- Analysis:** The analysis chapter is divided in two interdependent parts, the interview process and the social informal network. The interview process enable opportunities for comparison within the social informal network. The social informal network is the frame of reference in which the job seekers compare and set the norm for what is perceived as granting status. Together the interview process and the social informal network make up a noteworthy arena for graduate job seekers social identity construction. Status is granted the individuals who can claim that they are high performers, capable, extraordinary and going places.
- Conclusion:** We emphasize the interview process as a battle ground in the war for talent. On this battle ground competitive advantage is gained by providing job seekers with status. We suggest that this is done by inviting the right people to the interview process, offering difficult assessments, being generous and recognizing the job seeker and by eliciting inference about future success.

## Definitions

**The recruitment process:** Any interaction between the employer and the individual, regardless of the purpose or intention, that-, directly or indirectly affects the individual's firm familiarity or corporate reputation. It is thus difficult to assess the beginning of this process. The process ends when the individual exits the recruitment process.

**Early stages of the recruitment process:** Often done through advertising, job fairs and pre-interviews held at job fairs.

**Late stages of the recruitment process:** Initiated when the first interview is commenced. Ends as the job seeker exits the recruitment process.

**Graduate job seekers:** Graduate student looking for a job. Also referred to as job seeker, applicant or graduate job seeker or graduate.

**Interview process:** The same as Late stages of the recruitment process

**Social Informal Network (SIN):** Individuals connected to each other to some extent. Often containing friends, family, fellow students and acquaintances.

**Status:** Individual's subjective belief about her relative honor and prestige in a group or society



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# Introduction

The thesis starts off by presenting two trends in today's society; employers' war for talent and individuals' quest for grandiosity and status. It is suggested that this search for status ought to be more apparent for graduate students because of their fierce identity struggles. The background goes on to describe our main research field; employee branding and employer attractiveness. In the problem formulation, our forum for this research field, the recruitment process is presented and prior research in this area is discussed. Under the heading *Our Study* we present our contribution, our theoretical framework and limitations. We present the purpose with the thesis and lay out a disposition.

## Background

### War for talent

The capability to attract talent is becoming increasingly important. The old reality that people need companies is replaced by a new reality in which companies' need talented people (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). Companies have been found to rethink their employment strategies in order to expand their pool of potential talent (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). Organizational performance is heavily determined by organizations ability to attract qualified personnel. This has become extra important in the *war for talent* (Williamson, King Jr, Lepak, & Sarma, 2010, p. 669). In knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs) this relationship is particularly evident as employees are the most important asset. KIFs need to compete simultaneously on the output market, with their services, and on the input market, for professional workers (Alvesson, 2004).

König et al. (2010) claim that organizations need to view the goal of recruitment processes as something more than a tool to predict validity of the applicants. One such goal is to create positive applicant reactions (König, Klehe, Berchtold, & Kleinmann, 2010).

### The pursuit of status

#### *Graduates identity struggle*

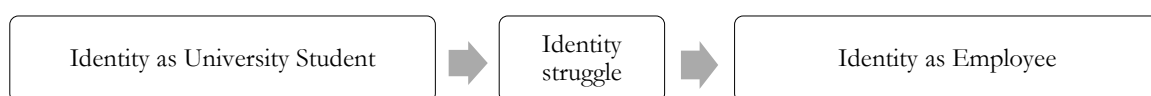


Figure 1: Graduate Students Identity Struggle

Identification is an ongoing process (Alvesson, 2004). As illustrated above, our study, like many before us, takes place in the transition phase between the identity as a student and as a employee. As Alvesson (2004) argues individuals strive for stable identities as it provides ontological security in

today's ambiguous reality. Based on this discussion there is thus reason to believe that this identity gap or transition period is experienced as difficult and may cause anxiety (Alvesson, 2004) and that the search for a stable identity in this period is particularly strong. Graduate job seekers are also subject to high expectations, both from themselves and others, after years of studying (Kleppstö, 1993; Alvesson, 2006). The recruitment process pre-socializes the individual into their employment (Cable & Turban, 2001) and therefore influences their social identity construction (Alvesson, 2004; Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

### *The fantasy of status*

*We live in a world where fantasy is more real than reality...*

(Boorstin, 1961, p. 37)

According to Alvesson (2006) grandiosity characterizes our society and has great effect on individuals' identity construction. Phenomena are projected in a way that, within a reasonable frame, makes them sound as appealing as possible. Semi-realistic-, phenomena are ascribed meaning of significance that creates a distance from the ordinary and dull. Connected to a widely spread narcissism and need to improve self-esteem satisfaction is subject to *mimetic rivalry*, the desire to pursue what others desire and pursue. The result is satisfaction as something that lacks true value and rather is something related and relative to *others'* satisfaction. Others could be any group with which identification exists. Interest in positively projected images outweighs actual substance behind claims of such (Alvesson, 2006).

Alvesson (2006) talks about an idealized projection connected to how the student's professional life after graduation will evolve. Sky high expectations frame fantasies of using the upcoming profession as a tool to live out idealized images of one's ability. The progression of the desire to be associated with strong brands contributes to the absence of satisfaction. Companies make massive attempts to try to establish positive standardized expectations and conceptions around their brands. These fantasies seldom have room for realistic job attributes which consequently ceases to be subject of interest in the pursuit of status (Alvesson, 2006).

In contrast to this, Cable and Turban (2001) among others, argue for the importance of projecting an accurate image of the organization during the recruitment process as unmet expectations are likely to lead the individual to experience dissatisfaction and quit (Cable & Turban, 2001; Cable & Judge, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

### Employee branding

*Employer branding represents a firm's efforts to promote, both within and outside the firm, a clear view of what makes it different and desirable as an employer.*

(Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p. 501)





Employee branding is an umbrella term defined as the combination of advantages offered through employment and identification with the employer (Ambler and Barrow, 1996). Ruch (2002) describes employee branding as the company's brand from the perspective of current and potential employees.

Cable and Turban (2001 p. 150) suggest;

*...that the goal of recruitment is to build job seekers' employer knowledge so that a firm is very familiar to its targeted job seekers, possesses a positive reputation, and has established a strong, accurate image.*

## Employer attractiveness

Employers' attraction among potential employees has often been deemed as vital in attracting talent. Many researchers have used a brand-equity approach to examine employer attractiveness. This perspective sees employer attractiveness as a result of its reputation and brand image. A strong brand can generate competitive advantage for organizations as it affects decision processes, improves efficiency of marketing programs (Cable & Turban, 2003) and create competitive advantage in the war for talent (Beechler & Woodward, 2009).

*Employer attractiveness is defined as the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization. It constitutes an important concept in knowledge-intensive contexts where attracting employees with superior skills and knowledge comprises a primary source of competitive advantage*

(Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005, p. 151)

Berthon et al. (2005) identified five factors influencing employer attractiveness from a post graduate perspective. Exciting job attributes, social atmosphere, economic factors, that the employer provides recognition and self-worth and finally the employer's humanitarian attitude (Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005).

Cable and Turban (2001) claim that attraction to the employer influences job seekers' motivation to find out more about the employer, whether they apply for a job; accept a job or a job offer or what expectations they have of the organization as future employer. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) link employer brand image to employer attractiveness and argue that social identity theory provides an explanation for this connection.

## Problem formulation

### Prior studies on recruitment

The recruitment process can be conceptualized as two ongoing parallel processes, employer and non-employer interaction, from where job seekers receive information and knowledge and hence creates an image of the employer. This in turn determines perceived employer attractiveness (Cable & Turban, 2001; Allen, Mahto, & Otondo, 2007; Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

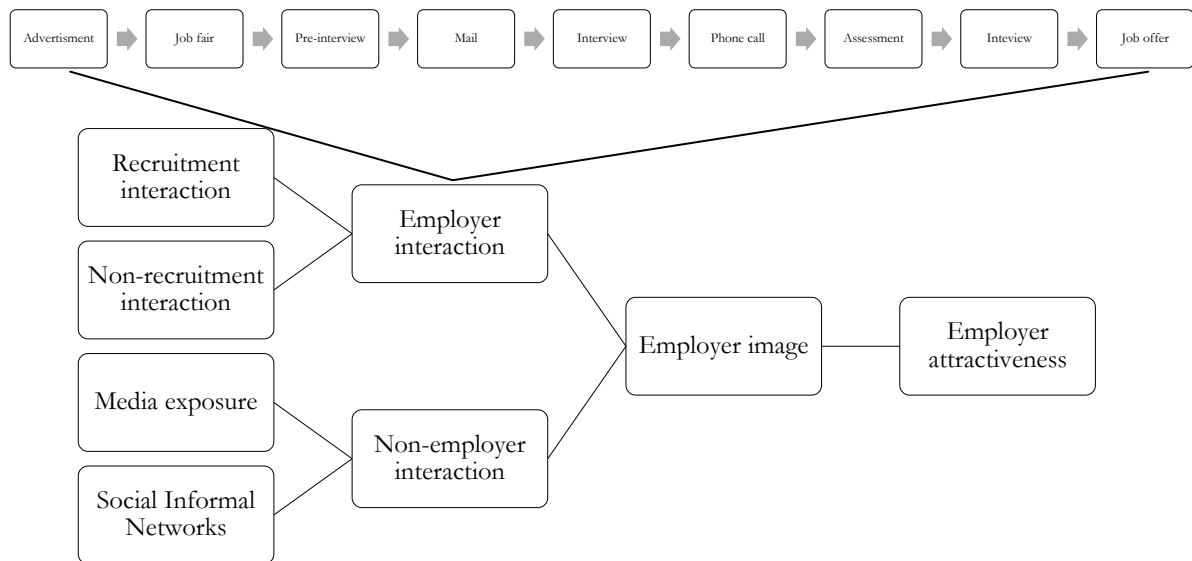


Figure 2: Conceptualization of the parallel and sequential interactions of the recruitment process

### *Employer interaction*

Employer-interaction is divided into recruitment and non-recruitment interaction. Recruitment interaction is the interaction between the employer and the potential employee that takes place within the recruitment process, and covers everything from job advertisements, interviews and assessments to job offers. From the employer perspective this interaction is intended to attract, assess and socialize the individual into her employment (Cable & Turban, 2001; Rynes, Bretz JR, & Gerhart, 1991). Non-recruitment interaction is communication from the employer that does not have the direct purpose of affecting potential job seekers, such as company advertising (Cable & Turban, 2001; Miles & Mangold, 2004).

### *The disputed importance of the recruitment process*

How applicants react to recruitment processes directly affects employer attractiveness (Vianen, Taris, Scholten, & Schinkel, 2004). Besides reputation, current research on the recruitment process focuses on knowledge about the employer and job attributes as determining employer attractiveness.

### *Knowledge and information*

Cable and Turban (2001) describe the knowledge job seekers have about the organization as contributing to employer attractiveness, evaluation of the recruitment process, job seeking intentions and job choice decisions. Williamson et al. (2010) argue that the reason is that knowledge reduces uncertainty about the employer. Information is less important for firms with strong employer reputation as potential applicants already have information about the organization and are less inclined



to look for it (Williamson, King Jr, Lepak, & Sarma, 2010). Prior knowledge about the employer might also affect the evaluation of the recruitment process (Cable & Turban, 2001).

The process of establishing and altering knowledge about the employer is ongoing throughout the recruitment process. Cable and Turban (2001) propose that as the knowledge about the employer increases, the importance of external information, such as advertising or annual reports, about the employer decreases. The importance of the recruitment process, such as interviews or campus visits, is still important as it can offer subtle insights into what it is like to work in the organization (Cable & Turban, 2001).

Based on signaling theory, Cable and Turban (2003), Rynes et al. (1991) and Turban (2001) argue alike; that job seekers interpret different components of the recruitment process as symbolic of broader organizational characteristics. They suggest that since job choices take place under imperfect information recruitment practices function as signals for organizational characteristics and job attributes. Based on their brand equity approach, Cable and Turban (2003) further argue that the same relationship applies to reputation. In the absence of full information reputation function as an important signal about the job attributes.

#### *Job attributes*

Taylor and Bergmann's (1987) quantitative study found that in the earliest stage of the recruitment process, which in their case was pre-interviews held on a college campus, recruitment practices such as the characteristic of the interview, recruiter demographics and the applicant's perception of recruiter empathy was significant for perceived employer attractiveness. This in turn affected the probability of accepting a future job offer as they impact on the job seekers inference about job attributes (Taylor & Bergmann, 1987; Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991). The more information applicants receive the less the importance of such inference becomes (Taylor & Bergmann, 1987). In the later stages of the recruitment process, when interviews tend to convey more information about job attributes, this inference becomes less important as do the recruitment activities themselves (Taylor & Bergmann, 1987).

#### *Pride*

*...individuals may expect to feel proud working for a familiar firm and therefore view it as a more attractive employer*

(Turban D. , 2001, p. 307)

Turban (2001) argues, based on social identity theory, that employers can influence their attractiveness in the earliest stages of the recruitment process by increasing job seekers knowledge about, and familiarity with, them. He argues that firm familiarity can provide job seekers with pride.

*Non-employer interaction*

Non-employer interaction is independent of the employer and can be divided into media exposure (Cable & Turban, 2001) and social informal networks (Hoye & Lievens, 2007; Cable & Turban, 2001; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991; Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey, & Edwards, 2000). Non-recruitment interaction, such as word-of-mouth, influence perceived attractiveness and loyalty towards the employer (Miles & Mangold, 2004) and hence determines whether the job seekers find the employer attractive (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

*Social influences*

*Many job applicants gather information about an organization's values through informal social networks of individuals who are not affiliated with the company...*

(Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey, & Edwards, 2000, p. 1078)

Social influences can be categorized into normative and informational. Normative social influences are motivated by desires for external rewards. Identification with and compliance to expectations of another group or individuals are drivers and can affect organizational attractiveness (Liden & Parsons, 1986). Informational social influences are motivated by problem solving and coping with the environment. It refers to accepting information provided by others and operates through internalization (Turner, 1982).

Job seekers regard potential co-workers as important sources of information as they are perceived to have great knowledge about working in the organization (Fisher, Ilgen, & Hoyer, 1979). Rynes et al. (1991) found evidence that perceived organizational fit was initially dependent on information provided by friends or acquaintances, both those who did and those who did not work for the organization.

*... firms need to ensure that interns have meaningful experiences so that they provide positive, yet realistic, information about the organization to other job seekers*

(Cable & Turban, 2001, p. 153)

Van Hoye & Lievens (2007) criticize previous studies on organizational attractiveness for treating individuals as independent decision makers, ignoring social influences. They conclude that word-of-mouth, especially from strong ties and peers, is a strong recruitment source which, has significant impact on perceived organizational attractiveness.

Peers function as a legitimizing function to job seekers evaluation of employers (Kilduff M. , 1990). Students faced with important and ambiguous decisions, such as which organization to work for, are likely to follow what others that are perceived as similar to them are doing. According to Kilduff and Krackhart (1994) social influences are particularly strong in college settings where social informal networks are tight. Turban (2001) further argues that employers can use social informal networks to



increase their attractiveness by targeting key individuals in these networks, both fellow students and university personnel.

### *Reputation*

Employer reputation is defined by Cable and Turban (2001, p. 127) as

*... a job seeker's beliefs about the public's affective evaluation of the organization*

Job seekers value reputation in an attempt to improve *their self-esteem by associating themselves with firms that have favorable reputation* (Cable and Turban, 2001, 2003). Cable and Turban (2001) argues that, because of the volitional nature of their relationship, an organizations reputation and job seekers identity should be strongly connected. Cable and Turban (2003) further argue that;

*Given the link between employers' reputations and people's self-concept, reputation should affect the pride that job seekers expect to feel after joining the organization*

(Cable & Turban, 2003, p. 2249)

How the organization is perceived by applicants has been shown to be the strongest predictor when it comes to accepting or declining a job. It therefore becomes increasingly important for organizations to get prospective employees to view the organization as a positive place to work (Williamson, King Jr, Lepak, & Sarma, 2010).

Job seekers reputation perceptions depend on their familiarity with the employer and corporate reputation. Job seekers reputation perception affects their evaluation of job attributes and pride from organizational membership. Job seekers are willing to pay a premium, in terms of lower wages, to become members of firms which they perceive to have positive reputation (Cable and Turban 2003).

## Our Study

*... joining a particular organization is a concrete, public expression of a person's values and abilities*

(Cable & Turban, 2003, p. 2249)

To nuance the understanding of employer attractiveness and current research on the recruitment process we take a closer look at graduates' identity struggle. We explore how job seekers construct self-identity and status as a result of their interaction and experiences from interview processes and their social informal network. Unlike most prior research on employer attractiveness this study does not take brand equity (Cable & Turban, 2003) or signaling theory (Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991; Turban D. , 2001) as main viewpoint. To nuance the understanding of employer attractiveness and the recruitment process we thus use social identity theory as a theoretical framework. The importance of social influences on job- search and accept decisions has been investigated (Liden and Parson, 1986; Fischer et al. 1979; Rynes et al. 1991; Kilduff, 1990; Cable and Turban, 2001; Cable and Turban, 2003). With our framework we wish to contribute to a deeper understanding on this phenomena by exploring perceived employer attractiveness as an effect of graduate job seekers desire to construct a positive social identity.

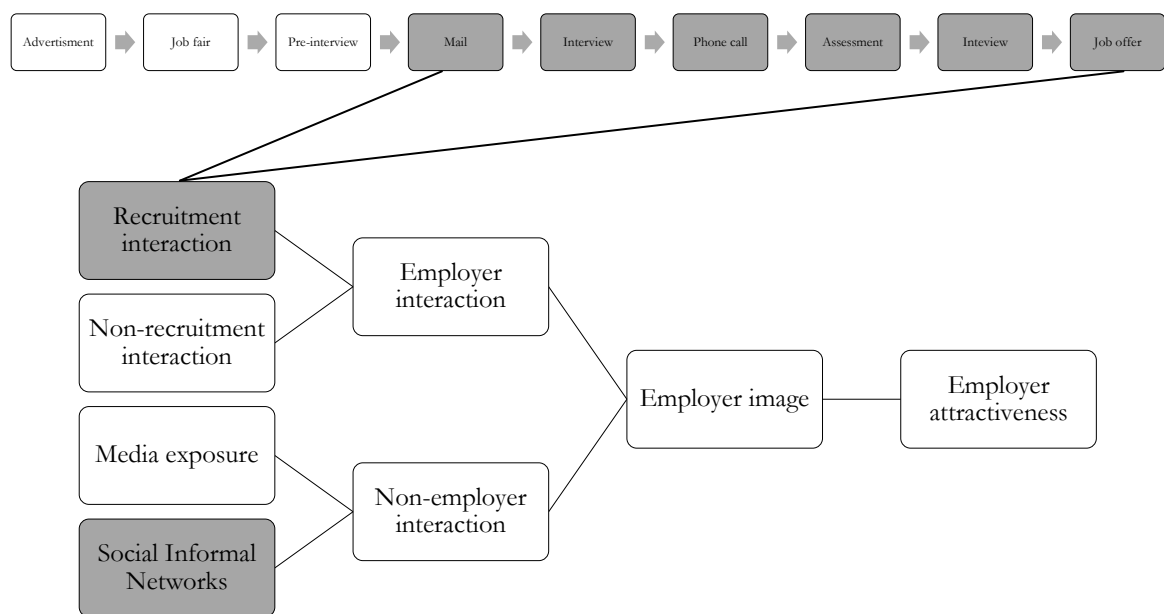


Figure 3: The Interaction within the Social Informal Network and the Interview Process

Our study takes place in both the employer and non-employer interaction processes. It is however limited within these areas. Within the employer interaction process our study focuses on the late sequences of the recruitment process; the interview process. The reason for this limitation is to contribute to the discussion on the importance of the late stages in the recruitment process. Within



the non-employer interaction process our study focuses on the informal social networks. The limitation in the non-employer interaction is due to our desire to extend the understanding of prior research indication of the importance of social influences upon employer attractiveness.

Due to prior research we find reason to believe that the two parallel interaction processes of our study, the recruitment interaction and the interaction within the social informal networks, are interdependent. For the employer the importance of the interview process would hence stretch far beyond the interviewee herself.

*...theoretical recruitment models to date [...] albeit important, appears to be incomplete because it fails to reveal what it is "in the hearts and minds" of job seekers that is actually driving recruitment image equity*

(Biel, 1992)

We believe that our aim to study identities and self-constructions require exploration of “*the hearts and minds*” of the respondents and unlike most studies on employer attractiveness we therefore conduct an exploratory qualitative study.

## Purpose

Based on a job seekers perspective, the purpose of this study is to explore influences of status and social identity upon perceived employer attractiveness as a product of the job seekers interactions within the interview process and her social informal network.

## Disposition

### Introduction

- Two trends in society are presented; employers' war for talent and individuals desire for status. We present employee branding and employer attractiveness as our area of interest. In the problematization we present prior studies on the recruitment process and describe our study, its limitations and purpose

### Methodology

- We present our chosen methods and motivate our choices. We describe our epistemological and ontological stance as social constructionist stance and describe our methodology as an exploratory qualitative study

### Theory

- Here we present the theories necessary to understand the analysis. We describe our theoretical framework; social identity theory and the research on recruitment processes and social influences to adapt it to the recruitment study.

### Analysis

- The analysis chapter is divided in two interdependent parts, the interview process and the social informal network. Together the interview process and the social informal network make up a noteworthy arena for graduate job seekers' social identity construction. The interview process enables opportunities for comparison within the social informal network. The social informal network is the frame of reference in which the job seekers compare and set the norm for what is perceived as granting status. Status is granted to individuals who can claim that they are high performers, capable, extraordinary and going places.

### Discussion

- We discuss our findings, how it relates to previous research and discuss interesting future research

### Conclusion

- We suggest the interview process as a new battle ground in the war for talent. By inviting the right people to the interview process, offer difficult assessments, being generous and recognize the job seeker and by eliciting inference about future success companies can gain competitive advantage in attracting talent.





## Methodology

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We present our methodological choices and present and argue for our decisive choices. Our social constructionist stance is connected to our research question in order to justify our methodological approach. We describe our data collection and interview techniques. Our qualitative exploratory study aims to dig deep in the meaning fields of our respondent's identity construction and calls for some extra attention directed at reflexivity.

This is carefully addressed in the later parts of this chapter.

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*The individual constitutes a node in a net of meanings, and this net is her world*

(Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 119)

### Ontological and epistemological stance

*... society is in some sense produced and reproduced by shared meanings and conventions...*

(Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 35)

Ontology, epistemology and methodology are three elements that encompass the paradigm that guides our actions as researchers (Lincoln, 1994). Our fundamental understanding is that there is no objective reality since reality is affected by people's pre-understandings and interests and thus is value loaded. Since our ontological stance of reality is as socially constructed we take on an interpretative perspective where knowledge is generated by interpreting subjective perceptions and understandings. Knowledge is not achieved by describing reality as reality is subjective (Bryman & Bell, 2007). By answering epistemological questions such as "*what and how we are able to know*" (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 40) we define our understanding of knowledge as socially constructed (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 35). We take interest in how this construction mainly takes places within the interdependent contexts of our respondents; the interview process and social informal networks. We believe these are in turn parts of larger interdependent contexts. We thus aim to understand our respondent's reality. We do not intend to seek, find nor generalize a non-existent truth to other contexts.

### Qualitative method

*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,*

*Than are dreamt of in your philosophy*

(Shakespeare)

The third element guiding us as researchers is our methodology, which is what connects our understanding of the world with data collection and analysis (Lincoln, 1994). Our understanding of the world makes us regard the studied object, identities, as unstable and negotiable. It is our belief that

this understanding and consequent problem formulation and purpose justifies an explorative qualitative study.

*A chess player does not 'see' a number of pieces that are then put together as a picture of the game, but views the whole board as a complex field of forces*

(Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 6)

We have chosen a hermeneutical approach as our main theme since it is linked with understanding human behavior through interpretation (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Subjective realities of the individuals have their own truths and none is more valid than the other. Interpretation is hence often superior to the empirical material itself and we believe “*that the meaning of a part only can be understood if it is related to the whole*” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 92). All our choices thus have this in mind. As fellow students, the perspective we take is one that is exclusive for us in comparison with prior researches and researchers. We believe there is a two-way interplay between our and our respondent’s pre-understandings of each other which allows us to position ourselves in a way that might gain unique access to the underlying meanings and thoughts of our respondents.

A very central criterion in qualitative research is the consideration and focus on open equivocal material (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Understanding is of essence for us and we therefore prefer an abductive- to an inductive- or deductive approach.

A deductive approach departs in theory and would limit our findings to our own pre-understandings and prior research. It is a less risky approach but “... *presuppose what is to be explained...*” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 3). The deductive approach “... *avoids explanation through authoritarian statements...*” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 3) and is inferior our abductive approach given our need to continuously evolve our knowledge in order to understand the underlying meanings of things.

An inductive approach departs from empirical data, is theory free and risks turning “... *collection of facts to a general truth...*” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 3). Inductive approaches fails to include the underlying structures and connections (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 3) which are of great important for our understanding of the whole.

By being abductive we allowed theories regarding *social identity* and supporting theories, mainly *employee branding*, inspire the way we gathered and treated empirical findings. Our interpretations from growing empirical findings developed our frame of reference. As a result of continuous adjusting, refining and re-framing our theoretical framework gradually developed.

According to Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) it is important to be familiar with different theories when conducting research, and by gathering empirical data with a wide set of theoretical preferences we had the tools to evolve our understanding and eventually navigate in on our final theoretical framework.



## Data collection

### Primary data

Our data is based on the interviews with our respondents. We conducted and recorded eight interviews that were 90-120 minutes long. Most of the interviews were at the upper range of that scale. We conducted six interviews live and two via Skype (one with video). At the end of the study we received additional information from two respondents which complemented previously gathered empirical gatherings.

To complement recordings we took notes throughout the interviews. They made it easier to keep track of covered topics and themes during the interviews and also assisted us throughout the transcription and analysis as they had captured things unavailable for the ear. According to Bryman and Bell (2007) it is important to show interest in the respondents. One of us therefore had the major responsibility of note taking whilst the other one could focus on keeping eye-contact and showing interest in the respondents.

We followed Kvale's (1996) ethics outline for interviewing. All respondents were informed about our total confidentiality. We have in our report manipulated with respondent's sex and names as well as with locations and companies.

All our interviews were conducted in Swedish. Citations used throughout the analysis are hence our translations of what respondents said.

### Selection of respondents

We selected respondents based on attributes such as educational level, educational background and type of job applied for. All our respondents have been students at Lund University at a minimum of Bachelor level. They all searched for qualified jobs and positions applied for were trainee programs, regular positions or internships in controlling, consultancy, finance or management. We wanted the respondents to have been part of similar contexts and be competing for similar jobs or positions. We assume a possibility that they, although to a different extent, by sharing this history could have been expected to have been exposed to the same myths, symbols and contexts. We find this relation and connection to the same shared background or sub-culture (university) important. Our respondents do not, however, necessarily represent a homogenous group of people with shared values, interests or ambitions.

The social informal network is interpreted as an ambiguous phenomenon with indefinable boundaries. We believe its characteristics, channels of communications and internal sources of influence constantly are evolving and we do not think it can be captured, limited and accurately defined in words.

## Grand Tour Questions

*The interview is the raw material for the later process of meaning analysis*

(Kvale, 1996, p. 144)

We conducted what Spradley (1979) calls specific *Grand Tour Questions*. A grand tour question has the goal to elicit a rich answer and is a type of *descriptive question* (Gilchrist, 1999, p. 363) which promotes the respondent with freedom to direct the answer. (Gilchrist, 1999). Descriptive questions are powerful as they give respondents time to think and construct rich answers simultaneously as the questions signal our interest in very detailed descriptions (Spradley, 1979).

In a chronological order starting at the first interview we asked our respondents to describe their experiences from several interview processes. The richness grand tour question's elicits provided us with opportunities to discover new activities in which we as interviewers could take *mini-tours*, in which further descriptive questions were formulated (Gilchrist, 1999). We often found rich information related to the social informal network during those mini-tours.

*The belief that language can mirror a complex reality should be toned down considerably compared with what is usual today*

(Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 221)

Interview situations are complex events and if simplified the interpretations that can be drawn from them risks being invalid (Alvesson, 2003). A problem with interviewing, perhaps extra salient with our Grand Tour approach, is the lack of control over our respondent's answers (Alvesson, 2003). Answers could for instance have been affected by respondent's moods (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009) and other contextual factors. Repeated interviews could have been used to check for consistency (Alvesson, 2003), and might have contributed to reflection from our respondent between the interviews. This might have deepened our understanding but was due to time constraints not prioritized.

## Transcriptions

*... committing verbal exchanges to paper seems to result in their immediate deterioration*

(Poland, 1995, p. 299)

In order to extract utility out of our interviews and make improvements for sequential interviews we transcribed them very soon after conducting them. Each interview enhanced our understanding of the contextual factors involved and provided us with new ideas for forthcoming interviews. Reviewing interviews soon after conducting them also made it easier to make better judgment calls regarding how to relate to what was said.

We shared the task of transcribing between us. According to Poland (1995) transcribers should try to ensure comparability early on in the process as a common mistake is to change the interpretation of sentences. We overlooked this and, for instance when our respondent's spoke in *run-*



on sentences (Poland, 1995, p. 297), we might have translated the same passage in different ways as we had to make judgmental calls regarding how to structure sentences.

*Good qualitative research is not a technical project; it is an intellectual one*

(Alvesson, 2003, p. 317)

Notes of laughter and pauses and our notes from the interviews complemented our transcriptions. To improve transcriptions Poland (1995) suggests using a symbols system for different verbal tones and other non-verbal communication. Due to the high cost in terms of time we overlooked this. According to Poland (1995; p299) it is “*exceedingly difficult to capture nonverbal cues, body language and many aspect of intonation through the use of written syntax...*”. We realize that we probably missed important pieces of information of this complex, very ambiguous and unpredictable interplay (Hess, Banse, & Kappas, 1995).

### Establishing rapport

*The romantic, advocating a more "genuine" human interaction, believes in establishing rapport, trust, and commitment between interviewer and interviewee, in particular in the interview situation. This is a prerequisite in order to be able to explore the inner world (meanings, ideas, feelings, intentions) or experienced social reality of the interviewee*

(Alvesson, 2003, p. 16)

Establishing rapport is a challenge (Adler & Adler, 2008). We took on a *romantic* (Alvesson, 2003, p. 16) approach in our interviews. The interviews were thus conducted in a friendly informal manner. Interview subjects often feel apprehension before interviews (Spradley, 1979). As indicated by Rynes et al. (1991) below, we believe that we by being students and job seekers ourselves, had good possibilities to establish rapport. We suspect this lowered our respondents' pre-interview apprehension and contributed to the friendly relaxed atmosphere we enjoyed throughout the interviews. According to Alvesson (2003) the romantic approach encourages the *authentic self* (Alvesson, 2003, p. 15) and, through openness and dialogue and by encouraging honesty, contributes to reducing the risk of respondents manipulating the answers (Alvesson, 2003)

*... we suspect that some of the frankness of our transcripts was due to the fact that subjects were interviewed by student peers rather than professors or placement directors*

(Rynes, Bretz JR, & Gerhart, 1991, p. 517)

Three main principles for establishing rapport were taken into account. We made *repeated explanations* (Spradley, 1979, p. 46) of our research topic which reminds applicants that we want to understand phenomena from their point of view. To telegraph our interest, verify what respondents said and decrease the risk of misunderstandings we *restated what the informant's said* (Spradley, 1979, p. 46). To

avoid sounding judgmental we tried to “... *don't ask for meaning, ask for use*” (Spradley, 1979, p. 47). This has a positive effect on rapport since it communicates to respondents that what we value and understand what they say (Spradley, 1979). Most of our interviews surpassed the initial time frame by far which we interpret as a sign of good established rapport. Both we and respondents might however have stressed through topics as a result of the time frame. Our interviews were conducted in private undisturbed settings. We wanted our respondents to feel like they could speak freely without external interruption or disturbance. Our respondents were alone in the room when interviewed via Skype.

## Reflexivity

*As qualitative fieldworkers it can be hard to understand how all the different aspects one has to take into account are related, and the thread that connects all these is reflexivity*

(Cuncliffe, 2010, p. 231)

In qualitative research, issues of credibility are comparable with what issues of reliability are in quantitative research. We did not think increasing credibility by using *respondent validation* (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 411) would be a good option in our case since we did not want respondents' opinions to affect our analysis. Since we did not want to accept what our respondents' said uncritically, we used Alvesson and Sköldbberg's (2009) outline for *source criticism* (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 115) to confirm the credibility of our research.

### Source criticism

*... the researchers repertoire of interpretations limits the possibilities of making certain interpretations*

(Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 273)

Source criticism seeks to give answer to the question 'are we really studying what we claim to be studying'. We are aware of different limitations with the way our data was gathered and our ability to interpret it. Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) addresses *criticism of authenticity, criticism of distance, criticism of bias* and *criticism of dependence* as different source-critical elements.

*Criticism of authenticity* questions whether or not the source is a source, or if it has interests in manipulating the shared information. Although we have trust in the stories told by of our respondents we realize that they to some degree might have given *political answers* (Alvesson, 2003, p. 22). It is for instance possible that our respondents chose not to present information that would have given them a bad image. (Alvesson, 2003) We must also realize that our respondent's perceptions and interpretations of us and of what images we expect them to project might have caused them to address phenomena in a way they thought of as aligned with our expectations on them (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).



*Researchers carry their own frame of reference, and inevitably make their interpretations in accordance with these*

(Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 106)

*Criticism of bias* questions us as researcher's potential *bias*, and as a result of our trust and pre-understandings of our respondents as honest and intelligent people it is likely that we are not as critical as we could have been (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009).

*A criticism of distance* is related to time. The time between the interviews and our respondent's interviews with companies could definitely have impacted their stories. (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009) It is unavoidable that we capture our respondents at different phases in their lives, even if we would interview them at the same time.

*Criticism of dependence* addresses the issue that other stories could have had impact on our respondents (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 115). We assume that our respondents during this transition phase are subject to a variety of work related stories, but we do not see this as a problem since we want to capture our respondents whilst they are in this process.

*The researcher should provide strong reasons for giving interview material a particular ontological status, particularly if it is seen as referring to social phenomena out there or to the interior (level of meaning) of the interviewee and his/ her likes*

(Alvesson, 2003, p. 27)

Throughout the study we tried to be aware of what Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) calls *empathy* and move into the horizon and meaning fields of our respondent's. Our pre-understandings assisted us in taking contextual factors such as background into account, but our pre-understandings might also be an obstacle for understanding (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, *Reflexive Methodology: New Vistas for Qualitative Research*, 2009).

A rather common statement in our study like "*I really enjoy challenges*" could when related to its context and turned into subject for interpretation be an expression for "*I hate those damn tests but I am supposed to like them since all my friends seem to like them*". Nevertheless, "*I really enjoy challenges*" could also be an expression for "*I really enjoy challenges*". We can never be sure what our respondents really mean. As reflective practitioners appreciating the problematic nature of language we might turn our attention '*inwards*' (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 9) and ask ourselves if they talk about the actual pleasure of just solving the problem, the increased (or maintained) self-esteem associated with the status of solving the problem (Alvesson, 2003) or the relief of solving the problem as something connected to external expectations (Kleppstö, 1993). Solving the problem would probably not have been as enjoyable in total anonymity in a vacuum from friends, family and expectations of a prospective career. We can to a very high degree relate to our respondents stories and our interpretations are very likely affected by our own feelings and emotions. Just as Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) we suggest that there is some complex ambiguous contextual interplay behind most statements and that "...

*empirical social science is very much less certain and more problematic than common sense or conventional methodological textbooks would have us think”... (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 2).*

### Contradictions

Qualitative research often generates contradictory data and can be difficult to discover. (El-Sawad, Arnold, & Cohen, 2004). We think that contradictions, perhaps by giving clues of the complex interplay between the individual and the relation to her context, add another dimension to our study. By using what Alvesson and Sköldbberg (2009) calls triangulation we could have increased the probability of finding contradictions that would assist our interpretations of data. However, different methods capture different perspectives and it can be tough to reach a coherent result when combining methods (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009)

### Qualitative analysis

*Knowledge of job choice and recruitment processes might be strengthened considerably by adding a more in-depth perspective to the accumulating array of inferential statistics*

(Rynes, Bretz JR, & Gerhart, 1991, p. 517)

Coding is analysis and the tough part is to dissect data whilst relationships between them are kept intact (Huberman & Miles, 1994, p. 156). Dey (1999) summarizes the various phases of analysis as first categorizing by coding (analyzing), then connecting categories (synthesizing) and lastly he promotes focusing on categories (prioritizing).

*Since a simple sorting and categorizing of ‘data’ is not exactly encouraged in reflexively ambitious projects, the problem of achieving and maintaining an overview is in some sense greater in reflexive than in mushroom-picking research*

(Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 314)

We color coded our transcriptions into categories. Those categories, as seen in the analysis, were the results the constantly growing familiarity with different theoretical concepts that came as a result of our abductive approach and our consequent evolving interpretation of our empirical findings.

A challenge with qualitative analysis is to capture its complexity. Strauss (1987) mentions that data collection and interpretations are a result of successively growing interpretations throughout the course of study. Data collected late in the research process are hence partly the results of questions asked early on in our process, and had we reversed the chronological order of the interviews our findings might have taken us elsewhere (Strauss, 1987).

### Alternative approaches

An alternative approach would have been to interview with applicants in the same process or at different stages throughout a process. Then we could have addressed the identity process throughout





the different stages. A problem, except the practical ones, with an approach like that would be criticism of authenticity (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Data from people within processes could potentially be affected by their interest in joining the organization.

*Furthermore, it should be emphasized that all understanding from the very beginning is 'always already' coloured by emotional moods; there is thus no purely cognitive or rational understanding*

(Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p. 120)

Another limitation is our limited insight in the different recruitment processes that our respondent's have experienced. This limitation was highlighted by the impact the *Grand Tour Questions* had for our understanding of this delicate topic. Kvale (1996) states that in order to maximize the utility of interviews the interviewer should be a master of the subject. We realize that if we had experienced the processes ourselves or had been in contact with HR representatives we might have been able to approach our respondents in a more rewarding way. A positive aspect of not talking with HR representatives is that our respondents perhaps would have felt inhibited to speak so freely to us since it could have risked their anonymity through the HR representatives inference about the stories. As fellow student and job seekers we have however experienced interview processes with similar or the same companies during the same time period.

## Theory

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In this chapter we present a short literature review of theories on social identity and explain individuals need for categorization and group belonging. Social identity theory is presented as our main theoretical framework and we show that social identities are constructed in comparison with others. We discuss the antecedents of social identification as made up of cognitive perceptions, external expectations, mimetic rivalry, group and interpersonal identification, personal and social attraction, the desire to identify with winners, similarities with others, group distinctiveness and prestige. We also show the different levels of social identity. The need for categorization and comparison is central in social identity theory and dimensions for comparison have influenced the structure of our subsequent analysis chapter.

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### Social identity

#### The need for a social identity and group membership

*Belonging to a collective gives strong symbolic support for self-definition and may counter act the fragmentation and mixed messages that the rest of the world produces*

(Alvesson, 2004, p. 211)

Identity is not robust or stable but constructed in an ongoing process. Belonging to a group is a matter of categorizations and identifications that are socially relevant and negotiated in the social context to which the individuals exist (Kleppstö, 1993).

Alvesson (2004) argue that contemporary social life has many features that threat a strong sense of self identity which leads to uncertainty, anxiety and low- or fluctuating self-esteem. Identity is vital to counteract existential uncertainty and secure a sense of self-confidence and self-esteem. Individual identity concerns how an individual constructs a particular version of herself. This construction is formed through social groups and how others see us is crucial for our self-image. Identity is a matter of how individuals and groups understand and define themselves (Alvesson, 2004). Membership to a group provides a sense of identity and meaning to reality. Individuals thus have a need to establish a social identity because of the importance of group belonging (Kleppstö, 1993). Profession or occupancy is often a strong source of social identity and helps to create a more coherent self-identity (Turban & Keon, 1993; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Corporate membership may fuel social identity and self-esteem (Alvesson, 2004) and joining an organization could thus be interpreted as an individual's public expression of values and abilities (Cable & Turban, 2001).

Positive confirmation of identity as well as lack of it affects motivation. Questioning by others may create a response to reinforce a valued self-identity through for example improved behavior. Excessive critique however may lead to decreased motivation (Alvesson, 2004).



## Different perspectives on group membership

To understand these groups one must focus on the processes that creates and sustains these categorizations and identifications and hence creates and maintains the groups. These processes take place, in large part, in the interaction with other groups (Kleppestö, 1993). Kleppestö (1993) describe these processes from four different but interdependent angles.

Kleppestö's (1993) first angle is through strategic interest. Groups are formed around interests and the key to understand these groups is to understand the interests the group is set out to defend (Kleppestö, 1993). The second way of understanding group identification is through socialization. The idea is that we are socialized into the group and our membership becomes clearer as we share more and more of the group's values and norms. In order to understand the group one must thus look to the socialization process itself (Kleppestö, 1993). The third way of understanding groups is through attraction. People have a tendency to associate and form groups with people who they like and are attracted to. Persons with similar backgrounds and presumed common faiths tend to like each other. Groups based on attraction persist until the attraction cease to exist (Kleppestö, 1993). Kleppestö's (1993) final angle to understand group belonging is through social identity. Our understanding of this angle is enhanced by complementing with Social Identity Theory, which also serves as our study's main theoretical stand point.

## Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory enables us to view the employer as an identity provider. From this point of view groups are socially constructed categories for identification. Group membership, our social identity, is an important part in our identity constructions. Groups can be understood by understanding the individuals need to categorize themselves and others. Distinction and separation is made between *the in-group*, to which one is a member, and *the out-group* (Kleppestö, 1993).

The complexity of reality forces us to categorize our observations and interpretations of it. Individuals are thus dependent on categorizing themselves and others into social categories in order to understand reality and themselves (Kleppestö, 1993). This serves two functions. First it provides individuals with systematic means of defining others into cognitive segments. Secondly, it provides the individual with means to define her in the social environment. The self-concept is comprised of personal- and social- identity. Personal identity is individual characteristics like abilities, interests and bodily features. Social identity is based on classification with a prominent group and is therefore "*the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate*" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21).

Individuals identify with social categories, such as organizations, partly to enhance self-esteem. The definitions of self and others are relational and individuals define themselves in comparison to individuals in other groups (Kleppestö, 1993). Through comparison with other groups the individual take part in the success and status of the organization. The extent to which an individual identifies with a group or a category differs (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Some categories, like man or woman, are

socially definite while others are negotiable and their meaning is subject of constant discussion (Kleppstö, 1993).

### Dimensions for categorization

Differentiation and evaluation require certain dimensions to categorize the groups within. The important dimensions are set by societal values and by the strongest player. Societal and social values play a big part in what status a group can claim. Based on our theories and empirical findings our analysis is structured after the dimensions interpret influence our job seekers social identities and provides them with status. The norms for what is deemed high status is shown to be established by the social informal network.

### Antecedents of social identification

*The high status of many large knowledge-intensive organizations facilitates identification with them*

(Alvesson, 2004, p. 210)

What causes individuals to perceive themselves as members of certain groups can have multiple answers (Brewer, 1991).

### Cognitive perceptions

*... attraction of large, well-known companies to some extent contingent more upon brand name and image than the work conditions offered...*

(Alvesson, 2004, p. 211)

Social identification is based on cognitive perception and does not need to be associated with specific actions or emotions. The perception of belonging to a group can outweigh lack of shared values, history or culture (Kleppstö, 1993). An individual does not need to share or strive for the groups goals (actions) in order to identify with the group and feel belonging. Nor does the individual have to feel loyalty (affect) towards the group. Actions and affect are antecedents or potential consequences of identification. *“An individual need only perceive him- or herself as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group”* (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). Social identification is thus not to be linked with internalization (Kleppstö, 1993). Identification defines who you are in terms of social categories whereas internalization is a process of incorporating values and believes of a certain category. Accepting a category as a definition of self does not necessarily mean accepting the values associated with this category, but is rather a potential consequence of identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Simply assigning an individual to a group is enough to generate in-group favoritism. A feeling of oneness is not dependent on perceived interpersonal similarities or interaction. A member of a group does not need to like other members of the group, nor be liked or accepted by them. It is the perception of being a part of the group that is the basis for incorporating that status into her social identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).



### *External expectations*

The categories individuals assign themselves to may be strongly rooted in social or societal norms or the social context to which one belongs (Brewer, 1991). An individual can be categorized into groups by her surroundings and hence eventually start to identify with this category. Social categories are associated with expectations on how the members of the category should be and act (Kleppstö, 1993) and group pressure has been shown to influence employer attractiveness (Liden & Parsons, 1986). The individual can easily feel forced to live up to certain expectations set by her surroundings and thus identify with a certain group as she is not allowed to identify with something else (Kleppstö, 1993). Social categorization is not necessarily forced upon an individual. An individual may select self-identity from the various bases of self-categorization available to her at the time. Ashforth and Mael (1989) argue that one may actively seek groups to belong to or it might be coincidental.

### *Mimetic rivalry*

Alvesson (2006) addresses the social aspects of satisfaction. This is conceptualized by mimetic rivalry, which means that you desire what the people you identify with desire. According to Alvesson (2006) groups are people's source of identification, and the group's preferences determine what individuals' pursuit and what serves as potential sources of satisfaction. Everything that can be assigned a brand name, for instance an employer, can be subject to mimetic rivalry. According to this view our wishes, desires and experienced satisfaction is highly dependent on others similar wishes and experiences. (Alvesson, 2006).

### *Group and interpersonal identification*

Ashforth and Mael (1989) argue that identification with a group is similar to identification with a person, like one's father or hero, or with a role, like manager. Identification with a group is often associated with a desire for self-definition whereas identification with an individual (*classical identification*) is based on a desire to "*appease, emulate or vicariously gain the qualities*" of another person (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 22). Ashforth and Mael (1989) argue that organizations often try to capitalize on classical identification by generalizing identification with a charismatic individual or leader to identification with the organization. Attraction between people can be rooted in perceived similar personalities and shared values and conviction (Dwyer, Schurr, & Sejo, 1987). Positive personal interaction exaggerates perceived similarities. Socially likable people may also enhance a group's positive distinctiveness and thus contribute to identification (Hogg & Turner, 1985).

### *Personal and social attraction*

There is a relationship between interpersonal attraction and group formation (Hogg & Turner, 1985). Attraction can be divided into personal and social. Personal attraction is based on idiosyncratic characteristics of close personal relationships like friends and relatives. Social attraction on the other hand builds on self-categorization and refers to attraction to individuals that represents a category to

which one wants to belong. Social attraction springs from the wish to identify with, and be identified by others as a part of, that category or group (Hogg & Turner, 1985).

### *Social influences*

Turner (1982) argues that group identification is influenced by normative- and informational social influence. Normative social influences are motivated by desires for external rewards. Identification with and compliance to expectations of an attractive group or individuals who have power to reward conformity and punish deviation are drivers. The vehicle for normative social influence is thus communication from group members or group pressure (Turner, 1982).

Informational social influences are motivated by problem solving and coping with the environment. It refers to accepting information provided by similar people who provide information about reality and operates through internalization. The vehicle for informational social influence is social comparison with other group members (Turner, 1982).

Kilduff (1990) found that friends or people that perceived themselves as similar tended to interview with the same organization. Peers function as a legitimizing function to job seekers evaluation of employers (Kilduff 1990). Current employees send signals to job seekers that enable them to visualize what working in the organization would be like (Cable & Turban, 2001).

### *Winners*

*... desires for positive identifications effectively create champions, converting the slightest sign of plurality into an overwhelming majority.*

(Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 25)

If the value of a group is appealing, one tends to identify with that group (Alvesson, 2004). Ashforth and Mael (1989) argue that individuals cognitively identify themselves with winners. They talk about the bandwagon effect. People's desire to identify with attractive individuals or groups affect their evaluation. Ideas or individuals who get support from attractive people easily get a majority to consent.

### *Traditional factors*

Traditional factors such as similarity, closeness, common history, shared goals, interpersonal interaction and so forth may not be necessary for identification but they are not insignificant. These similarities are also a potential base for categorization of individuals and hence a potential source for identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

### *Different levels of personal identity*

Brewer (1991, p. 476) argue that the frame of reference for differentiation and social comparison to which one defines oneself works on several different levels simultaneously;



*... the self-concept is expandable and contactable across different levels of social identity with associated transformations in the definition of self and the basis for self-evaluation.*

At the “first” level, the level of personal identity is the individual, for example the student. In this example the most immediate frame of reference for social comparison is the fellow graduate students at for example The School of Economics and Management, and the most salient features of her self-concept in this context are those interests, grades and accomplishments that distinguish her from her fellow graduate students (Brewer 1991).

On the social identity level the interest and accomplishments of her fellow graduate students are included. The first level of her social identity is as member of her graduate class. Here the class provides the relevant frame of reference and social comparison is with other classes or majors. The most salient features of her self-concept are those that she has in common with the other members of her category or class. Her fellow students are on this level interchangeable parts of a common group identity and her self-worth are tied to the reputation and outcomes of the class as a whole (Brewer, 1991). On yet a higher level of social identity is the school from which she is graduating. On this level the school becomes the frame of reference and other business schools the basis for comparison (Brewer 1991).

*Working for a company with a very high status is thus for many a mixed blessing from the identity point of view*

(Alvesson, 2004, p. 197)

In high status organizations individuals who perceived themselves as high performing in comparison to their classmates or colleagues in former jobs often find themselves struggling to be perceived as average performers. Stiff internal competition may undermine self-esteem and trigger extensive efforts to reconstruct and maintain a positive self-image. Alvesson (2004) argue that in large consultancy and accounting firms comparison with individuals in the same cohort function as a strong motivational effect. Individuals wish to perform at better or at the same level as their peers is a strong driving force. However this kind of work environment makes it difficult to create and maintain a stable self-esteem, identity or feeling of competence. Securing a sense of self is important. People want to perform well partly because of the status and feeling of competence raises self-esteem (Alvesson, 2004).

#### *Group distinctiveness and comparison*

Groups, like individuals, seek social recognition; confirmation from the environment. A group’s distinctiveness in comparison to other groups increases the likeliness of identification with that group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Social identity demands distinctiveness in order to provide and sustain its identity providing influence (Kleppstö, 1993). A group must struggle to be perceived positive in comparison with other groups. Intergroup relations are thus about securing their distinctness and status. Low status groups try to identify with desired out-groups and their status (Ashforth & Mael,

1989). However, even negative valued distinctiveness functions as sources of identification. Negatively regarded groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), or low status groups (Kleppstö, 1993) have been shown to display a greater “social creativity” and use different defense mechanisms to defend their status. Recasting a negative distinction into a positive one, minimizing or reinforcing a negative distinction or changing the out groups to which the in-group is compared are creative examples (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kleppstö, 1993). The stronger perceived threat the in-group experiences the stronger the defensive bias (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

### *Prestige*

In a consumer behavior perspective Salomonson et al. (2010) argue that individuals strive for prestige, status and self-realization. They claim that;

*In a system where (like it or not) a consumer is defined to a great extent by what they do for a living, occupational prestige is one way to evaluate the “worth” of people.*

(Salomon, Bamossy, Askegaard, & Hogg, 2010, p. 466)

Prestige of the group is known to increase identification with the group. This is based on social identifications affects self-esteem through intergroup comparison (Turner, 1982). Favorable comparisons with others increase perceived prestige or status and thus a positive social identity. The need for positive social identity motivates individuals and groups to create and enhance positive in-group distinctiveness. Where the in-group lacks positive distinctiveness the individual will try to restore its status or leave the group, psychologically dissociate from the group in pursuit for membership in a higher status group (Turner, 1982).

### Organizational consequences of social identity

Ashforth and Mael (1989) argue that there are three general consequences of social identification relevant to organizations. First of all individuals tend to choose activities that are congruent with prominent aspects of their own identities and support the institutions that embody these identities. They argue that it thus is likely that identification with an organization leads to commitment to this organization. A second consequence of identification is cooperation, altruism, inter group cohesion and positive evaluation of the group (Turner, 1982). Ashforth and Mael (1989) further argue that it is likely for identification to lead to pride in- and loyalty to the group and its actions. The pride job seekers expect to feel should be linked to the employer’s reputation (Cable & Turban, 2003). Finally, social identification may increase the perceived distinctiveness of the in-group’s values and its prestige, that is, it reinforces the antecedents of identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Solely the virtue of membership to the same group may cause people to like each other despite perceived negative personal attributes (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Identification with the group can persist although other members are disliked and even when group affiliation is personally painful (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).





Identification often leads to internalization of the group's values and norms as well as homogeneity in attitudes and behavior. Turner (1984, 1985) argues that this production of prototypical characteristics to oneself is a consequence of classification of oneself, as member the group, and subsequent identification. This *de-personalization* of the self increases the individuals perceived similarity with other group members and conformity to group norms (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 26; Brewer, 1991, p. 480). The more salient the characteristics of the organization are the stronger are the effects of the internalization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Research indicates a strong link between socialization and the self-concept. It has been argued that the emergence of situational and self-definitions are intertwined. As the individual defines herself and her identity a sense of where she is and what is expected of her emerges (Alvesson, 2004; Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

### Developing Social Identification

Both situational- and self- definitions emerge through symbolic interactions and evolve in interactions between individuals. It does however not need to be interpersonal and can involve any symbolic transmission like advertisement. Symbolic interaction resolves ambiguities and generates knowledge about the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Individuals have a tendency to identify with the category itself (for example I am a management consultant). *“Thus, identification provides a mechanism whereby an individual can continue to believe in the integrity of his or her organization despite wrongdoings by senior management...”* (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 28). Alvesson (2004, p. 213) talks about *subjectification* where an individual creates a self-definition as a distinct kind of subject; an *“idea of what kind of person I am”*. He argues that this self-definition can be influenced by employers and other social institutions by providing assessments, psychological tests, communication, explicit criteria for the job or providing feedback. The employee is encouraged to define herself as the kind of person who chooses this kind of job. This self-definition produces commitment to the role. By influencing the individual's self-definition in accordance to organizational characteristics an element of identification and sense of belonging is produced and strengthened (Alvesson, 2004).

*Through the manipulation of symbols such as traditions, myths, metaphors, rituals, sagas, heroes, and physical setting management can make the individual's membership salient and can provide compelling images of what the group or organization represent*

(Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 28).

A positive and unique organizational identity attracts the recognition, support and loyalty by job seekers. It is the search for this identity that makes organizations focus so intensely on advertising, leaders, mascots and other symbols. Charismatic leaders' skills in manipulating symbols make them adapt at creating both identification with the leader and the organization. (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Individuals have multiple identities associated with different categories. This leads to internal conflict between the identities which suggest the possibility of double standards, apparent hypocrisy and selective forgetting (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

## Empirical Material and Analysis

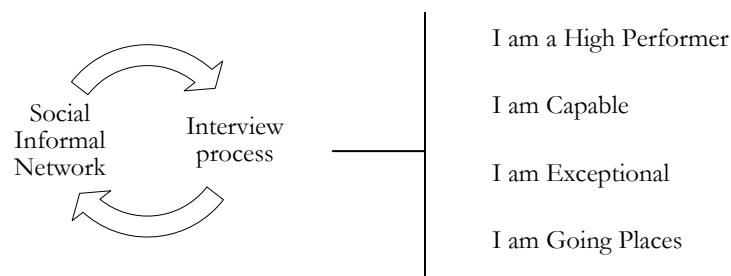
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The analysis is divided into two major parts; the interview process and the social informal network. These two interactive processes are interdependent and together they form an arena for our graduate job seekers social identity construction. Social identity is constructed in comparison with others. The interview process provides our respondents with opportunities to compare themselves with others in their social informal network.

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Kleppestö (1993) argues for the importance of dimensions for categorization. We argue that status can be derived from the interview process if the job seeker, in comparison with his social informal network can say; I am a high performer, I am capable, I am exceptional and I am going places and these dimensions make up the structure of the interview process-section.

The social informal network set the norm for what constitutes an impressive interview process and thus what in the interview process is perceived as providing status. As individuals expose their experiences from interview processes to the network these norms are altered. Graduate job seekers identity construction is thus ongoing in a circle between norms and experiences.



### The interview process

The interview process provides our respondents with opportunities to compare themselves with their social informal network.

#### I am a High Performer

*They [the other applicants] had greater influence upon my will to get the job than the company representatives*

(Mark)

Identifying with high-performing people is important for our respondent's self-esteem and perceived status in their social informal network. *I am a high performer* is the influence upon the job seekers social identity construction from categorizing herself with people that are perceived as high performers. The intelligence, physical appearance, success and similarity of others are discussed and in what way this

affects our job seekers social identity. Both co-applicants and company representatives play important roles in this social identity construction.

### *Categorization with others*

#### *Impressive people*

*He was a smart guy with an impressive education. [...] If he is there and he is satisfied it is a quality stamp*

(Sara)

Intelligent and smart people (other applicants, employees and recruiters) seem to make our job seekers feel that the organization is “...*only looking for the best*”. This appears to make them feel special for being smart enough to get an interview. As Sara says; “*It felt good. You belong to some of the best*”. If the people our job seekers interact with are perceived as smart, intelligent, nice and/or beautiful our job seekers thus seem likely to identify as such and it boosts their self-esteem. The applicant is likely to project this image onto the organization and their desire to identify with the organization increases (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Many respondents felt that they would be perceived as smart or intelligent in their social informal network when telling their friends about the other applicants, if they were smart. Meeting intelligent people or people from good schools like Handels in Stockholm and tough educations like Technology Management at Lund University appears to put a significant quality stamp on the employer.

*He came with his MacBook Air and nice shoes [...] He is doing really well I think*

(Mark)

The evident success of the employees our job seekers meet during the interview process play an important part in helping job seekers to visualize what kind of success and status they can expect from working with the company. Our respondents seem to look up to these individuals.

*They told us that the CEO started as a teller. That kind of stuff goes to your heart*

(John)

Success stories and myths are not just spread in the social informal networks. Myths and stories about employees, promotional opportunities, high salaries and networking possibilities are common communications from the organizations that our respondents interview with. Some stories and myths regard employees' previous employments. If employees prior to their membership of the current organization has been employed by a high status firm the respondent are happy to tell us. It seems to tell them that successful people work here and which offer them a sense of pride to be interviewing with a firm that others choose before some of the most high status companies out there. According to Ashforth and Mael (1989) this is an effective strategy to make the individual's membership of the group salient.



### *Unimpressive people*

*Stupid girl, how did you get a job here? It was really unattractive; I do not want to work with stupid people*

(Madeleine)

In contrast our respondents give examples of how they felt less attracted to organizations after being in contact with what they considered to be un-attractive people. This seemed to lower their sense of pride. After meeting with an employee at an organization John felt overqualified and lost all interest; “*You basically fit in here if you have no education*”.

### *Social attraction and classical identification*

One explanation to the increased employer attractiveness is the relationship between interpersonal attraction and identification with a group. (Hogg & Turner, 1985). This is based on the theories of *classical identification* and *social attraction*. *Classical identification* is an individual’s wish to identification with an individual based on a desire to “*appease, emulate or vicariously gain the qualities*” of another person. This desire is projected on to the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 22). Social attraction on the other hand builds on self-categorization and refers to attraction to individuals that represents a category to which one wants to belong. Social attraction springs from the wish to identify with, and be identified by others as a part of, that category or group (Hogg & Turner, 1985). Another potential explanation is found in the desire to identify with winners (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

*It felt like this is future colleagues in a way, if I like working with them during the interview I know its people that I will enjoy working with during real projects...*

(Klara)

The applicants are often fairly similar and share a lot of bases for categorization (Brewer, 1991). Shared background (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) is one of these, in our cases most notably education and shared assessment and interview history which makes it easier and potentially more attractive for the job seeker to identify with this category (Hogg & Turner, 1985). Kleppstö (1993) addresses group identification through socialization. His theories seem to be applicable in several of our cases in which our respondents describe long assessments days with great or small enthusiasm, depending on the other applicants.

Attraction between people can be rooted in perceived similar personalities and shared values and conviction (Dwyer, Schurr, & Sejo, 1987). Positive personal interaction exaggerates perceived similarities. Socially likable people may also enhance a group’s positive distinctiveness and thus contribute to identification and a wish for group belonging (Hogg & Turner, 1985). Social attraction builds on self-categorization and refers to attraction to individuals that represents a category to which one wants to identify with, and be identified by others as a part of (Hogg & Turner, 1985). The

similarities are projected upon the firm and thus affect the likelihood for identification with the company as well (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

*Everybody was good looking. That felt like a big plus, you felt that you must be good looking since you've got an interview here. Everybody was good looking!*

(Sara)

Our findings, exemplified by Sara's statement, suggest that the ideas of *classical identification* (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and *social attraction* (Hogg & Turner, 1985) are applicable to physical appearance as well as successful career and high salaries.

#### *The symbol of other people*

We argue that the people or job seekers interact with in the interview process, together with assessments, function as a symbol of success and status. They can therefore, according Ashfort and Mael (1989), serve as basis for manipulation of the compelling images of organizational attractiveness.

#### *Selective forgetting as a sign of identification*

*Bulging and inconsistency is bothering me. Hypocrisy, saying one thing and doing another is the worst thing I know. It's the dreadful characteristics one can have.*

(Mark)

Mark shows signs of selective forgetting (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) regarding a company's basic values. Mark perceives the company as bulging and as hypocritical which he describes as the worst characteristics he knows. In the next sentence however he says that there are of course positive aspects of hypocrisy and that they can be really beneficial. And even though the organization contradicts his value he still pursues employment with the organization. We see this respondent's contradictions as an indication of the strong identification Mark has developed with the organization. The respondent is conflicted between his old values of hypocrisy and the new values internalized through the interview process (among other things) with the firm. As argued by Ashforth and Mael (1989) this leads to internal conflict between the identities which suggest the possibility of double standards, apparent hypocrisy and selective forgetting.

#### *Walk the walk*

*We want the best, but that's what they all say*

(Sara)

Sara's quote show the importance of being able to prove your worth as an employer during the interview process. If the messages sent from the employer and the expectations this creates are not aligned with the image created of the employer during the interview process and through word-of-



mouth within the social informal network the job seekers image of the employer will be affected negatively. Other applicants play a great part in confirming or rejecting these expectations.

*We should have a trainee program. Yeah, wow! And they throw themselves right at it. I do not think it really is thought through [...] Getting coffee and participating in meetings is part of work*

(Mark)

Mark pursues a trainee program despite being critical about it. After meeting other applicants he starts to regard the trainee program as something that the company just did because it made them attractive and more as show-off than content. Mimetic rivalry (Alvesson, 2006) seems to have strong influence upon our respondent's actions. The satisfaction to pursuit a position is strengthened by the widely desired job title; trainee.

*There were not exactly any hot-shots from Handels there, just average people from random universities. Then there was me and a guy from Oxford and it was like; Ehh, what are you doing here, are you lost?*

(Allen)

One impressive applicant alone cannot outweigh other bad impressions and a majority of unimpressive applicants. If the company has presented a poor image through a majority of unimpressive applicants, rumors in the social informal network, employees or locations, one impressive applicant seems to be seen as an exception to the rule. Rather than identifying with the employer our job seekers seem more likely to identify with this person in the category; outsiders of the interview process. As this category compare themselves with the "interview group" in a favorable manner (Turner, 1982) the status of the employer is likely to drop even further.

## I am Capable

Assessments and tests are important influences on an individual's social identity (Alvesson, 2004, p. 2004) and are intensely discussed in our job seekers social informal networks. *I am Capable* is the individual's self-definition influenced by achieving or failing tests and interviews. Job seekers status and employers attractiveness is correlated to the assessments and tests that are a part of the interview process. This chapter will address how assessments contribute to our respondent's identity construction. The difficulty of the assessments and the distinctiveness this provide is discussed.

### *Assessments and tests*

#### *Difficult assessments*

*Some things are hard to get, and that is why it is high status.*

(Sara)

Tough assessments seem more appreciated than easy assessments. Sara met with two different employers and based on their assessments and on other applicants drew the conclusion that if she

joins the consultancy firm she would be working with smarter people and be identified as smart among her friends.

Allen says that four people were *chosen* to come to the interview at the prestigious consultancy firm. He does not know out of how many applicants, but assumes a couple of hundred. “*There was a completely different feeling to it, no silly group exercises, just die hard cases*”. Allen is noticeable proud to have been part of such an experience. It is interesting to note that because of the recognized name and the difficult assessments Allen assumes that the employer is really attractive among others. We believe that it is this comparison with others that makes him proud.

Assessments do not just concern tests. The interviews and the recruiters also seem to have a big effect on perceived status gained from an employer. After a demanding interview Daniel says that “*It felt more serious to know that there are individuals within the organization that expect result*”. Recruiters that clarify responsibilities and expectations of managing tough workloads deter some applicants at first. However, the compelling thought of becoming part of a high performance group seems to outweigh the associated burden of hard work.

According to Alvesson (2004) assessments can aid the individual to define herself and this self-definition process can translate into commitment to the role. Accomplishing a difficult assessment might hence strengthen *subjectification* whereby the individual identifies with the role of for example a management consultant or employee at a specific company (Alvesson, 2004).

*Two people were sent home after the first case [...] At that point people started to stretch a little extra,  
but it was also a tense waiting for the next person to go*

(Mark)

Several of our respondents have heard about or experienced recruitment processes where people that were not good enough were sent home throughout the assessment day. The competitive setting and clear signals of high demands and expectations from the company allows participants to categorize themselves as competent individuals. Seeing others being eliminated is likely to raise self-esteem as it sends clear signals that; in comparison with others you are better. Belonging to such a high prestige competitive group is also likely to be linked with higher societal status in the job seekers own social informal networks. We believe that as the group gradually decline and people are sent home, in-group favoritism (Turner, 1982) and identification with remaining applicants and the company could potentially rise as they share more bases for identification and is an increasingly distinct group.

Assessments further create a feeling of fierce competition for the jobs, which according to mimetic rivalry could intensify the pursuit for the ultimate satisfaction of external approval, getting the job. Alvesson (2004) argue that people want to perform well because it raises their status and self-esteem. The pursuit for raised self-esteem and the status associated by being a winner might hence create illusions that everyone at the assessment day wants the job since everyone appears to maximize their efforts to get it. The employers attractiveness thus spiral upwards by the internal competition.





*If I get this far on the first attempt there should be other possibilities as well*

(Klara)

Another interesting effect of tough assessments is the effect of the consequentially raised self-esteem (Alvesson, 2004). After difficult assessment Klara received a job offer. Despite feeling attracted to the job and talking very well about it, she turned it down with the motivation that it should not be a problem to find another job, a better job. Her initial job seeking success raised her self-esteem (Kleppstö, 1993) and allowed her to categorize herself as an attractive job seeker (Alvesson, 2004) with good alternatives that could afford to take a risk and pursue a more desirable job and hence membership in a higher status group (Turner, 1982).

#### *Distinctiveness*

*A professional company that wants' to accomplish things. They have high demands on their employees.*

*Not anyone gets in here, you are actually tested. It gave me a positive impression*

(Klara)

Allen found one test at a consultancy firm particularly difficult. They had a test that is acknowledged as tougher than any other test that competitive firms throw and he says; "I know that they have a test that no one else has". Besides this test, the entire day was a complete challenge. The organizations distinctiveness and superiority makes Allen identify with the employer; they are perceived as winners. Tough assessment strengthens the employer's distinctiveness as only selected elite is able to join the group. This strengthens identification with the employer (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Alvesson, 2004).

#### *Easy assessments*

*The case was a little nerdy. Maybe because it was meant to another target group [...] Tough cases give an impression of a more serious position*

(John)

As difficult assessments encourage our job seekers easy assessments deter them. John dis-identified to a group partly because of a case. Based on the other applicants he felt overqualified already before the assessment. The easy assessment strengthened this feeling. He says that he wants "... the tests everybody else is getting [...] how many gas stations or weddings there are in Sweden".

### **I am Exceptional**

Recognition raises self-esteem and seems to be an important part of our job seekers identity work. *I am Exceptional* is our respondents' identification with the employer as an effect of raised self-esteem from recognition. When identification with the employer is strong our respondents seem more likely to project a good image that raises their own status within the social informal network. Recognition in form of appraisal, meeting executive and free lunches are discussed. So is the importance of being one of a kind and relationships with recruiters.

## Recognition

### Appraisals

*I remember her last words; 'This is really good!' I got an ego boost, nice, more companies that want me.*

(Allen)

The high status of the organizations that our respondents apply for are well known in their social informal networks. Receiving recognition from these organizations thus provide our respondent with a sense of pride. It boosts our respondents identification in their social informal networks. Association with the high status employer provides them with self-esteem and status. In order to raise their status job seekers wants to be able to tell their social informal network that they got recognition, met the CEO of a high status company, got free lunch or dinner at fancy restaurants or got to stay at a four star hotel "... because the company wanted me so bad".

Allen's statement shows appraisals and recognitions great influence on self-esteem. Personal appraisal makes our respondent feel special in comparison within the group of other applicants (Kleppestö, 1993).

### Meeting senior executives

*...the absolute boss came in and wanted to shake my hand and shoot some shit. It made me feel that I will not just become a faceless stooge...*

(Klara)

Our respondents are proud to tell us if they have met with senior executives of the company. Meeting senior executives of a company during the interview process shows engagement and makes our respondents feel special and chosen. The desire to be acknowledged by others is strong (Hogg & Turner, 1985) and meeting with important representatives acknowledges respondents as important to the firm which seem to raise their self-esteem.

### Freebees

*It does not create a cool image working for X when they don't even pay your trip. And you want to work at a cool place. X will not be at the top of my list*

(Madeleine)

Our respondents are eager to talk about free lunches, fancy dinners, hotel nights and paid trips. These freebees seem to be accepted as a sign of recognition and self-worth and appear to impress our job seekers. Our respondents appear more willing to identify with employers who are recognized as generous. Paid trips to interview events are more or less expected and job seekers who do not get this often display negative associations to the employer. If the employer not only pays but also makes the effort to book the trip the job seeker takes this as a sign of recognition and "*it really feels like they care about you*". Madeleine claims that the lack of recognition in form of time and money spent on her



made her feel un-prioritized. At all the other interview events she has felt more prioritized and she claim she would rather identify with such a group.

*They made reservations for me at a four star hotel where my mother has always wanted to stay...*

(Mark)

This will make Marks mother understand what kind of top notch jobs he is applying for. Staying at a nice hotel is something Mark's entire social informal network can recognize the value of.

#### *Second best is not good enough*

*They offered lunch; no other company I have interviewed with has offered lunch. But it was a little bit of a disappointment because later on I heard that the people who applied for the trainee program got shrimp sandwiches! We did not, we just got fruit and nuts, and they got shrimp sandwiches!*

(Sara)

In comparison to other interview events Sara was really satisfied with getting free lunch and she felt important. This feeling lasted until she got home and talked to a friend who had applied for the trainee program. When she perceived that the employer had invested more in this group of applicants than in her own group she did no longer feel as prioritized. Her interview process was no longer "... *the best*" and she therefore psychologically dissociated herself from the organization and she might seek membership with an employer that she perceives providing more status (Turner, 1982).

#### *External expectations*

*People called me and asked what I thought the company wanted to hear*

(Madeleine)

An individual can start identifying with a group because of external expectations (Kleppstö, 1993). Madeleine's social informal network associates her with the company because she is in the interview process. This seems to create a sense of pride which affects her identification with the company.

#### *Company glasses*

*I think the main problem was that I was so into the other interview process, and they [the recruiters] probably noticed that I did not make too much effort. I was so booked on the other process [...] I think I did not get the job because I did not want it as much as the others*

(Sara)

Several of our respondents reported how being part of a process made them less likely to pursuit other jobs. We see Sara's statement above as an indication of her strong identification with the employer with the interview process and organization. This made her indifferent to another job.

### *One of a Kind*

*If you get to the first interview and they have taken time to arrange everything you feel; ok, they believe in me. [...] Instead of getting the feeling that they had a number of applicants and took in a chump for evaluation [...] I kind of had the impression that everything they did was for me. I got an ego boost*

(Klara)

The feeling of being prioritized and recognized does not only have to do with the payments. Some respondents mention that paid travels also indicates that some kind of selection has been made before the interview and they therefore feel chosen. Our respondents find it very important not to blend in to the crowd of other applicants. Some respondents report that despite being comfortable in their ability they fear not being able to get the opportunity to show it. Sara says that; “*You have to be visible; you have to make an impression!*” The feeling of becoming unengaged by disappearing in the crowd might be explained by the potential lack of positive confirmation (Alvesson, 2004). Further, Sara’s wish to make an impression might be rooted in a desired feeling of competence, status and self-esteem that according to Alvesson (2004) arises from performing well.

This is one reason why case solutions and tests are regarded positive; it allows our job seekers to show what they can do. The contradiction between the quality stamp of the best applicants and the wish to be superior to everyone else is in line with Alvesson’s (2004) arguments on the mixed blessing of entering high performing knowledge intensive firms. The contradiction could perhaps be explained by Brewer’s (1991) theory of multiple levels of the comparative frame of reference in which one defines oneself. In comparison within ones social informal network one can be perceived as having high status if associated with the best. Thus, within the social informal network applying for jobs where other applicants are impressive is desired. However, in comparison within the group formed during the interview process; the group of applicants for the position, one wants to be superior which might explain why a lower standard of applicants are sought.

### *Relationships*

*It felt really good [...] it won’t be a problem getting into the organization. It is just to hang on to H and it will all work out*

(Daniel)

A lot of our respondents express a feeling of comfort in perceived relationships with someone, preferably a recruiter, within the organization. They describe these people in terms of stable points, allied, and lobbyists helping them to get the job and support them on their way. This generates positive feelings towards these people which often seem to be projected upon the organization.

Social identity theory suggests that personal interaction is not necessary in order to form identification with a group (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). However, according to Kleppstö (1993) one



way to understand group identification is through socialization. The job seekers are socialized into the group and their membership becomes clearer as they share more and more of the group's values and norms. The relationship to the recruiters is a venue to explore and be socialized into the values and norms of the organization. Researchers on SIT argue that although not necessary for identification with a group, interpersonal interaction greatly influences likelihood of identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). We argue that interpersonal interaction also enables the job seeker to find more potential bases for categorization (Turner, 1984) as they find out more about the recruiter and the organization. Further, the relationships our respondents have are often with prestigious individuals within the firm and relationships are thus likely to affect identification with the organization through classical identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and social attraction (Hogg & Turner, 1985).

*It was not my dream job [...] But it felt good to get something as early as in January before other people even had started to apply.*

(Sara)

The joy evident in this statement was not over the position, which was less than what she applied for, but over the relative position to her social informal network where she had a job already before people had started applying. The quote indicates the importance of social comparison (Kleppestö, 1993; Turner, 1982; Ashforth & Mael, 1989) upon identity construction and status in the interview process.

### I am going places

Unlike the prior three factors which have connected the individual's status directly to the interview process. The last category; *I am going places* refers inferences about future job attributes and future status from being associated with the employer based upon the interview process.

*“... as posh as it can be, right next to the castle. [...] There was a bell right next to a wooden door with the name of the firm. I rang the bell and a gorgeous girl came and opened and let me into this marble church with pillars*

(Allen)

The geographical location as well as the space of the office seems to matter to our respondents. Allen, who had a very bad experience at the management trainee program assessment day but a very good experience at the consultancy firm, describes two extremes. To further underline the standard of the facilities and provide a clear picture of his opinions about the image they project of the organization he describes them in metaphors of “a *hide-out, where you store guns and drugs*” versus a “*marble church with pillars*”. It is evident that his identification with the consultancy firm and his lack of identification with the management trainee program to some part were due to the office space.

Based upon our findings we argue that, freebees and assessments, offices and their location, function as symbols. As argued by Ashforth and Mael (1989) symbolic interaction influence self-identities as they resolve ambiguities and generates ideas about the organization. Offices may thus

“make the individual’s membership salient and can provide compelling images of what the group or organization represent” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 28) and generate a positive unique organizational identity which attracts the recognition, support and loyalty by job seekers (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

*No one else knows if I have a really, really big office or if I sit in an office space with twenty others. So that is not the status, the status has more with the work to do*

(Sara)

Sara exemplifies the lack of perceived importance of job attributes per se. In her quote the office space itself is not particularly important. As the statement above indicates this is based on the idea that no one in her social informal network can see her actual office space. Status as something that others can relate to is a reoccurring theme evident for example in organizational reputation, freebees, and in comparison with other applicants. We believe this is based on the increased prestige and status from favorable comparison with others in the social informal network which would mean a positive effect on identification with the employer (Kleppstö, 1993).

## Social informal network

The social informal network is a frame of reference for our respondents’ identity work within the interview processes. It composes a main arena for the job seekers to compare with others. Through stories and myths about employer reputation and the interview process and the network set the norms for what is accepted as being a high performer, capable, exceptional and going places. These myths are shown as a source to conformity. The analysis last part discusses the interview process as a source for these myths and its influence over the norms of the network.

*At first I was like; I hope a get a job at all. But then you saw what your friends were doing [referring to case interviews] and you thought; hey, I could do that! [...] You got like... greedy and started comparing with what other people got [referring to interview processes]. The grass is always greener on the other side.*

(Klara)

## The Social Informal Network set the norms

*But in Technology Management the job was really hyped because half of their class went on interview and then you get better than anyone else in your class if you get the job. It depends so much on what group you hang out with, which companies that becomes high status.*

(Sara)

The statement above is a good example of how the social informal network set the norm for what is perceived as status. Employer status and reputation seem to be very dependent on who applies for a job there and on who is getting an interview with the company. If a lot of people from the same social



informal network apply for a certain job or a certain company it becomes more recognized in the social informal network. This in turn affects the status of the individuals who gets an interview with the company. Several respondents argue that some industries are “*hyped*” in their class or university and being associated with them provides status. One explanation comes from Alvesson (2006) thoughts on the relationship between social trends and satisfaction. Alvesson (2006) also argues that group preferences often serve as determinant for what the individual pursues. This is further pictured in Allen’s quote below where he pursues a career in order to impress upon his family.

*I will not become the black sheep of my family; it is still a pissing contest*

(Allen)

Allen’s desires are strongly influenced by the norm set by his family. He first talks about the consulting industry as attractive because it pays well. When confronted with the fact that he can easily do the same money in the successful family business another image is unveiled. In this image Allen talks about the importance of doing something that “... *at least requires a university degree*” and about gaining recognition from his family. In this image money does not seem to be a matter of purchasing power but rather a measurement of success and recognition, a recognition he perceives will be gained as a consultant. According to Kleppestö (1993) an individual might feel a need to live up to certain expectations set by her surroundings.

*Of course you are influenced by what other people think [...] They are very attractive among other [students] which makes them very attractive. What other people think about the company matters*

(Madeleine)

As suggested by *mimetic rivalry* (Alvesson, 2006), the competition for things others want seems to be of great importance. The reputation within the social informal network seems to outweigh job attributes such as wages, working hours and other attributes. Evident in Madeleine’s statement above, others’ opinions have a big impact on organizational attractiveness since it seems to affect prestige and the wish to identify and be associated with the organization. An explanation for this mimetic rivalry can be found in Alvesson (2006) who address individuals’ need to improve self-esteem which, according to Alvesson (2004), may be done through status.

### **Employer reputation**

*I want to work for a company that others know about so they know that I am this good, I have been accepted here*

(Sara)

All of our respondents aspire to work for a company renowned in their social informal network. To be associated with the firm appears to function as a hallmark and our job seekers recognize that this

strengthens their personal brand within their social informal networks. Size and brand name are contributing factors to this recognition.

One respondent was appealed to some industries as she had heard about the smart people and the recognized difficulties of getting a job associated with these industries. She saw this as a quality stamp and that these industries would make others recognize her as smart. John claims the reason he is not pursuing his dream career, to become a teacher, is the lack of status within that industry. Instead he is applying for jobs within banking to which he expresses mild enthusiasm.

*This is pretty much the first firm you come in contact with when studying business. That's why I applied, everybody knows the firm.*

(Allen)

Our respondents often focus their attention on the same industries and companies as their friends. The need for confirmation of the employer as attractive might be grounded in *mimetic rivalry*; the desire to have what the people you identify with desire (Alvesson, 2006). Hence, since our respondents believe their classmates perceive a particular employer as attractive this is an employer they pursue and find satisfaction with (Alvesson, 2006). Another explanation provided by Alvesson (2006) is the search for legitimacy and ontological security. The sense of security offered by applying to the same organizations as peers is based on the comfort of imitation which substitutes critical reflection and independence and provides legitimacy. It also confirms our respondents ontological stance as they apply for the same jobs as people they identify with and thus lends a sense of who they are (Alvesson, 2006; Alvesson, 2004).

### *Stories and Myths*

*On the weekends, if you could take some time off, the company paid your vacation anywhere in the world*

(Madeleine)

Within the social informal networks myths-like stories about rigid assessments, salaries, travels, and promotional opportunities contribute to identification and attraction to a specific company. According to Ashforth and Mael (1989) myths and stories fuel messages of compelling organizational images. These myths create images of certain companies as unreachable and, in the eyes of some of our respondents, therefore highly desirable. *"It never felt realistic, it felt awesome and unattainable"*. The strong appreciation for difficult assessments could also be understood by thoughts on group distinctiveness (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kleppstö, 1993). Social identity demands distinctiveness in order to provide and sustain its identity providing influence (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Organizations that only accept a small elite, like consultancy- or other knowledge-Intensive firms (Alvesson, 2004) thus become unique and wanted as they guarantee a positive distinctive social identity in comparison to others. *"They don't accept just anyone"* is a common statement. One respondent says that from the first semester at the university everybody told her that no one gets hired at a specific company because





they expect straight A's and have impossible assessments. The high standards only appealed her to apply;

*It is high performance indicators that make you feel like you are a part of a group where everybody is high performance*

(Sara)

These myths seem too spread throughout the networks and seem to play huge roles for our respondent's perceived organizational attractiveness. These unconfirmed stories and myths confirm Alvesson (2006) ideas that in constructing their identities individuals pay less interest to substance than to compelling positive images.

### *Conformity*

*I am pretty adaptable, I can change personality*

(John)

Our respondents seem more concerned with fitting into the frame of the company, painted by the myths in their social informal network, than presenting a true image of themselves in order to find the company that suits them best. We see this as just another example of the small importance of actual job attributes. Often the compelling images of an organization or industry seem to be so strong that it is deemed as attractive although the people in the business are very different than our respondent's find themselves. John's statement confirms Alvesson's (2004) idea about identification as an ongoing process when he suggests that he could learn to identify with the people in the organization.

### The interview process alters the norms

*This is a story I think has to be ventilated. [Company] is present on all universities and at all job fairs. How the hell can they let them come here? I tell everyone I know how they trick students into applying for them*

(Allen)

Just as the social informal network set the norms for what grants status, individuals experiences from interview processes are brought back to the social informal network and alter these norms. Allen's interview experience with a company had a very strong dissociating effect and he even felt embarrassed for having applied to the company. A positive experience has opposite effect. As identification with a group lead to in-group favoritism, and positive evaluation of the group (Turner, 1982) the individual applying for the job is likely to present a positive image in her social informal network in order to, intentionally or unintentionally, raise the employer's, and consequently her own, status.

*As I saw company A then, that's how I see company B today. You could get a job there [at company A] and they have come down on the ground, fallen from the stars [...] much because of my cousins and the discussions we have had about how firms differs. They are not the coolest anymore...*

(Madeleine)

As Madeleine's statements above indicate, the images and attraction value of employers are however constantly changing as the stories are altered when new "insights" reach the network. Identification is an ongoing process (Alvesson, 2004). Madeleine's statement above indicates that this ongoing process of identification with and perceived attractiveness of an employer is influenced both within the interview process and through *informational social influences* (Turner, 1982) in the social informal network.

Our job seekers often compare different processes they have been to and that they have heard about from peers. As elaborated below these comparisons are shared within the social informal network where generous employers are endorsed. In comparison with others in their social informal network our respondents' status can be raised as they are associated with the status of an endorsed employer's status (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kleppestö, 1993). This all goes well with Alvesson's (2006) idea of grandiosity. Our respondents seem to have a vested interest in picturing their interview process as something out of the ordinary. This would, according to Alvesson (2006), be grounded in the need for self-esteem offered by the extra ordinary.



## Discussion

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The findings are discussed and this chapter intends to shed new light on the influence of the interview process upon job seekers social identity construction and employers competitive advantage in attracting talent. The interview process is portrayed as a status symbol. The interview process and the social informal network are pictured as two interdependent battle grounds in employers' war for talent. Before further research is discussed we take on a more critical approach to the relationship between graduate job seeker desire for grandiose self-images and the war for talent. We conclude by summarizing the thesis.

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### The interview process - The battle ground

Our study emphasizes the interview process as a battle ground in employers' war for talent. Graduate job seekers' struggle for a new social identity, their desire for status and the interview process influence upon graduate job seekers social identity construction suggests that this might be an interesting battle ground for employers in order to attract talent. Our results suggest that employers can gain competitive advantage in the war for talent by granting graduate job seekers positive social identities and status. By offering individual job seekers status within their social informal networks the job seeker identifies with the employer and is thus likely to project a positive image of the employer in her network. Thus, by boosting job seekers status, employers subsequently boost their own status and reputation. As our study has confirmed employers reputation within social informal networks has strong impact on perceived employer attractiveness.

Our study suggests that one way to influence graduate job seekers status is to provide the job seeker with a feeling of, in comparison within her social informal network, being a high performer, being capable, being exceptional and being on their way to a successful future. A powerful arsenal on the battle ground of the interview process is thus inviting the right people to the interview process (I am a high performer), offer difficult assessments (I am capable), being generous and recognize the job seeker (I am exceptional) and influencing the job seeker's belief about her future success and status after joining the organization (I am going places).

We would like to discuss the suggestion by prior studies (Turban D. B., 2001; Taylor & Bergmann, 1987; Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991) that the importance of the recruitment process lies in its inference and increased knowledge about organizational characteristics and job attributes. This view is based upon the belief that knowledge about the employer and job attributes drives employer attractiveness. As this knowledge increase during the sequence of the recruitment process the importance of the process itself decrease suggesting that the later stages, interview process, does little to change employer attractiveness. Instead we take sides with Cable and Turban (2001) and argue that the process of establishing and alter knowledge and employer attractiveness is ongoing throughout the recruitment process. They argue that the interview process is important as it can offer subtle insight on what it is like to work in the organization.

We would however like to nuance Cable and Turban (2001) explanation of the importance of the interview process in two ways. We present these two proposals below under the headings; the interview process – a status symbol, and the interview process – inference about future status.

### The interview process - A status symbol

Prior research (Alvesson, 2004; Ashforth & Mael, 1989) has shown that association and identification with an organization or role is an important part in an individual's social identity construction, ontological security, self-concept and a potential source for status. Our results indicate that the interview process provides opportunities for social identity construction. Identification with the interview process itself may have similar effects as identification with an organization. This identification may in turn be projected upon the employer. Our study indicates that, besides firm familiarity and corporate reputation (Cable & Turban, 2003; Turban D. B., 2001), the interview process may have influence upon perceived pride or status. It is thus not solely pride from *working for* the organization (Turban D. B., 2001) that impinge on employer attractiveness but also being associated with its interview process. We argue that the importance of the interview process upon perceived employer attractiveness lies within the power of the interview process as a symbol of status.

### *Invite the right people*

Peers (Kilduff, 1990), parents (Liden & Parsons, 1986), employees (Fischer et al. (1979), friends and acquaintances (Taylor & Bergmann, 1987; Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991) have been shown to influence employer attractiveness. Our study contributes to this list by elaborating on the understanding of other applicants upon employer attractiveness through the lens of social identification.

We argue that the employer (Alvesson, 2004) is not the only source for identification. Other applicants seem to be a strong source for social identification to a category of intelligent, capable, high performers. As the job seeker has not met any of the applicants prior to the interview process this is further an indication of the importance of the interview process upon the construction of social identity. They might have heard reputation about other applicants and this might have given them an impression of the firm that is influential throughout the recruitment process as indicated by (Lawler, Kuleck, Rhode, & Sorensen, 1975). However, many of our applicants report positive or negative impression from meeting other applicants and claim that this affected their impression about the employer.

Other applicants seem to be of high importance for our respondents' perceived status. The quality of the other applicants sends signals to our job seekers of the competence required to be invited to the interview process. High quality thus has great importance on how our job seekers construct their own self-identity and what status can be expected from identifying with the employer. Sara's perception about companies "*We want the best, but that's what they all say*" shows the importance for employers to prove that they can deliver what they preach. We therefore argue that the importance



of inviting the right applicants to the interview process stretches far beyond increasing the likelihood of finding the right person for the job. Inviting the right people to the interview process send powerful signals to the applicants of what kind of people are interested in this organization and what it takes to get an interview. “[They] don’t invite just anyone” is a recurring statement in our empirical findings that really emphasize the symbolic status of being associated with the best and the perceived distinctiveness this provides. Co-applicants status mirrors the status of the job, and the status our respondents assign co-applicants is projected upon the company. Inviting the right applicants is a great way for companies to boost applicant self-esteem and social identity as it makes them feel like *high performers*. Inviting the right applicants thus influence the company’s employer attractiveness. Other applicants are a symbol of status.

It is not solely a question about inviting the right people, which may feel rather intuitive if you look for talent. Based on our findings we would specifically like to emphasize the importance of not inviting the *wrong* people to the interview process. As they have an apparent negative impact on our respondents perceived employer attractiveness inviting the wrong people might have negative influences that stretches beyond the cost of inviting and assessing them. As unimpressive people are invited to the interview process the distinctiveness and feeling of high performance is lost and the employer thus loose reputation within the social informal networks of the universities.

Further, as argued by mimetic rivalry, respondent’s want to pursue the same things as people to which they identify. The legitimacy provided by finding other high-status people at the interview process is thus important. Competitive high-performers may trigger each other as they observe that their rivals appear eager to get the job. The competition may thus tighten and the employer’s attractiveness spirals upward as the group of applicants strive to beat each other. Based on this we would like to argue for the potential benefit of competitive elements within the interview process.

### *Offer difficult assessments*

Difficult assessments are another powerful status symbol. Difficult assessments, like impressive applicants, appear to be a *mixed blessing* as they can make individuals question themselves and their abilities. However, it is these difficult obstacles that, when achieved raises job seekers self-esteem. As they recognize the job seeker as capable within the social informal network. Difficult assessments make the job seeker feel that only a selected elite is allowed to join the organization and being one of few to accomplish tough tests provides distinctiveness to the group of applicants remaining and thus raise the likeliness of identification with that group. Being associated with such a tough assessment will raise the individual’s status within her social informal network as it enables her to say; *I am capable*. Having the reputation of providing difficult tests also directly raise the employer’s reputation and attractiveness. Tough tests make up an important part of job seekers comparison dimensions within their social informal networks and is thus a strong source for social identity construction. Assessments

is another element in the interview process that provides ontological security as it seems to prove the job seeker that she is a capable and smart individual and boost her self-esteem.

### *Generous and recognizing*

Receiving recognition from high status employers raises our respondents' self-esteem and feeling of self-worth and pride. Getting recognition from high status employers elicits status in the social informal network where the individual can claim that she is *exceptional*. An employer that can generate this status for a graduate job seeker is more likely to generate identification.

## The interview process – Inference about future status

### *Inference about future status*

We agree with prior studies based upon signaling theory (Rynes, Bretz JR, & Gerhart, 1991; Turban D. B., 2001) arguing for the importance of the recruitment process as a result of information asymmetry about job attributes. However, rather than agreeing with (Taylor & Bergmann, 1987) that this information is saturated already in the early stages of the recruitment process we believe, in line with Cable and Turban (2003), that the interview process may offer new insights. Taking on a different perspective we suggest a different explanation to the interview process influence upon employer attractiveness. Based on social identity theory we would like to offer a potential explanation as to *why* inference about job attributes might be important.

Our results thus nuance Taylor and Bergmann's (1987, p. 282) belief "*that recruitment activities influence applicants reactions primarily through their impact on the individuals inference about job attributes*". Our results suggest that graduate job seekers pay little interest to the actual type of work they are to perform, trendy words like responsibility and challenging work tasks seem more important. Even in situations where the job seeker is aware of daunting work tasks (Mark) the identification with the firm and the firm's reputation in the social informal network rather calls for selective forgetting than questioning the job position. Salary and location are much more interesting to them. However, our results suggest that the office space itself, that is, the place where the individual is actually performing her work and thus the biggest impact on the daily work, plays a minor part. What is more important seem to be what the social informal network knows about the location and office space. Nor does salary seem to be mainly a matter of purchasing power but rather a measurement of success and status. The interview process importance may lie in the inference about job attributes. However, we argue that this inference is not simply a tool to visualize what the job seekers future daily work day will look like. The reason *why* this knowledge affect employer attractiveness is that (perceived) knowledge about job attributes enables inference about future success and status. This inference enables the job seekers to show her social informal network that she is *going places*. From a graduate job seekers perspective job attributes is first and foremost a symbol of status.



## The social informal network - The extended battle ground

According to social identity theory an individual's social identity is constructed through categorization and group belonging. It is in comparison with others that an individual's social identity is constructed. Our results indicate that one main arena for this comparison is within an individual's social informal networks. The interview process provides the individual with opportunity for comparison within her social informal network and it is in the social informal network that the individual can portray herself as a high performing, capable, and extraordinary person with a bright future. The interplay between the interview process and the social informal network is thus a key arena where the social identity is constructed and employer attractiveness is determined.

The tightness of the social informal networks at universities suggested by Kilduff and Krockhardt (1994) makes the networks especially important for graduates. Most people in their social informal network of graduates is in the same position of applying for jobs. Our study suggests that comparison within graduates' social informal networks thus becomes incredibly apparent and the need to project a positive social identity is great.

Similar to Turban (2001) our study shows reputations, within the social informal networks, great influence upon job seekers employer attractiveness. Our study however, suggests that the influence from the social informal network is strong not only in the earliest stages of the recruitment process but also during the time of the interview process. We argue that the norms for what is perceived as status construct our job seekers "truths" about what is desirable and what to strive for. These norms are constantly altered within the social informal networks through word-of-mouth from individuals' interview experiences. Our study shows that myths about extraordinary applicants and "impossible" assessments spread within the social informal networks and the great influence of these myths upon the desire to identify with a certain category or a certain employer.

Based on the magnitude of contradiction, selective forgetting, mimetic rivalry and depersonalization evident in our findings we argue that the status of employers and individuals' identities are fragile and seem to be constantly re-negotiated within the interactions of the interview process and the social informal networks. Based on our social identity theory perspective it appears to us that the volatile nature of employer attractiveness is closely connected to the conformity within the social informal network. We argue that one explanation for the ongoing process of establishing employer attractiveness might be found in the ongoing construction and negotiation of social identity suggested by Alvesson (2004).

## The fantasy of status

Society's interest in positively projected images rather than actual substance (Alvesson, 2006) is evident in our research on graduate job seekers. We propose that the lack of interest in actual job attributes such as location or salary but rather how these attributes are projected within the social informal network might be an explanation for the fantasy images projected by employers (Alvesson,

2006) in order to attract talent and stand out in the war for talent. This stands in clear contrast to Cable and Turban's (2001) argument of the importance to project an accurate image of the organization. We argue that these fantasies of status might explain job seekers dissatisfaction and decisions to quit. We argue that, in their pursuit for status, job seekers fantasies make them blinded by the images projected in the interview process. Job seekers blind pursuit for status intensifies the war for talent as employers' desperately race to be most attractive and consequently raise individuals' expectations and desires. This sends the pursuit for status into an upward spiral which most likely leads nowhere but to shattered fantasies and dissatisfaction.

## Further research

It would be interesting to study the impact of the interview process on social identity construction and perceived status from the perspective of current employees. It would be interesting to see whether the interview process affect current employees' sense of pride and levels of motivation as a result of witnessing the tough competition for joining their organization or job.

Our study does not take personal characteristics into account. It is possible that the employer interaction within the interview process is interpreted and received differently between low and high esteem individuals (Turban & Keon, 1993, p. 191) and thus affect their perceived employer attractiveness differently. An interesting extension of our study would be to explore how different personal characteristics are affected by employer interaction within the interview process. This could enable employers to tailor their interview processes to the kind of person they are looking for.

Another interesting research topic would be to explore the influence of status upon employer attractiveness in earlier stages of the recruitment process, even as early as the first impression when students start studying at the university. As our study has shown, the nature of employers reputation within the social informal networks are fragile and negotiable. Knowledge about how individuals' status affects their reputation at an early stage could help companies build up stronger employee brand names.

Finally, taking on a different perspective than graduate students would shed some interesting light on the importance of status in the recruitment process. We hypothesize that since people who already have a job consequently have more knowledge and insight to their job preferences perhaps job attributes per se play a bigger part on determining employer attractiveness.





## Conclusion

The study outlines two trends in today's society; employers' war for talent and graduate job seekers' desire for a grandiose social identity. The study takes on a social constructionist perspective and uses social identity theory as a theoretical framework. We conduct an exploratory qualitative study on the influence of the interview process, and its interdependent relationship with graduate job seekers' social informal networks, upon social identity construction. The interview process is found to be an important influence upon graduate job seekers' social identity construction as it elicits dimensions for comparison with peers in the social informal network. These comparisons are an important part of job seekers' social identity construction. The social informal network functions as a frame of reference and set the norms for what is perceived as providing job seekers with status. The interview process can contribute to status if the job seeker, in comparison with her social informal network, perceives that others see her as high performing, capable, extraordinary and as a person with a future successful career. Employers can thus increase their attractiveness by inviting the *right* other applicants to the interview process, offering difficult assessments, being generous and recognizing the job seeker and finally by providing symbols for a successful future. Prior research has been discussed and a nuanced view on the importance of the interview process presented. It is argued that the interview process is important for two reasons. First of all, the interview process is pictured as a strong status symbol and job seekers desire to be associated with high status processes *per se* as it raises their status. Secondly, the interview process may create impressions and beliefs about future status and success after joining the organization. Stories and myths from experienced interview processes are spread within the social informal networks and create and alter employers' reputation and status. What is being perceived as status is thus constantly constructed in an ongoing process between the norms of the social informal networks and the interview experiences. It is argued that the job seekers pursuit of status intensify the war for talent by triggering employers to provide the toughest, most exclusive interview process, which just further escalates the job seekers pursuit for status.

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