



Beyond a Paycheck – Employment as an Act of Consumption for Gen Y Talents

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Abstract

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Purpose: This master thesis aims at bridging the distinct notions of production and consumption by investigating how well-established consumption frameworks gain significance in the employment world. Therefore, we ask how Gen Y talents experience their jobs as commodities and act as consumers in the workplace as a reaction to this commodification. The purpose of this paper is to gain a general understanding of how students and recent graduates consume their work.

Conclusion: We conclude that even those areas of our daily life that have previously been distinctly separated, such as employment, can now be viewed from a consumption standpoint. Employees experience and construct employment as a commodity, where jobs are packaged, priced, placed and promoted by capitalist means to sell employers' offerings to current and potential hires. Employees further see themselves as active consumers in the workplace that choose what they want to do and who they want to do it for. We found that they assume the three primary consumer roles of communicator, hedonist and identity-seeker in the workplace.

Theoretical contribution: This paper offers new insights into how consumer frameworks can be applied to areas that have previously not been investigated as areas of consumption, namely the workplace. We therewith extend the relevance of consumption practices and suggest that consumer culture is even encroaching on the productive side of our life.

Managerial implications: We see this research topic as especially important for employers, who can gain a new understanding of how employees and job-hunters see themselves as consumers in the work environment. It can either provide insights into how offerings can be better marketed or how the offerings have to be changed to appeal to this new type of empowered and demanding consumer. It might also assist students and recent graduates in understanding their position in the employer-employee relationship better and therewith help them to find a job that matches their demands best.

Suggestion for future research: Since the research in this field is in an early phase, there are a lot of additional questions that can be asked. We are particularly interested in how this consumption of work differs between various target groups, such as Gen Y and Gen X or highly educated and less educated employees. We further suggest a longitudinal study to explore how the consumer roles of employees change throughout their life time. Moreover, a critical stance could be taken to explore the negative effects of consumption of the workplace for employees.

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1. Introduction

“Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life” (Confucius).

This quote illustrates the relationship many highly-educated and privileged employees have with their work today. They do no longer expect to simply work for a paycheck in order to satisfy basic needs such as food and shelter. For them, what you do for a living and where you do it have become determinants of self-expression, self-actualization and prestige (Parment and Dyhre, 2009). Hence, choosing an organization and job have become complex symbolic processes, similar to those of choosing consumer brands.

Even the process of job hunting is becoming more and more similar to that of a shopping trip. Job hunters are looking for jobs online where each employer presents what they have to offer at the click of a button. At campuses, career fairs become increasingly popular, where students can window-shop different companies and their offers while employers promote themselves in any way possible, including freebies, product demonstrations and activities (Chertkovskaya, 2013). Even the online job application process resembles a virtual shopping cart (e.g. monster.com, indeed.com, linkedin.com), which we have previously been familiarized with through online retailers such as ebay and amazon. Furthermore, internships serve as ‘fitting rooms’ for future employees to ‘try on’ different roles and for companies to determine what aspects of a job and of an employer fit and which alterations have to be made (Huhman, 2011). This behavior results in employers branding themselves and their positions, just as much as their products. Consequently, yearly rankings of the “most attractive employers” have emerged (e.g. Universum, 2013, Glassdoor, 2014) and may be considered just as important as the rankings of the most valuable brands (Forbes, 2014).

Unsurprisingly, employer branding activities are enjoying increasing academic attention (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). It is especially popular to point out the benefits for employers: gaining talents, creating a productive corporate culture, motivating employees and retaining them over long periods of time (Bakanauskienė, Bendaravicienė, Krikstolaitis & Lydeka, 2011). However, less research has been done from the employees’ perspective and how they respond to these employer branding activities. These developments turn a certain group of employees into consumers that actively seek jobs as consumable commodities.

Although jobs are still seen by many, especially the lower income bracket, as a mere means to finance their livelihood, we see a change in how employment is presented to and perceived by highly-educated students. Being job hunters ourselves, we have asked whether the traditional view of job seekers as being at the mercy of employers is changing and if yes, to what degree. Through our experiences, we have learned that employers are well aware of the shortage of highly educated talents and are willing to present themselves in a way that emphasizes selling their job offers. Corporations are selling themselves to potential and current hires, just as much as those potential employees are selling their skills. Hence, we feel like consumers in today’s employment world, choosing between different offerings and assigning an exchange value to the different job packages.

Based on all of these developments, the employment market, despite the negative mood around unemployment rates and job insecurity, may be increasingly viewed as a commodity market (Löow &

Bredberg, 2013). This shift in market structure forces us to reconsider how we have previously looked at employment and work. It is becoming harder and harder to argue that the productive side of our economy is merely rational, constructive and a means to an end (Salzer-Mörling, 2010).

Therefore, we suggest that, in today's consumer culture, even the previously distinct sphere of employment is now penetrated by values, processes and understandings derived from consumption practices. Thus, employees become consumers that utilize their position and employer to derive meaning from their daily tasks that transcends the actions themselves and echo into all aspects of the individual's life.

Unsurprisingly, investigating the new relationship between employment and consumption as something that might be interrelated and connected is gaining increasing academic attention. For example, two well known journals are planning special issues on this topic. *Ephemera* published a call for papers on "Consumption of Work and the Work of Consumption" (Chertkovskaya, Limki & Loacker, 2014), while *Organization* reviewed papers under the headline "Organizations and their consumers: Bridging work and consumption" (Gabriel, Korczynski & Rieder, 2014). Additionally, many more papers have been published individually in a variety of journals. Interestingly, these journals encompass a range of academic specialties, such as consumer behavior, organizational theory and sociology. Hence, the presented development influences a multitude of academic fields, which not only highlights the actuality of the topic but also its transboundary significance. Nevertheless, consumer behavior scholars have paid least attention to the topic of consumption at work.

Hence, this paper suggests an expansion of research in this field and attempts to provide first insights into how employees and job hunters see and experience this new transition of workplace into consumption space. We explore how they experience the commodification of work and how they see themselves as consumers in this new environment.

2. Research Objective & Questions

This paper aims at contributing to the current discussion of consumption of work by adopting a consumer behavior angle and exploring current and potential employees' perspective on employment consumption. By doing so, it attempts to contribute to currently existent academic literature, which focuses mostly on the organizational perspective of consumption practices at work.

In contrast, the following analysis will focus on how employees perceive work as a form of consumption and which roles they assume according to what is presented to them. To investigate this field of interest, the analysis will look at how employees perceive work as a commodity by treating and presenting it like a consumer good. Hence, the first research question is:

RQ1: How do employees construct employment as a commodity?

Furthermore, we will investigate how employees react to this new way of looking at employment and what motivates employees to perform acts of consumption in the workplace. For this, we will determine how employees see themselves in the workplace by asking:

RQ2: How do employees perceive themselves as consumers in the workplace?

The findings are going to be presented in the following way:

Chapter 3 explains the basic terms and definitions utilized throughout this thesis. Furthermore, chapter 4 outlines the literature available on the topic in question, while chapter 5 presents the theories used to make sense of the empirical data collected. Chapter 6 will present the research methodology utilized for data collection and analysis. The primary data collected through this process will then be presented and analyzed in chapter 7. Lastly, chapter 8 will conclude the discussion and summarize our findings, highlight our theoretical and practical contributions and provide the limitations to our study and possible future research topics in this area.

3. Background & Definitions

Since this paper tries to highlight how consumer culture is penetrating even the spheres of our daily life that have previously been distinctly separated, such as employment, the terms “consumption”, “consumer culture” and “consumer culture theory” build the basis for the following analysis. Hence, these are going to be explained and defined in this chapter to ensure a shared understanding of what the subsequent chapters are based upon and how these definitions guided us in our analysis.

3.1 Consumption

Consumption, from the Latin word “consumere”, literally translated means “to use” (Ekström, 2010a) and has been utilized synonymously with using up, destroying, laying waste and devouring since the sixteenth century (Dale, 2012). This negative connotation can still be found within the colloquial use of the term today, being defined as “the action of using up a resource” (Oxford Dictionary, 2014), which implies a destructive nature of consumption activities and stands in direct contrast to the constructive production side of the economy (Salzer-Möring, 2010).

However, consumption is playing an increasingly important part in our daily lives. In this context, consumption does not only encompass the action of using up a resource but also those of purchasing, owning, using, maintaining, repairing, disposing, giving gifts and producing (Ekström, 2010a). Academic attention to the field of consumption has been proliferating and consumption is now also seen as something positive, including that consumption enables us to be autonomous (Dale, 2012), brings pleasure and enjoyment and is no longer a means to an end but rather an end in itself (Gabriel & Lang, 2006).

The underlying goal of consumption has, thus, shifted from satisfying a need to the “satisfaction of human wants” (Kyrk, 1923 cited in Campbell, 1987, p. 38), whereby needs are focused on biological necessities and wants center around psychological factors that increase quality of life (Chertkovskaya, 2013). In this sense, human wants and desires are infinite and ever changing as what were formerly known as luxuries are now considered standard (Löfgren, 2010, p. 71). Hence, people need to continuously consume to satisfy newly emerging desires and in the process take on different roles for different consumption practices, such as chooser, communicator, explorer, identity seeker, hedonist, victim, rebel, activist or citizen (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Here, the consumer becomes an active agent in consumption practices and derives value from them.

Therefore, the traditional definitions are no longer satisfactory as they disregard both the productive functions of consumption as well as the active role consumers partake. Consequently, for the remainder of the paper, a modified definition of consumption by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2014) is going to be used, according to which consumption is “the utilization of economic goods in the satisfaction of wants or in the process of production resulting chiefly in their destruction, deterioration, or transformation”. We consider consumption to be the utilization of an economic good, during which consumers simultaneously (and/or subsequently) derive value. Hence, the very process of consumption can be the goal instead of the means to achieve a goal. The consumer

actively transforms the good and its meanings into something of value to him/her and, thus, produces meaning through consumption.

3.2 Consumer Culture

It is not surprising that in Western societies, where basic needs are sufficiently satisfied, consumers turn to complex consumption that goes beyond the functional value of an economic good towards consuming the symbolic meaning of that good (Slater, 1997; Ransome, 2005). In its symbolic capacity, consumption acts as a mediator between people, goods and markets, and the dominant cultural values of society are organized via consumer practices (Ekström, 2010b). Hence, the term consumer culture indicates the shift of consumption from a simple side effect of production to understanding consumption as crucial for “social reproduction” (Featherstone, 1995, p. 75). This idiosyncrasy of modern society is captured in the term “consumer culture”, which was termed by Baudrillard, who highlights the symbolic function of consumption as a means for social interaction:

In this sense, affluence and consumption -- again, we mean not the consumption of material goods, products and services, but the consumed image of consumption -- do, indeed, constitute our new tribal mythology -- the morality of modernity. Without that anticipation and reflexive potentialization of enjoyment in the 'collective consciousness', consumption would merely be what it is and would not be such a force for social integration. (Baudrillard, 1998, p. 195)

Consumption becomes the dominant mode of interaction and derivation of meaning and mediates the majority of signifying practices (Featherstone, 1995). Hence, consumption increasingly penetrates all aspects of our daily life, even those, that have previously been excluded from commoditized experiences, such as citizenship (Gabriel, 2008; Ekström, 2010b; Hjort & Salonen, 2010) and it is not surprising that we are looking to consumption to explain the developments within other spheres of economy, such as production. By the way we consume, we can express most or even all functions of our lives, such as political, social and cultural stances. Consequently:

consumption is always and everywhere a cultural process, but 'consumer culture' – a culture of consumption – is unique and specific: it is the dominant mode of cultural reproduction developed in the west over the course of modernity. (Slater, 1997, p. 8)

Therefore, if we understand culture as everything that is not natural and, hence, created by man (Ghauri & Cateora, 2010), every act of production is guided by consumption practices. If we further believe consumption to proliferate in a consumer society, meaning gaining increasing importance and traction, cultural meanings proliferate with it. Therefore, consumption becomes crucial for creating meaning in life and meaning in society.

3.3 Consumer Culture Theory

The fragmentation and overproduction of culture is not only a typical characteristic of consumer culture, but also central to postmodernism (Featherstone, 1995) to the point that consumer society and postmodernism are considered synonymous (Campbell, 1997). Although there is no one universal definition of postmodernism (Brown, 2006), Cova (1997, p. 298) uses Bauman's (1992, p. 134) analysis of postmodernism to conclude that "postmodernity may be interpreted as fully developed modernity". Modernity emphasized the rule of reason and rationality and celebrated individualism (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). In contrast, postmodernity goes beyond simple dichotomous categories, such as consumer/producer or subject/object, to accepting ambivalence and subjective truths (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Cova, 1997). "It is a world of ephemerality, instability, proliferation, hallucination and, above all, chaos." (Brown, 2006, p. 213). Consequently, it is a time characterized by hyperreal experiences, fragmentation and decentering of the subject (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Featherstone, 1995; Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Unsurprisingly, studying consumer behavior has to adapt to this new reality. This postmodern turn has given strength to the academic field of consumer culture theory (CCT).

The postmodern form of consumer research is interested in the dynamic relationship between consumers, markets and cultural meanings, and investigates the heterogeneous allocation of meaning and the multitude of coinciding and conflicting cultural groupings (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). As Stone, Firat and Gould (2012, p. 420) express it: "consumer research becomes the eclectic, open-ended (sub)conscious study of intertwined trajectories of human becomings and doings as they unfold through an atmospheric world-in-formation."

Consumers are no longer distinct black boxes but rather elements in a cosmos of consumption, which can only be understood if their relationships to other subjects and structures are being taken into consideration. CCT recognizes that cultural meanings are established through consumption practices (Arnould & Thompson, 2005).

Consequently, consumption fulfills important roles in our society today; it is essential for constructing culture, identity and social life (Moisander, Rokka & Valtonen, 2010) and serves as a communication tool that provides information about social status and identity (Skov, 2010, p. 330). All of these functions of consumption are also carried out by employment, as our subsequent analysis will show, which leads to the assumption that employment is closely connected to consumption. These functions of consumption are further unequivocally connected to the idea of symbolic meaning over functional meaning presented in the previous chapter, where consumers are more concerned about the 'spectacle'; producing images, desires, fantasies and dreams rather than objects (Gabriel, 2008). In this way, culture, which is constructed by consumption, enables society to manifest and further develop their knowledge and attitudes about life (Geertz, 1973 in Stone, Firat & Gould, 2012). Thus, consumption is inherently productive (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871).

The sphere of CCT research encompasses four main areas, which are (1) consumer identity projects (2) marketplace cultures (3) the sociohistoric patterning of consumption, and (4) mass-mediated marketplace ideologies and consumers' interpretive strategies (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871). This paper is going to take the first, second and last areas of research into consideration when investigating the consumption of employment. Firstly, we question how consumption of work helps

employees in forming a personal and social identity. Secondly, we look at how they see themselves linked and as a part of the workplace community. Thirdly, we explore how employment is presented as a commodity by employers and how employees are interpreting and reacting to this picture of work.

4. Literature Review: The Relationship between Producer and Consumer Roles

Considering the developments outlined in chapter 3.2, which illustrate the increasing importance of consumption in our daily lives, it is reasonable to ask how this affects the importance of production and whether a new relationship between the two economic spheres of society has been established. To answer this question, it is necessary to now take a step back and investigate how workers, employees and producers have been viewed traditionally and how this view has changed. We then discuss how this new relationship between production and consumption has been examined by some academics in the fields of consumer behavior, sociology and organizational theory. This literature review will guide us in our subsequent analysis by highlighting the current research gap.

4.1 The Traditional Production Paradigm

In traditional economic theory, production and consumption were seen as distinctly separate spheres of people's lives. Work and production occupied a positive connotation in peoples' minds, creating resources and substance instead of using them, while consumption destroyed these resources (Chertkovskaya, 2013, p. 64). This worldview is based on a Protestant work ethic, which determined the principles of economic conduct for the time period starting during the sixteenth century up until the beginning of the industrial revolution (Featherstone, 1995; Du Gay, 1996; Ransome, 2005; Swadzba, 2010; Chertkovskaya, 2013). Weber's popular "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism" (1976) outlines the core values of the Protestant work ethic as: hard work, industriousness, diligence, thrift, and frugality (cited in Ransome, 2005, p. 27). Because people were mostly concerned with satisfying basic needs and work offered them such satisfaction, work was seen as the primary achievement in life.

Ransome (2005, p. 15) terms the expression "work-based society" to describe such a social order. He goes on to explain that work-based societies were characterized by quantitative means, such as the amount of time and effort people extend to working activities, and qualitative attributes, such as whether or not people saw benefits in working and how work affected personal and social identities. Hence, work saturated life in those pre-industrialized Western societies, which were inherently work-based. Employment allowed material and psychological security, opportunities for creativity and self-actualization at work and social contact (Ransome, 2005, p. 22) and, hence, satisfied survival, personal and social needs and desires (Bauman, 2007, p. 59). Especially class segmentation became increasingly popular whereby the occupation automatically suggested a certain lifestyle, including consumption habits, political stances and leisure activities (Micheletti & Isenhour, 2010; Noren, 2010). Work, hence, functioned as a communicator to tell people around the workers who they were and what their place in society was. Taking all of this into consideration, work was both a means to establish personal identity, as the concept of self is grounded in the assumption of purposive action, and social identity as class segmentation was based on employment status. Furthermore, it was a source of hedonic enjoyment as work was carried out in communities and workers enjoyed seeing the end product they accomplished at work (Ransome, 2005).

External circumstances, such as propaganda, increased the desirability of work and the positive image of work as a key ingredient for personal and social growth as labor was said to be the primary driver of economic growth. Moreover, at the time people still recalled years of poverty, unemployment and famine and hence appreciated work much more (Swadzba, 2010).

4.2 The Shift Towards a New Production Paradigm

With the industrial revolution, the employee-work relationship changed. Organizations were more and more focused on optimization, productivity and automation. Hence, the division of labor became a widely accepted standard, as illustrated by Adam Smith's popular publication "Division of Labour", and Fordism with its assembly line design taking over (Ransome, 2005). Consequently, production and consumption were separated regarding who carried out those acts into distinct players of producers and consumers and in terms of when production and consumption processes took place. This led to alienation as producers did no longer see the end benefit of their work and consumers lost their appreciation for where products came from. Consequently, fulfillment and identity at work were lost (Du Gay, 1996). This process of alienation was criticized by many and started numerous discussions about identity at work, its importance and its management (Du Gay, 1996). Probably most famous is Marx's critique of the capitalist developments:

In what does this alienation of labor consist? First that the work is external to the worker, that it is not part of his nature, that consequently he does not fulfill himself in his work [...] The worker therefore only feels home in his leisure, whereas at work he feels homeless. His work is not voluntary but imposed, 'forced labour. It is not the satisfaction of a need, but only a means for satisfying other needs.' (Bottomore & Rubel, 1963, pp. 177-178 cited in Du Gay, 1996, p. 11)

Consequently, modernity was characterized by the separation of production as a public matter and consumption and leisure as private matters (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). While before, consumption was a necessity and fulfillment was found in work, in modernity consumers were disappointed by their work activities and therefore diminished work to a mere necessity in their lives that enabled them to find satisfaction in consumption (Firat, 1997 cited in Löow & Bredberg, 2013). Hence, the purpose of economic activity became consumption (Brekke, 2010, p. 117), which explains the advancement of mass consumption around that time (Ransome, 2005) as well as the dominant role consumption occupies in our society today.

4.3 The New Production Paradigm

In the new production paradigm of today, production becomes the mean and consumption becomes the end. Production is no longer valued for its inherent functions but is rather seen as a tool to achieve the freedom to consume in ecstasy. Consumption, rather than production, becomes the end goal. As consumers no longer feel pressure to satisfy basic survival needs via consumption, they can now enjoy the process of consumption itself. Consequently, many have argued that consumption

now overtakes production as the dominant force in society (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995, p. 250), which symbolizes the “end of the work era” (Swadzba, 2010, p. 123).

This highlights the ideological shift from Protestant values to consumer values of the twentieth century, namely consumption, play and hedonism (Bell, 1976 & 1980 cited in Featherstone, 1995). Postmodernism, with its celebration and cult of the expressive individual, is crucial for evoking the spirit of consumption (Corrigan, 1997 cited in Löow & Bredberg, 2013).

This “consumption-based society” (Ransome, 2005, p. 43) suggests that we move away from “simple consumption” (Ransome, 2005, p. 71) to satisfy simple survival needs towards forms of “complex consumption” (Ransome, 2005, p. 8). This form of consumption goes beyond the functional aspects of a consumption object and includes symbolic meanings (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). Consumers therefore become more concerned with hedonism than with instrumentalism (Chertkovskaya, 2013). Hence, a “de-materialisation” (Salzer-Mörling, 2010, p. 545) takes place where we distinguish the actual tangible object from what it stands for and is seen as. Consumers begin to consume symbols (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

In this symbolic function, consumption has the same basic motivation as traditional acts of production in that it allows people to define who they are and where they belong in society. Therewith, consumption expresses “the basic states of our existence; having, doing, being” (Slater, 1998, p. 215 cited in Ransome, 2005, p. 44). Ransome (2005) goes on to elaborate that the meaning people detect or assign to actions is a way for them to express their sense of self. Consequently, identity is now self-constructed through acts of consumption rather than pre-defined by occupation, which highlights the active role consumers possess in the production of their own reality. In that sense, the role that employment used to play in people’s lives is now taken on by consumption (Bauman, 2007). However, assigning meaning to consumption, rather than employment, automatically leads to the assumption that how people develop a sense of identity changes with this paradigm shift.

Consumers act as “interpretive agents” (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 875) that derive meaning from consumption practices; hence, it is a way to make sense of the world (Salzer-Mörling, 2010, p. 536). Considering Firat and Venkatesh’s (1995, p. 246) distinction between production and consumption based on their value-creating potential “If the community of definers sees the outcome of a process or set of activities as something of value, then production has taken place. Otherwise, the activity is a profane act of consumption: pure use, devouring, and destruction” and the notion that sense-making can be seen as a value creating activity (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995), consumption becomes an inherently productive measure.

This conclusion is supported by other sources, claiming that “Consumption is productive and profoundly cultural in the sense that it invokes, mediates and reproduces the meanings and systems of representation through which people make sense of their everyday lives and achieve social order” (Moisander, Rokka & Valtonen, 2010, p. 78). Firat and Venkatesh (1995) concur as simultaneous to every consumption process, production takes place – whether it may be the production of another object, the person itself, an image or a symbol. Some even argue that consumption exceeds production in importance since consumption constitutes the moment where symbolic meaning is exchanged that manifests and produces social order. Hence, consumption is not the outcome of a

process but rather a process in itself during which much is created and produced (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995).

Especially younger generations are prone to this type of symbolic production paradigm as they have experienced a lifelong wealth where material and functional values have become minimum requirements and the real value is seen in its symbolic functions (Inglehart, 1977 cited in Swadzba, 2010). Hence, younger people, especially generation Y, search for meaningful and fulfilling jobs (Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010; Becton, Walker & Jones-Farmer, 2014) where they consume symbolism (Swadzba, 2010). This goes hand in hand with creating a society of spectacle that markets images, desires, fantasies and dreams as commodities (Gabriel, 2008). Guy Debord (1977, para. 1) expresses this in the following way: "In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, all life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has moved away into representation." Hence, today's consumers are more likely to consume immaterial objects rather than tangible ones because they have lost touch to the production side of the economy due to division of labor and worker alienation. These spectacles have originated in the re-enchantment of rationality of late modernity (Ritzer 1999 cited in Gabriel, 2008).

All of this supports the fact that consumption becomes increasingly important in our daily lives, which is closely related to the rise of consumer culture. Interestingly, Ransome (2005) suggests that people in a consumption-based society are eager to work more for the purpose of obtaining more goods and are willing to sacrifice leisure time in exchange, despite the fact that leisure is seen as one of the most valuable goods that we desire more the richer we get (Brekke, 2010). Although one possible explanation is given by economics: By becoming more affluent and more productive, the price of leisure increases proportionally so that we can buy more goods for the same amount of leisure time, which is an attractive incentive to keep working the same amount of hours although we are getting richer (Brekke, 2010).

However, we propose another possible scenario for why we are working more although we would have the financial resources to increase our time spent outside of work, namely the fact that employment is becoming a good that workers consume. By increasing their time at work, consumers are also increasing the time they have to enjoy consumption since employment is an act of consumption. Hence, instead of finding the sweet spot between leisure (as a consumptive good) and work (as a means for consumption), one equals the other. Consequently, although we have established that consumption can be productive, the perspective we are taking is going one step further to suggest a more dramatic evolution of the relationship between production and consumption. Namely, that production and consumption are not opposing forces, but rather inherently connected as people produce meaning while they consume and consume while they are producing/working.

4.4 The Convergence of Production & Consumption

As the previous two chapters suggest, production and consumption were traditionally seen as competing with each other, even antithetic, as the pre-industrialized society is dominated by production and the post-industrialized society is dominated by consumption. The former emphasizes

‘working to survive’ and the latter ‘working to consume’, but both are profoundly instrumental in their orientation (working to achieve something else) (Chertkovskaya, 2013). Du Gay (1996, p. 7) illustrates this paradigm shift as follows:

The representations of consumption circulating within the social sciences have tended to veer between the two extremes of ‘structural pessimism’ on the one hand, where consumer culture is entirely determined by the forces of production, and a ‘heady romanticism’, on the other, where consumption is seen as an inherently creative activity entirely divorced from that part of production.

However, consistent with the postmodern CCT school of thought, we propose that this dichotomy is simplified. We see consumption and production converging and building a bilateral relationship, suggesting a third option ‘working as an act of consumption’ and we therewith include work in the hedonist activities that are an end in themselves. The traditional dichotomy of production/consumption and producer/consumer, however, makes it especially interesting to apply the frameworks of one sphere to the other and explore whether these are still valid. Hence, we suggest applying a consumer lens to the employment space and therewith ask if employment is an act of consumption.

In accordance with this suggestion, many scholars have looked at how the relationship between the productive and consumptive aspects of our lives can be examined from a more convergent standpoint, which we will cover in the following paragraphs, leading to the illustration of a gap in the current research.

It is well established that our service society breaks with the traditional distinction between production and consumption as services are produced and consumed at the same time (e.g. getting a haircut) (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011). Hence, we are experiencing a cycle of production and consumption (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). However, Fine and Leopold (1993, p. 247, 250, 253, 255 cited in Ransome, 2005) have pointed out that the distinction drawn between the two spheres of economic life, although unsustainable, has still not been overcome by theoretical frameworks able to combine both:

consumption in the new analysis has displaced production in name alone [...] There are insuperable problems in constructing an opposition between production and consumption [...] The result has been the failure to develop, and a hostility towards, theoretical structures that unite production and consumption.

Despite Fine and Leopold’s assessment, some attempts have been made to bridge the identities of consumer and worker. Most famous, perhaps, is the idea of a “prosumer” (Toffler, 2001 cited in Niezgodá, 2013; Willmott, 2011, pp. 23-25), describing a consumer that takes on productive activities during the consumption process and therewith becomes a co-creator to a product that is better able to satisfy his/her unique needs. This phenomenon is especially interesting when looking at the value of consumer inclusion in R&D (e.g. Antorini, Muniz & Askildsen, 2012). However, scholars have not only looked at how production finds its way into consumption, but also vice versa.

Consumption in an employment context is most commonly investigated by asking how employees are consumed as human resources by their employers. Today, personal branding, i.e. the utilization

of corporate branding and marketing tools to further personal and professional goals, is becoming a requirement in the hiring process for job-seekers (Shepherd, 2005). Here, employees market themselves “as items to be consumed on the corporate menu” (Dale, 2012, p. 13). Human Resource Management markets companies as if future employees were consumers, all the while consuming them like resources (Dale, 2012). Even after being hired, ‘living the brand’ (Pettinger, 2004; Land & Taylor, 2010 cited in Chertkovskaya, Limki & Loacker, 2014) and therewith representing the company even outside of work is expected. Employee branding has become an acceptable practice, which refers to the promotion of an idealized worker who “represents the look and feel of the brand” (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011, p. 5) and becomes “aesthetic labor” (Gabriel, 2008, p. 313). Especially due to the growing service sector where employees are the face of the company, they function more and more as company billboards (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011). Hence, workers are seen as human capital as well as promotional tools and are actively sought out and consumed by companies for their productive contribution to the organization. However, this also implies that (1) the distinction between private and work life are increasingly blurred as companies expect their employees to constantly represent the company, and (2) that the self-identity of workers is shaped by the overwhelming influence of employer branding activities (Russell, 2011). It is not farfetched to relate this circumstance to the “iron cage” (Weber, 1958/1978 cited in Gabriel, 2008, p. 310) employees experienced during industrialization. The restraints companies demand from their employees can be seen as alienating, only if this new employer-employee relationship does not offer benefits for the employee as well.

As employee branding and personal branding suggest, consumption becomes a central tool in the employment relationship (Korczynski, 2007 cited in Chertkovskaya, Limki & Loacker, 2014; Dale, 2012). However, so far, organizations were seen as the predominantly consuming actor, while employees were seen as objects. We propose that employees are not only resources in the world of employment. On the contrary, some employees may be seen as empowered agents who consume their workplace, just as much as it consumes them. Hence, we view employment consumption from a less critical perspective, assuming that at least the exclusive group of highly educated employees are empowered and consciously consume their work, similar to the perspectives taken by Arnould and Thompson (2005), Gabriel and Lang (2006) and Davies and Elliott (2006).

Ekaterina Chertkovskaya, however, takes the aforementioned critical perspective of employment consumption in her PHD thesis “Consuming work and managing employability; Students’ work orientations and the process of contemporary job search” (2013). She presents multinational corporations as “hegemonic powers” (Chertkovskaya, 2013, p. 14) that create and transmit mass-mediated ideologies (see chapter 3.3) about jobs to students, including that employment is an object that can be consumed through the consumption of work image (prestige) and work processes (e.g. training) (Dale, 2012; Chertkovskaya, 2013). She further explains that employment is only presented as a commodity as a result of macro environmental changes in the job market and the economy that should lead job-seekers to believe that they want job flexibility, while in reality today’s companies simply do not want to provide job security anymore. In this sense, companies encourage their employees to emphasize long-term employability over job security and seek personal development by the means of frequent job rotation. Furthermore, she tests the student’s interpretive strategies to these ideologies and concludes that the majority accepts this new employment status quo, although some try to rebel by escaping or speaking out against it. Through the promotional

techniques of employers, recruits bask in the false believe that they are in control of their situation, while really they only follow what has been fed to them by the hegemonic power. Overall, Chertkovskaya's thesis makes interesting contributions to the areas of marketing and marketization of work as the meaning of work is commodified and the process of working becomes an act of consumption (Chertkovskaya, 2013, p. 65). However, it mostly investigates the mass mediated ideologies of multinational corporations and whether students accept these ideologies as facts. We, however, would like to extend this knowledge by asking whether highly educated students and recent graduates can take on a more empowered role in this employer-employee relationship. Hence, we explore this topic from a less critical perspective.

Löow and Bredberg (2013) attempt to find the meaning of employment in the construction of identity via the employer brand in their Master thesis "The Employer Brand as a Symbolic Resource; generation Y and 'consumption' of the employer brand". For this purpose they set out to investigate how the association with an employer brand helps with the formation of a personal and social identity. By interviewing Siemens employees in Sweden, they investigate how much current employees identify with the values and brand of this employer. However, we, in contrast, believe that the consumption aspect of employment and its value for identity building is especially pronounced in the transition period of student to employee (see chapter 6.4.1), which makes this target group most interesting to research in this context. Furthermore, we would argue that the employer brand is only one way in which employment can be consumed and, hence, an analysis of this wider definition of "consumption of work" is necessary. Moreover, the way in which the thesis describes identity building activities is limited as they explore personal identity merely in the realm of identification with the employer values (Löow & Bredberg, 2013). Although we find Löow and Bredberg's approach very interesting and a good starting point, we would like to widen their definition of how employment can be consumed by going beyond the employer brand as a consumable good, including a different target group and extending the definition of identity building processes as more than mere identification with brand values.

Lastly, in his book "Consumption and Identity at Work" Paul Du Gay (1996) investigates the blurring line between consumption and production and comes to the conclusion that the identities of workers and consumers are more and more converging to include the same characteristics, such as autonomy and responsibility. He also looks into how 'tactics of consumption' are used in the workplace to cope with environmental factors. However, he merely suggests that who we are as consumers influences who we are as workers. He does not go as far as to explore that the reason for alignment of identities might lie in the fact that work is actually consumed, and hence, employees automatically assume consumer roles. This will be the focus of our thesis.

Although there is much more literature to be covered in this section, we focused on the main areas and authors that we thought most valuable to our thesis. While the topics of employment and consumption have been discussed separately in great detail (Chertkovskaya, Limki, & Loacker, 2014), we argue that there is room to develop a more nuanced idea by bringing the two together. The literature, thus far, has neglected to view current and future employees as consumers of their work environment that derive meaning and value from their jobs that go beyond mere financial security. No paper has gone as far as to suggest that working is an actual act of consumption that satisfies workers in the same way buying symbolic-laden brands does and that represents workers as

autonomous and empowered consumers. From this stance, it seems particularly interesting to study the group of highly-educated students and recent graduates that is in transition from seeing themselves as students to seeing themselves as workers. Hence, we will investigate whether they see work as a commodified good and how they see themselves as consumers in the workplace. Literature suggests that the relationship between consumption and production has undergone phases, where consumption was a means to an end, i.e. fulfilling survival needs to production being a means to an end, i.e. fulfilling consumption needs to now production being an inherently consumptive act that is an end in its self. Therefore, we would like to utilize concepts that are more often seen and used in a consumption field to highlight how these are also applicable in a production setting, marking production as an act of consumption.

5. Theory: Consumer Goods & Consumer Roles

The following chapter aims to introduce the consumption frameworks and theories, which we will later apply to the workplace in order to investigate how employment can be seen as an act of consumption. Therefore, we will first outline how employment is commodified, i.e. turned into an object of consumption, by the means of employer branding. Secondly, we will present three of Gabriel and Lang's (2006) termed roles that consumers can take on during the process of consumption, namely that of "communicators", "hedonists" and "identity-seekers". We find these three most interesting as our interviewees reported on adapting to the same roles in the workplace.

5.1 The Commodification of Work: Employer Branding

Commodification describes the process of turning an object that was not previously consumed into an object of consumption (Merriam-Webster Dictionary Online, 2014). Consequently, work can be understood as a commodity if it is produced under capitalist circumstances and receives an exchange value (Chertkovskaya, 2013). The aim of this chapter is, hence, to build a comprehensive argument for how employment is commodified by being marketed like an object of consumption via the means of employer branding strategies, i.e. the advertising of employment options. This will be done to assist us when later analyzing how employees construct employment as a commodity.

5.1.1 Origin of Employer Branding and its Relationship with Product Branding

Employer branding is focused on how to positively influence both current and future employees to apply to and stay at a company. One very important element of employer branding is employer attractiveness, defined as "the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization" (Berthon, Lian Hah & Ewing, 2005, p. 151). Employer branding, hence, functions to favorably position employers in the minds of existing and potential employees.

The academic interest in employer branding has increased over the past few years (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Barrow & Mosley, 2005; Biswas & Suar, 2013), and today organizations implement employer branding as a long-term strategy that they spend considerable amounts of resources on (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Sullivan, 2004; Bakanauskienė, Bendaravicienė, Krikstolaitis & Lydeka, 2011). Ambler and Barrow (1996, p. 187) first introduced employer branding in 1996 and defined it as "the package of psychological, economic, and functional benefits provided by employment and identified with an employer". This might sound familiar, as this definition is extremely similar to that of a brand. The American Marketing Association (2014) defines a brand as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors". When comparing the two definitions one can see that, instead of differentiating goods and services from one seller to another, employer branding intends to differentiate one employer from another based on psychological, economic and functional differences, something that transforms employment into an object that can, just as a product brand, be consumed on different levels.

Consequently, employer branding is pure branding applied to a Human Resource Management context (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens, Van Hoye & Anseel, 2007) “to attract and retain talents” (Biswas & Suar, 2013, p. 94) rather than to attract and retain consumers. The goal of employer branding is, hence, to communicate to internal and external audiences what makes the company different and a desirable place to work (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Jenner & Taylor, 2007).

5.1.2 Employer Branding from the Employer’s Perspective

Numerous studies underline major benefits for the employer when implementing an employer branding strategy, namely the acquisition of talent which leads to improved reputation, innovation and creative input, reduced turnover, and increased customer satisfaction (Bakanauskienė et al., 2011). Employees and the intangible skills they possess have become invaluable to companies, and new talents have come to be as precious commodity as new customers (Bakanauskienė et al., 2011). These developments could be explained by looking at different factors of globalization. Increased mobility has brought an endless need for continuous innovation through skilled employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004) possessing “multicultural fluency” (Arachchige & Robertson, 2011, p. 26). Another factor playing a part is the ageing population (Wilden, Gudergangs & Lings, 2010) as “the demand for talent has increased more rapidly than the supply” (Biswas & Suar, 2013, p. 93). Needless to say: when implemented correctly, an employer branding strategy is a rich source of competitive advantage and seems to be a strategic must for most companies in today’s war for talent (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Martin, Beaumont, Doig & Pate, 2005; König, 2008; Wilden, Gudergan & Lings, 2010).

To attract the most desired and talented applicants, the employer uses something called the employer value proposition. This is the core of employer branding, defined as the tangible and intangible benefits offered to attract and retain talents (Martin et al., 2005). Chertkovskaya (2013) underlines five main elements of the employer value proposition. These elements are: benefit package, organizational brand, lifestyle, self-development and employability. Firstly, the benefit package simply includes non-monetary income, such as health insurance or corporate discounts. Secondly, organizational brand is intangible, where the employer positions itself as a symbolic and consumable object that exudes, for example, high status. Thirdly, lifestyle, perhaps the most important element, is increasingly used in the employer value proposition and underlines the corporate culture as a fit to the employee’s personality. The lifestyle element can also attract talents through underlining a flat corporate hierarchy where the employees have a great chance of impacting. Furthermore, the lifestyle element emphasizes a hedonistic approach to work, e.g. being able to travel and see the world through international assignments. Lastly, the self-development and employability elements try to highlight personal and professional growth through in-house training and development. This value proposition has the purpose of marketing employment as a commodity at campuses, on websites and in brochures.

5.1.3 Employer Branding from the Employee's Perspective

When changing perspectives from the employer to the employee, one might get a deeper understanding of the employer branding concept, and as this thesis treats how employees construct employment as a commodity, their perspective is vital in this study.

Employer branding reflects a changing labor market where graduates are increasingly picky when selecting potential employers (Edwards, 2005). Previous research indicates that prospective employees are drawn to organizations with values close to their own (Judge & Cable, 1997), findings that are further strengthened by more recent research pointing to the fact that graduates indeed do search for socially responsible employers with visions and values that they can connect to their own lives, rather than only searching for employers offering a high salary (König, 2008; Wilden, Gudergan & Links, 2010; Arachchige & Robertson, 2011).

Just as with consumer goods, it is important to separate functional and symbolic benefits of employment. Functional values are concerned with instrumental elements such as salary and the compensation package, while symbolic values rather encompass the employee's subjective perceptions about the organization as well as social approval. Due to the dominance of consumer culture, a culture obsessed with the symbolic value of objects, even employers are now consumed primarily through their brand, hence in a symbolic fashion (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Symbolism in employer branding is an especially hot topic today and is argued to be equally important for employees when choosing an employer as for consumers when choosing brands (Robbins & Judge, 2010 in Lööw & Bredber, 2013). Rather than only pointing at instrumental benefits, ideological currency (i.e. social rewards from doing good) is underlined as these rewards can both motivate and fulfill employees, and fulfillment is exactly what talents today are looking for (Thompson & Bunderson, 2003; König, 2008; Edwards, 2010).

When work receives meaning through employer branding it becomes a commodity, something consumable (Chertkovskaya, 2013). In this way, as Berthon, Lian Hah and Ewing (2005, p. 151) so nicely put it: "employees are internal customers and jobs are internal products" where "job products must attract, develop and motivate employees, thereby satisfying the needs and wants of these internal customers". Employees hence consume the meaning they attach to their employers and job tasks and in that way consume their job. We thus come back to one element of Ambler and Barrow's (1996) very first definition of employer branding; *psychological benefits* of employment. Employees and consumers are hence identical from this perspective: Just as consumers can be attracted to a brand in the marketplace, employees can be attracted to a certain employer brand that they can identify themselves with (Edwards, 2010). This allows employees to "live the organization's brand" (Edwards, 2005, p. 267) rather than just working somewhere in a 9-to-5 job.

In conclusion, this chapter has highlighted what employer branding is and how it has created a labor market where jobs have become branded commodities, trying to attract potential employees. Highly educated employees in return are actively consuming the symbolic functions of their job offerings. Hence, they value employment for more than just the paycheck. The symbolic functions of work can encompass a successful identification with the organization and what it stands for, the hedonic enjoyment of work tasks, or the communication of social distinction, i.e. status, through work. We

are, in turn, interested to explore, not how employment is turned into a commodity by employers and their branding strategies, but how employees react and adapt to these strategies.

Based on these findings, we pose our first research question, which we will answer in the analysis chapter by utilizing the empirical data we have collected:

RQ1: How do employees construct employment as a commodity?

5.2 Investigating Employer-Employee Relationships: Consumer Roles

The chapter will elaborate on three different consumer roles, which are taken on by people in the consumer goods market, namely the role of a “communicator”, a “hedonist” and an “identity-seeker”. We have found that these three roles are taken on by employees in the workplace, and, hence, will use the theories on these three in the analysis chapter later to showcase how employees use work as a symbolic resource to fulfill personal and social needs.

A “communicator” consumes “to express social differences as well as personal meanings and feelings” (Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 45). A “hedonist” is a pleasure-seeker who derives value from the outcome or the process of consumption itself (Chertkovskaya, 2013, pp. 69-70). Consumption choices are made “in the pursuit of happiness” (Lebergott, 1993, p. 8 in Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 98). Lastly, the “identity-seeker” utilizes commodities as extended selves to find and express who he/she is and his/her place in society (Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 79).

5.2.1 The Consumer as a Communicator

The consumer that uses his/her consumption to communicate is closely linked to the consumer who uses consumption to create or find identity, after all, you can only communicate what you have found yourself to be (self identity) and how you position yourself in relation to others (social identity). However, since these aspects are going to be covered in a subsequent chapter, this section focuses primarily on how objects can be a means of communication, especially employment. What they are expressing will then be covered in chapter 5.2.2.

First and foremost, “culture is text” (Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 45) and text can consist of different codes or signs, which mediate cultural interaction. Products and goods can be seen as such codes, as Baudrillard’s (1998, p. 79) popular expression “system of signs” illustrates. He equates products with words, forming a communication tool or language. However, this is only possible if everyone is aware of the meaning that each product holds, hence products need to carry shared meanings, which is also the prerequisite for turning a logo into a brand (Sullivan, 2006; Salzer-Möring, 2010). It is therefore not surprisingly that our world today turns into a “branded world” or “brandscape” where products become crucial cultural carriers for their symbolic, emotional and aesthetic values rather than for their “use value” (Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 46) and where consumers can easily navigate through this system of signs and recognize products for their inherent meaning (Salzer-

Mörling, 2010). As Gabriel and Lang (2006) explain, we are conditioned to read this new language, decode it, question it, interpret and analyze it.

Many have argued that the primary characteristic of our current consumer culture is the totality of meanings which is carried and expressed by objects, images and signs (Featherstone, 1991; Du Gay, 1996; Slater, 1997; Sullivan, 2006). However, in order for objects to claim their position as cultural signifiers, they need to be disconnected from their instrumental value (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). After all, a car can only tell a unique story if it is not related to the transportation aspect of the vehicle. If the story would be connected to its transportation value, it would not be unique as all cars transport their drivers. Economic value, then, results from whether or not people are able to create meanings for objects, whereby the creator's intended meaning is not necessarily the consumer's exercised meaning (Mukerji, 1983).

Consequently, "any consumer good can be made into an ideological sign" (Voloshinov, 1986, p. 10) and consumers actively negotiate those signs as interpretive agents (Arnould & Thompson, 2005). With that, products and goods become expressive means and communicators. Simmel's (1971) ideas about fashion and Veblen's (1925) theories about conspicuous consumption (cited in Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 45) are two examples of how consumer goods were traditionally thought of as linguistic means to exhibit personal differences/status and therefore became a society's means of communication. Today, consumers utilize goods to display moods, personality traits, lifestyles, status, identities and above all tell "the story about me" (Salzer-Mörling, 2010, p. 531). In this way, Gabriel and Lang's (2006) concept of the 'consumer as a communicator' may be related to McCracken's (1988) ideas about consumption as a way to achieve social distinction (Löow & Bredber, 2013).

Since employment and an individual's position within the productive side of the economy (e.g. occupation, employment status, and income level) still offer tremendous insights into that person's life story (Ransome, 2005), it is not surprising that employment also functions as a sign within the 'system of signs'. The value of employment in its symbolic function has been widely acknowledged (Hirschman, 1980 in Löow & Bredber, 2013) as well as the fact that employment is a source for meaning (Chertkovskaya, 2013). In this way organizations participate in this new linguistic discourse by orchestrating collective fantasies and emotions to endow their signs with meaning in the head of current and future employees (Ritzer, 1999 in Gabriel, 2008). They are trying to be more for employees and recruits than a way to earn money; they want to present themselves as exciting possibilities with interesting values and intriguing corporate culture, so that when people think of a certain employer, they do not think of offices, they think of storylines. Especially corporate brand personalities (Kapferer, 2012) communicate which type of people work for a certain firm and enable employees to express and display to others what type of person they are.

5.2.2 The Consumer as an Identity-Seeker

Closely linked to the expressive and communicative functions of brands is its role in establishing our identities. After all, the symbolic function of brands and employments do not only work outwardly in that they communicate with others about who we are, but also inwardly, in forming our self-image.

Objects become instrumental for developing the self (Ekström, 2010b). Elliott (1997 cited in Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998) refers to this as the two directional functions of the symbolic meaning of products, creating social-identity and self-identity.

Traditionally, in its Latin meaning, identity stood for the sameness, continuity and distinctiveness of things that allowed observers to group objects together and classify them, e.g. plants and stones. However, this concept of identity only covered physiological characteristics (Gabriel & Lang, 2006) and fell short of delivering self-esteem and self-image, which were, thus, related to self-identity and social-identity (Erikson, 1968, p. 42 cited in Gabriel & Lang, 2006).

The psychological concept of identity was also driven by uniqueness, answering the questions of 'who am I?' and 'what makes me different?' through linguistic and social means (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003 in Gurrieri, 2012). However, uniqueness here stems from psychological factors such as one's perceptions about one's self as a unique creature (self-identity) and self-perception in relation to others (social-identity) (Jacobson, 1994 in Löow & Bredber, 2013). This is a very difficult discussion as individuals change constantly to adapt to their ever-changing environments. Consequently, uniqueness becomes a struggle where consumption is an important weapon:

Uniqueness is not given, but is achieved; continuity can be undermined or ruptured. Psychological identity is the product of psychological work; it must be nurtured and defended, worked for and fought over. The importance of material objects to these processes was to prove seminal." (Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 84)

Therefore, Marx's notion that "a commodity is, in the first place, an object outside us, a thing that by its own properties satisfies human wants" (Marx, 1999, p. 13 in Sullivan, 2006, p. 22) is outdated in today's consumer culture. Postmodern consumers are active identity seekers and makers (Arnould & Thompson, 2005, p. 871), who internalize commodities to achieve symbolic completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982 in Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). This development is closely linked to postmodernity where the increased geographic and social mobility, cultural fragmentation and the destabilization of feudal structures and hierarchies signify that identities are no longer be assigned automatically (Bauman, 1998; Ransome, 2005; Salzer-Mörling, 2010). On the contrary, the self is actively created through consumption (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998) and brands act as symbolic resources used for the construction and maintenance of identity (Mick & Buhl, 1992 in Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). We are not who we are but what we make of ourselves (Grey, 1994). As Clammer (1992, p. 195 cited in Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 84) expresses: "Shopping is not merely the acquisition of things: it is the buying of identity." Therefore, consumption is also an act of self-reflection on who we are and where we stand (Falk & Campbell, 1997 in Dale, 2012; Bauman, 2000 in Dale, 2012).

While young children like or dislike things for no apparent reason, hence, do not construct identity around them (Baumeister, 1986 in Gabriel & Lang, 2006), for adolescents every choice is dominated by image-consciousness as they try to construct their place in the world – their identities. Today, consumers read stories into inanimate products, prioritize sign value over functional value and favor images (Gabrie & Lang, 2006). An object that is important for the definition of our inner self, is termed "extended self" (Belk, 1988, p. 140), which describes the process of object appropriation and internalization to the point where people are what they own.

Consumers constantly undertake “identity work”, including the constant construction, repair, maintenance or strengthening of our sense of self (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 626 cited in Gurrieri, 2012, p. 787) as they interact and try to keep up with their ever-changing environment. As Giddens (1991, p. 5 cited in Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 83) puts it: “The reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives”. According to narrative identity theory (Ricoeur, 1984 & 1992 in Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998), we make sense of ourselves and our lives by the stories we can or cannot tell. Therefore, identity becomes a narrative of who we are and a fantasy of who we wish to become (Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 94) and objects are means to bridge the gap between narrative and fantasy. Objects become magnets for displaced meaning that are seen as the solution to our identity crisis ‘If I had that car, I’d be who I want to be’ (McCracken, 1988). This lifelong identity project (Salzer-Mörling, 2010) does not only encompass image and narrative, which could both be satisfied with material means, but also meaning and value. This explains the perpetual chase of poor and rich alike for identity. One does not only have to establish one’s identity through objects and their inherent imagery and narrative but they have to simultaneously demand attention, respect and emotion (Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 94), which becomes a never-ending quest for meaning and the construction of oneself as a work of art (Cova, 1997).

Especially interesting is the fact that postmodern consumers are no longer looking for a centered, unified and integrated identity (Suerdem & Sinan, 1992 in Gabriel & Lang, 2006; Venkatesh, 1992 in Gabriel & Lang, 2006). Rather, they embrace the opportunity to explore different selves (Bauman, 1998). As Firat (1992, p. 204 cited in Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 88) points out, today’s consumers are “seeking to ‘feel good’ in separate, different moments by acquiring self images that make them marketable, likeable and/or desirable in each moment.” Even psychology accommodates these findings by terming working self, possible self, independent and dependent selves as some of the possible selves one can combine within one identity depending on the situation (Allwood, 2010). Thus, the relationship to our identity is quite complicated. We long for one, although we do not want to commit to one exclusively.

This postmodern fragmentation also translates into our social interactions and our group affiliation. No longer do we belong to a certain community by birth (Bauman, 1998; Ransome, 2005; Salzer-Mörling, 2010), but face a proliferation of group choice and new forms of community. People have a natural desire to link themselves to the groups around them (Tajfel and Turner, 1979 in Edwards, 2010) as the quest for substance and meaning in an individual’s life is only possible through the active participation in communities (Moisander, Rokka & Valtonen, 2010). These strong collectives may provide robust symbolic support for self-definition and therewith counterbalance some of the fragmentation and confusing messages produced around the world. Maffesoli’s (1988) idea of fragmented neo-liberal or postmodern tribes emphasizes this. In his view, society today is characterized by a small number of consumers with similar lifestyles and tastes building affection-based collectives without the traditional tribe-like fixity, longevity or physical boundaries (in Moisander, Rokka & Valtonen, 2010). Cova and Cova (2002, p. 602) define these tribes as “a network of heterogeneous persons – in terms of age, sex, income, etc. – who are linked with a shared passion or emotion.” Hence, we are free to choose different tribes for different aspects of our life and act out different personalities within them.

Since our social identity includes all those aspects of identity that are derived from a shared category membership and is based on intergroup-comparisons, and group belonging can be an important source of pride and self-esteem (Campbell, 2005). By using brands and objects as symbolic resources, consumers express their affiliation to and distance from certain groups (Featherstone, 1991), which in return, shapes their self-identity (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998). As Douglas (1974) explains: "The meaning of goods [...] arises from their ability to act as markers of social status, symbols or badges indicating membership of, or aspiration to, high status groups" (cited in Slater, 1997, p. 153). However, products are no longer isolated in their functionality but serve as "the totem" or "pole of attraction" for tribes (Cova, 1997, p. 307) and the symbolic production and consumption of goods become major areas for community participation (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Unsurprisingly, many tribes develop around products, i.e. 'brand communities'. These entities bring together consumers with a passion for the same product or brand and are organized similar to traditional communities, including a set structure, shared ethos, rituals and traditions, consciousness of a kind as well as sense of moral responsibility (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001; Schouten & McAlexander, 1995).

In this way, it is impossible to separate the development of a self-identity from the creation of a social identity (Jenkins, 1996 in Elliott and Wattanasuwan, 1998). While individuals draw their sense of self from their affiliation groups, whose members share similar ideas and aspirations (Gabriel & Lang, 2006, p. 85), this stands in opposition to the original quest of identity for uniqueness. Hence, social identity stands in the cross-fire between the desire to belong and the desire to stand out (Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998).

We suggest a discursive approach (Phillips & Hardy, 2002 in Gurrieri, 2012) where identity is socially constructed by means of discourse. The consumer assumes the role of a "dialogic self", meaning that as an inherently incomplete and unsatisfied subject, individuals stand in constant dialogue with themselves and others to define their identity (Chertkovskaya, 2013, p. 22). Because "only in communion, in the interaction of one person with another, can the 'man in man' be revealed, for others as well as for oneself" (Bakhtin, 1999 in Chertkovskaya, 2013, p. 23). An internal-external dialect of identification (Jenkins, 1996 in Elliot & Wattanasuwan, 1998) takes place where the self-identity must be validated through social interaction and where the self is embedded in social practices. Consequently, the external dialogue is inseparably connected to the internal dialogue and the social-identity is crucial for the individual to define a self-identity and vice versa. A means for this dialogue we suggest symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934 in Burke 1980) where consumers interpret their external environment and utilize those interpretations for identity construction. Hence, selves are social products that are mediated by the interpretation of the consumer.

Social fragmentation also reaches the sphere of employment with more and different jobs available to workers, partly because of rising education levels (Swadzba, 2010). Hence, it is not surprising that the choice we make regarding our employment also reveals parts of our self-identity, as well as social-identity.

The notion exists that modern society relied on employment to define identities, while in postmodernity class and occupation are not sufficient indicators of one's self (Ransome, 2005) and have been overtaken by the significance of consumption in the establishment of identities (Bauman, 1998). However, the knowledge of someone's location within the division of production, such as

occupation, employment status or level of income still tells us much about them (Ransome, 2005). Work can be seen as a lifestyle choice as many consequences accompany an employment decision such as free time, compensation, social interaction with co-workers, which are inherently linked to how we can fit various products, services, resources and activities into our daily life (Hansen, 2010). Furthermore, individuals do not arrive at a job with a fixed identity, “rather, the social identity of the individual is an ongoing negotiation between the social actor and their relationships and situation.” (Dale, 2012, p. 15). Consequently, there is a constant “self-formation amongst people at work” (Clegg et al., 2007 in Dale, 2012, p. 15). In the same way, establishing a career is comparable to an identity project where employees strive to develop more and more skills and fit the job description better and better to move ahead (Grey, 1994; Chertkovskaya, 2013).

Moreover, Parment and Dyhre (2009) conclude that more employees define themselves by the organizations that employ them than by what they actually do. Hence, it is not surprising that many organizational theory scholars have looked into the relationship between employment and identity construction (e.g. Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Collinson, 2003; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). However, identity-building as a consumption process is far less explored. Bringing the aspect of consumption into the employment context therefore poses the question whether identity formation at work via consumption is possible. If we view employees as consumers rather than workers within the organization, employment is associated more positively with freedom, choice, autonomy, pleasure, desire and self-fulfillment (Dale, 2012). Employees become “chameleon-employees” (Gabriel, 2008, p. 317), who believe to be in control of their own destiny rather than being subject to the company’s despotism. Hence, arguing for consumption of work means not prioritizing one sphere over the other but suggesting that employment and consumption are equally important for the establishment of identities.

5.2.3 The Consumer as a Hedonist

Lastly, we are going to explore how consumers can assume the roles of hedonists, i.e. pleasure-seeker who derives value from the outcome or the process of consumption itself.

Consumption has two sides to it: It can be rational, or so-called utilitarian, where the consumer is said to make well-informed and rational decisions based on knowledge and reasoning. It can also be hedonic, which includes “those facets of consumer behavior that relate to the multisensory, fantasy and emotive aspects of one’s experience with products” (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982, p. 92), hence the psychological side of consumption. These are the two extremes in making consumption choices.

A great deal of consumer research has traditionally focused on the utilitarian consumer behavior, thus the tangible aspects of consumption and products fulfilling a functional purpose (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982). However, already in the 1950s it was found that people purchase certain products because of their meaning (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982), which is also underlined by Maslow (1968) who found that “in some instances emotional desires dominate utilitarian motives in the choice of products” (cited in Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982, p. 94). This means that consuming in a meaningful and hedonic way, where feelings are the main motivation for making a purchase decision rather than the economic situation, started several decades ago.

Hedonic consumption is increasing, and as a result, “consumption has begun to be seen as involving a steady flow of fantasies, feelings and fun” (Holbrook & Hirschman, 1982, p. 132). This means that products are viewed as symbolic objects, where the focus is on how they make the consumer feel (Singer, 1966 in Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982).

This can indeed be tied to our postmodern society which has turned into a hedonic “experience society” (Kapferer, 2012, p. 54) where people increasingly search for the intangible and experiential aspects of consumption. Capitalizing on this desire to experience, “Starbucks doesn’t sell just coffee, it sells The Starbucks Experience” (Kotler, Armstrong, Wong & Saunders, 2008, p. 169) – this is the new postmodern way to consume; searching for experiences in every act of consumption (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982).

We hence lean increasingly toward consumption of experiences that are *built in* to products: “The hedonic perspective includes the psychological experiences that accompany product usage” (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982, p. 97). Products thus *become* experiences when consumers turn their fantasy on and end up in an imaginary situation or desired state of mind as a reaction to a certain product.

As previously argued, employment is increasingly turning into an object of consumption. Consequently, hedonic consumption also applies to the area of employment, something one can clearly see when looking at the huge employer branding trend, where the purpose often is to highlight employment as an experience. The work orientation is overall becoming more intrinsic, having a meaning within itself rather than being a means to an end (Chertkovskaya, 2013). Work is now in a hedonic way “judged by its capacity to generate pleasurable experience” (Bauman, 2007, p. 33) and can be tied to modern hedonism, where consumers are looking for meaningful experiences in all aspects of life, even work (Campbell, 1987).

We are going to utilize the knowledge about the three consumer roles of communicator, identity-seeker or hedonist later on in our analysis chapter to structure our findings regarding our second research questions:

RQ2: How do employees perceive themselves as consumers in the workplace?

6. Methodology

This chapter outlines and argues for the methodological approaches taken during the research process to provide the reader with a thorough understanding of how and why data was collected and made sense of. For this purpose, an adapted structure of Malhotra's (2010) approach to research problems will be followed, including research objective, ontological and epistemological considerations, research design, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations. The limitations of the chosen approach are going to be covered in a subsequent chapter (chapter 8.3).

6.1 Research Question & Objective

The purpose of this study is to investigate how the relationship between employees and their employers has changed in the era of consumer culture to the point that employees perceive their work as an act of consumption, rather than a mere means to an end that serves the satisfaction of survival needs.

Since the aim of this study is to investigate how employment is perceived by employees, the study tries to reveal internal thoughts, emotions and meanings that employees ascribe to work experiences. Therefore, the objective is identifying individual experiences, rather than active and observable behavior. Consequently, a general understanding for the new position of employees in the multidirectional relationship between employer, employee, and work will be gained by exploring:

RQ1: How do employees construct employment as a commodity?

RQ2: How do employees perceive themselves as consumers in the workplace?

6.2 Ontology & Epistemology

In accordance with our CCT background, we emphasize the exploration of specific consumption experiences and previously undetected contexts of consumption (Simonson, Carmon, Dhar, Drolet & Nowlis, 2001). However, we are not looking to establish universal laws or grand theories (Bacharach, 1989). We are aware that consumer reality is different and deeply personal. Hence, the truths revealed by these encounters will be different, ungeneralizable and unimitable (Stone, Firat & Gould, 2012).

Concomitant with the CCT stance of this analysis, the paper is based on a constructionist ontology, leaning towards a critical realist stance. We agree with constructionism that the social world as a whole is not established as a static frame for social interaction, but needs to be understood as "an emergent reality in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction" (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 22). The world is shapeable and constantly changing (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). However, in contrast to social constructionism, which presents reality not as objective and exterior but rather as socially constructed and made meaningful through the interpretation of social actors

(Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008), we agree with critical realism, which represents the compromise between social constructionism and positivism. This school of thought recognized that concepts are social constructs (such as class or wealth), but have real consequences, even if these may not be picked up by scientists (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). Consequently, we believe in some degree of objective reality, although we don't believe this can be picked up via research. Against the positivist opinion, which claims research can directly reflect reality, we concur with the critical realists who claim that "our perception of reality is only a way of knowing that reality" (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 18). Hence, what we subjectively experience is reality; it cannot be generalized or even recreated by others – it only exists in the mind of the individual. Regarding the presented research question in this context, the employment relationship is to be seen as socially constructed and must be investigated from an interpretive epistemology.

Interpretivism emphasizes the act of symbolic interactionism (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). In today's brandscape where we communicate with each other primarily via the symbolic meaning of what we own, do or say, people interact with others and their environment by interpreting the symbolic meaning of their surrounding and respond based on that interpretation (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Since interpretations are always subjective, everyone, including our interviewees, sees the world from a different angle and can only report on their unique experiences. Consequently, no universal laws for all employees and their employment relationships will be drawn from this study, but rather insights into a very context specific environment will be gained. The interesting aspect here is to uncover how individuals make sense of their own reality and create their own meanings (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). Hence, Weber's approach of "Verstehen" is applied (cited in Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 18). We attempt to understand the underlying interpretations of the world that motivate actions, which are more significant influencers for human behavior than external forces, rather than derive causalities (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). Hence, the research focuses on understanding human behavior (Von Wright, 1977 in Bryman & Bell, 2007) rather than explaining it.

These ontological and epistemological stances can function both as a "filter" and "sensitizer" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008, p. 117) and will most likely influence the way we look at our data and our analysis. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to expose and understand this theoretical backbone of the presented analysis as the research design and process are built upon it.

6.3 Research Design

Based on the study objectives as well as ontological and epistemological stance, the research design was chosen to be exploratory in nature, meaning that the focus of the paper is gaining insights rather than testing fixed hypotheses (Malhotra, 2010). Furthermore, since holistic insights were aspired, without the restriction of well-defined hypotheses, rich data was required. Therefore, a qualitative study was conducted to oppose "the tendency to quantify and to reduce variables to their smallest components on the grounds that this loses most of the real meaning of the situation" (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008, p. 69).

Taking into consideration that the use of language is one of the main means for social interaction that mediates human action, a qualitative approach that emphasizes words over quantification was deemed most appropriate (Bryman & Bell, 2007). As Bakhtin (1991 cited in Chertkovskaya, 2013 p. 23) says: “only in communion, in the interaction of one person with another, can the ‘man in man’ be revealed, for others as well as for oneself”. As a result, the external dialogue is inseparably connected with internal dialogue”. Therefore, video conference in-depth interviews were chosen as the most appropriate data source since they provide natural language data (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). Although video calls increased the distance between us as interviewers and the respondents, we felt this was partly overcome by the personal relationship we had established before the calls. Furthermore, our time and budget restrictions and the geographical distance to the respondents prevented us from scheduling face-to-face meetings, which we otherwise would have liked to conduct. This method is in accordance with a social constructionist philosophy, which states that how people make sense of their world should be researched by how they share their “experiences with others via the medium of language” (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008, p. 58). The interview process itself is a social construct where interviewees construct their reality and share it with the interviewer. Hence, language is experienced as a symptom of inner motivations and processes.

A main focus of the study is to understand the world through the eyes of the interviewees (Bryman & Bell, 2007) and therewith enter their subjective reality (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). The raw data obtained from in-depth interviews, because presented in the respondent’s own words, offers the most suitable entry point into someone’s world. According to Thompson, Pollio and Locander (1989, p. 138) “interview is perhaps the most powerful means for attaining an in-depth understanding of another person’s experiences”.

Since respondents were asked about hidden issues and complicated, personal, maybe even socially unacceptable behavior that they might not have thought about previously, in-depth one-on-one interviews are best suited to overcome unwillingness or inability to answer directly (Malhotra, 2010). We viewed our conversations as in-depth engagements as respondents opened up to talk about issues that were hiding below the surface and that we would not have been able to uncover without our personal connections as well as a long interviews, enabling us to utilize probing tools and build rapport to encourage the sharing of sensitive information. For example, talking negatively about their employer was sometimes difficult for our interviewees and it was crucial that they felt the information they provided was used cautiously by us. This was especially important since strong social norms exist when it comes to choosing a profession. Furthermore, interviews minimized the effort required from interviewees, e.g. preparation time, which increased their willingness to participate in the study (Malhotra, 2010). Moreover, observational studies are deemed unable to reveal the internal processes of employees and, hence, were unsuited for answering our research questions. Furthermore, observational studies are ethically disputable because of their intrusive nature, which is another reason we refrained from utilizing this method.

Lastly, interviews allowed us to cover a greater thematic breadth within a shorter time frame than other research designs such as observational studies, which is especially important considering the limited time resources for this project (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Since we wanted to gain an insight into the career path of the interviewees, starting with their choice of university up to their current

position, and how they perceived this development, in-depth interviews were most appropriate to cover this time span. In-depth interviews allow the respondents to recall and reflect on experiences from the past, a characteristic that for example participant observations lack. The time constraint is also the reason why we choose a cross-sectional design over a longitudinal one (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Furthermore, the “rich media” that one-on-one interviews offer bridge the differences between researchers and researched and the coinciding gap of mutual understanding (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008, p. 162). Consequently, talking to respondents directly assisted us in understanding their motivation better and immerse in their world rather than objectively observing it. Since consumption is a very symbolic process, the interviews themselves revealed many acts of employment consumption, e.g. how our respondents defined themselves via their employer and how they expected of us to speak the ‘employer language’ and understand what working for their employer means in terms of status and reputation.

6.4 Data Collection

The data collection process was two-fold. Firstly, we made extensive use of available literature to segment the current status of research in our field and to base our data analysis on existing theories in the area of consumer studies. Secondly, we undertook a phase of primary data collection where we sampled 10 soon-to-be or recent graduates and conducted in-depth interviews with them to extend the current knowledge in our field of research. This section is going to focus on how we obtained our empirical material.

6.4.1 Interviewee Selection

We chose to interview 10 soon-to-be or recent graduates in-depth. These interviewees were chosen via the technique of “judgment sampling” (Malhotra, 2010, p. 376). One of the two interviewers knew a group of highly work-oriented individuals, who seemed to fit the profile of consuming employees. Hence, interviewees were selected because they were thought to be most revealing and interesting in the context of the research questions and were expected to allow us to experience employment consumption. Consequently, the selection was information-oriented (Flyvbjerg, 2006) by preferring “revelatory” and “instrumental” (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 64) cases to understand the phenomena at hand.

Recent and soon to be graduates were chosen because of their proximity to the topic of choosing employers and professions. By being in the process or just having finished the process of defining what is important for them in a career, these respondents were better able to answer questions and reflect on decisions related to employment choices. These respondents fell into the generation Y category, a generation born between 1980 and 1995 that is found to differ significantly when it comes to attitude, values and behavior in the workplace (Schweitzer & Lyons, 2010). Generation Y is famous for its work orientation of self-expression and self-actualization, and is hence looking for meaningful and fulfilling jobs (Parment, 2008). To interview members of this generation is thus especially suitable for the purpose of this thesis, being to investigate how the objects of the study consume their jobs in a symbolic fashion.

Furthermore, we chose soon-to-be and recent graduates that can be classified as “talents” or “high potentials”. Firstly, these graduates are more likely to consume work because they do not fear unemployment and therewith look beyond the mere survival propositions of employment. Secondly, these students have a greater work orientation, where work becomes a priority in their life and, hence, they put more emphasis on the profession they choose (Chertkovskaya, 2013). Lastly, studies show that a new work ethic of self-fulfillment can be found in highly educated individuals and in professions with higher status (Schmitchen, 1996 & Riffault, 1998 & Mariański, 1994 in Schwadzba 2010). Therefore, we chose graduates with double bachelor degrees (two bachelor degrees obtained during one study program) and/or master degrees in the area of business. A detailed table on the respondents can be found below:

	Name*	Gender	Age	Schools	Employers
1	Anna	F	25	(ESB) European School of Business, Germany (NU) Northeastern University, USA (SSE) Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Beiersdorf • Rapp International • BMW • Daimler • McKinsey
2	Yvonne	F	24	(ESB) European School of Business, Germany (NU) Northeastern University, USA (GSM) Grenoble School of Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BMW • AOL Advertising • Bluenove • AlphaSights
3	Stephanie	F	25	(ESB) European School of Business, Germany (ICADE) Comillas Pontifical University (CBS) Copenhagen Business School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Breuninger • UBS • BCG
4	Mary	F	24	(ESB) European School of Business, Germany (NU) Northeastern University, USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • L’Oréal • Novomed Lifescience Consulting • Earnest & Young • UBS • Deloitte
5	Lena	F	25	(ESB) European School of Business, Germany (NU) Northeastern University, USA (LU) Lund University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Novoferm • L’Oréal • AOL Advertising • German American Chamber of Commerce
6	Brandon	M	25	(RMS) Reims Management School (NU) Northeastern University, USA (GSM) Grenoble School of Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lanson International • Winslow Technology Group • Leaders League • Reed Business Information
7	Steven	M	26	(JIBS) Jönköping University (SMU) Singapore Management University (CBS) Copenhagen Business School	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Synchron International AB
8	Mark	M	26	(ESB) European School of Business, Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Price Waterhouse Cooper

				(NU) Northeastern University, USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UBS • KPMG
9	John	M	26	(ESB) European School of Business, Germany (NU) Niagara University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • GE • Warner Brothers • German American Chamber of Commerce • Google
10	Robert	M	26	(UDLAP) Universidad de las Americas (NU) Northeastern University, USA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Papa John's • Scotiabank

* Names were changed to protect the interviewee's anonymity

Ten graduates were interviewed as we experienced the same saturation previously experienced by McCracken's (1988), which led to his assessment that eight qualitative interviews are sufficient for qualitative research where information depth, rather than respondent quantity, is crucial. These interviewees were selected based on snowball sampling, leveraging personal contacts to recruit the firsts respondents and gaining access to others through the interviewee's personal networks (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). Because of the project's time constraints and the existing personal network in that area, this method proved to be most effective. The ten participants were active in various fields within business and were, to our knowledge, very work-oriented and offered a variety of personal backgrounds, which diversified the experiences we could observe in the interviews and ensured unique and rich stories. We also tried interviewing students from the field of law and journalism. However, they were not able to articulate their motivation behind employer options as well and therefore didn't offer much insight into our research questions. Hence, these interviews were excluded from the study. Since the nature of the material was sensitive and very personal, we adopted a viewpoint Alvesson (2003, p. 16) termed "romantic", which includes the establishment of "trust" and "rapport" as "a prerequisite in order to be able to explore the inner world (meanings, ideas, feelings, intentions) or experienced social reality of the interviewee". The fact that one interviewer personally knew the interviewees enhanced this viewpoint and enabled the respondents to open up and the interviewers to probe where interesting topics were known to exist. Obviously, this viewpoint has to be adapted with caution as the previously existing relationship between interviewee and interviewer might bias her interpretations of the answers. We counteracted this threat by having the second interviewer, who did not know the interviewees previously, lead the interviewing process and communally analyzing and discussing the obtained data.

6.4.2 Conducting Interviews

The ten interviews were conducted in a three week time period. The first was held one week prior to the remainder as a pilot interview to test and optimize questioning (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Malhotra, 2010). The interviews were about one hour and we tried to give each interview enough time to explore each lived experience in depth but not demand too much attention or time from our interviewees. Obviously, the interviews varied in length depending on the answers that were given and how interesting each account was for the purpose of the research. The interviews were held via

video chat on Skype due to the geographic distance of interviewees and interviewers. We were able to pick more interesting cases and include more people in the study as we did not have to travel for the interviews. We utilized the video chat to also be able to include facial expressions and gestures into our analysis and as a hint what topic might be interesting to further discuss. Furthermore, it made the interviewees more comfortable and open when seeing us because it established a more inviting and non-threatening atmosphere. The interview became more like a conversation than interrogation (Burgess, 1984 in Bryman & Bell, 2007). This approach corresponds to the demand that researchers should work more closely with their objects of study (Latour, 2000 & Gane, 2006 in Bissell, 2010) and assisted in obtaining the respondents' trust (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008).

The goal of the interviews was to receive rich lifeworld accounts from the respondents (Thompson, 1998 in Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006) to better understand their individual interpretations of consumption of work and be able to see through the eyes of the interviewees (Bryman & Bell, 2007) when they were asked about critical incidents regarding employer choice and career decisions (Flanagan, 1954 in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). We started with more general questions like "tell us about your career choices. Which schools have you attended? Which companies have you worked for? How did you choose these employers? Which employer characteristics are particularly important to you?" and then went into detail depending on what they told us.

Comprehending general "worldviews" is easier with a more loosely structured interview (Bryman & Bell, 2007, p. 477). Hence, all interviews were semi-structured in nature to guarantee flexibility (Bryman & Bell, 2007), while simultaneously minimizing complexity and artificiality of the data collection (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). To avoid preconceptions general themes were covered rather than specific questions, and laddering and probing techniques helped zoom in on the interesting topics (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). The complete interview guide can be found in the appendix along with the interview transcripts as all interviews were recorded (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure that the respondent's meaning did not get lost over the time period of interviewing, analyzing the data and writing the paper. However, for the purpose of readability, the direct quotes utilized in this paper were cleaned up and checked for grammar. In a subsequent step, the interview transcripts were analyzed to derive answers for the proposed research questions. In that sense, the research questions were asked to the empirical material rather than to the respondents.

6.5 Data Analysis

To receive rich insights and interpretations, Alvesson's (2003, p. 14) idea of "reflexive pragmatism" was utilized in that the interviews were analyzed from different metaphorical standpoints to facilitate interpretive creativity and richness. Hence, a more exhaustive portfolio of interpretations was collected, even those that challenge each other. To achieve such interpretations, we chose an iterative approach towards available literature, meaning that literature was consulted constantly

throughout the entire research process rather than merely at the beginning (Bryman & Bell, 2007; Easterby-Smith, 2008 in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). This process permitted us to gain an initial understanding of the current state of research regarding the relationship between employment and consumption as a starting point. Building upon this information, we were able to design a semi-structured interview guide (Bryman & Bell, 2007). However, we tried to refrain from constructing premature assumptions that could have limited us during the interpretive process of primary data (Eden & Huxham, 2002 in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). Therefore, we did not settle on specific research questions before the interviews but were more interested in what respondents said about their relationships to work, employers and other employees. Consequently, “preconceptions provide a necessary frame of reference rather than act as distorting biases that hinder understanding” (Thompson et al., 1994, p. 433). We tried to avoid making premature assumptions based on our secondary research before working with the primary data at hand to circumvent fitting a theoretical pattern on our data that might limit the quantity of interpretations able to arise from it. Once we conducted a couple of interviews, we saw which parts of the interviews were most interesting to us regarding consumption of work and determined the final research question of our paper being the commodification of work and how employees see themselves as consumers in this context. This paper presents only the theories we used during our analysis, i.e. communicator, hedonist and identity-seeker, because those were the roles our interviewees most commonly referred to. Hence, we did not test Gabriel and Lang’s (2006) theories against our data but rather saw that our empirical material matched the framework they had established in the consumer goods market.

This iterative approach towards secondary literature was also a crucial step for employing grounded approach during the data analysis phase later on. We took on Strauss’ approach to grounded theory, who “recommends familiarizing oneself with prior research and using structured, and somewhat mechanistic, processes to make sense of the data (cited in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008, p. 101). The goal here is to achieve “disciplined imagination” by combining both inductive reasoning and deductive reasoning (Weick, 1989 in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008, p. 20) to arrive at a critical assessment of the current literature and innovative interpretations of the newly collected data. In contrast to Glaser’s understanding of grounded theory, Strauss’ approach allows flexibility when handling outside literature before, during, and after collecting and analyzing empirical material and, hence, emphasizes the interplay between data and theory to achieve rich data interpretations (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008).

Our grounded approach allows for theory to emerge from data rather than fitting primary data into pre-defined theoretical categories and constructs. In this fashion, the consumer roles we presented earlier in our theory chapter emerged from the data, rather than us testing the data against those theories. In an interpretivist fashion, we were looking at the interviewees’ words as symptoms of the object of study, namely looking for the meaning embedded in the respondents’ statements. Here, a hermeneutical circle of understanding is created in that the understanding of each part of the data stands in reference to the totality and vice versa (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000 & McCracken, 1988 in Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006). To accomplish this intertextuality, a structured process was used to condense and make sense of the complex and rich material. We actively interrogated the empirical material according to Strauss’ concept of grounded theory (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008) as displayed in the following.

Firstly, we familiarized ourselves with the interview transcript and memos (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Secondly, we used line-by-line in vivo coding, meaning that we grouped different ideas within the transcripts together under explanatory variables that respondents used during their interview sessions since interview answers tend to be thematically dispersed and highly disorganized. This helped reduce the amount of available data. Furthermore, we looked at each case separately and found common themes and then cross-referenced those themes with all other interviews to establish cross-case analysis. By doing so we attempted to unveil intratextuality and intertextuality (Kjeldgaard & Askegaard, 2006). In a subsequent step, we used data display methods like cognitive maps (Bryman & Bell, 2007) to establish relationships between the aforementioned explanatory variables to arrive at categories and constructs. In this step single responses were turned into generalizations by means of theoretical abstraction (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). In parallel we kept cross-checking our results with the raw data and made coding and construct adjustments, if necessary. This constant comparison is a key tool within a grounded approach (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Lastly, we were able to draw conclusions based on the interplay and cross-verification of raw data, reduced data and theory. The goal was to reach a parsimonious and logically coherent theory (Eisenhardt, 1989) that organizes and communicates essence of the raw data (Bacharach, 1989).

During the entire research process, both researchers were equally involved to ensure objectivity and make use of each other's interpretive ideas. True to the social constructionist principles, a splitting-up of different research tasks between the two researchers was also avoided to present a holistic view of the situation (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008).

However, the line-by-line in vivo coding fractured the entirety of the interview. Hence, besides constant cross-referencing of raw data, we also asked a subset of our interviewees to check and validate our findings (Corbin, 2000 in Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008). This respondent triangulation ensured an accurate reproduction of the interview situation (Bryman & Bell, 2007). Consequently, the study could be reported as coherent, thick, and close to the material.

6.6 Ethical Considerations

This research was carried out without any political stakeholders or influencers. The study was not funded by any institution and the selected supervisors remained detached enough to not influence the results. Hence, the presented analysis represents, as much as possible, our personal reflections.

We tried to create an interview situation that was most comfortable for the interviewees and mitigated ethical concerns. A non-disguised research design was chosen and all respondents were read a "standard ethical protocol" in the beginning of their interview that they consent to. It informed them about their rights during the interviews, such as leaving the interview at any point or refusing to answer questions they were not comfortable with. We also assured them that all information would be handled sensitively and their names would be kept anonymous. All interviewees were also debriefed after the interview to avoid deception (Malhotra, 2010, p. 200). Here, they learned about the purpose of the study and were asked whether they wanted to read the interview transcripts before we utilized it in the analysis phase to verify that we only used the

information directly provided by them. Furthermore, by providing a comfortable and friendly atmosphere, we tried to minimize the stress for interviewees, some of which were nervous because interviews were held in English, which was not their native language. Moreover, all findings were reported fully and truthfully. Overall, the research process was guided by the 10 principles of research ethics (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2008, pp. 133-134).

To prove that we have indeed assumed the role we have argued for, all transcripts can be received upon request.

7. Analysis

This chapter will present the empirical data we have collected, structured in a manner to answer our two primary research questions. Namely, we will explain how employment is seen as a commodity by our sample of highly-educated graduates that is packaged, priced, placed and promoted with capitalist intentions and how employees react to this commodification by assuming consumer roles. They become communicators, hedonists and identity-seekers, who demand from their employer more than a paycheck. Their consumption, much like consumption in the consumer good market, goes beyond the functional value of their work to include sign values that assist them in determining and expressing who they are, what they like and where they stand in society.

7.1 Commodification of Work

We experienced that our interviewees talked about their jobs with a clear capitalist logic. As all of them were educated in business schools and have worked in a business setting before, it is not surprising that they would transfer business frameworks to their own life. The interviewees reported on how employers try to utilize controllable marketing variables to attract and retain desirable employees, hence, turning them into a marketing target. It became clear that they saw themselves as market actors and felt like customers in the employment market. Throughout this section, we will illustrate by the means of quotes and interview interpretations how the capitalist rules also apply to the employment market and, hence, how this market becomes increasingly similar to the consumer goods industry where jobs are seen as commodities.

Consequently, this section attempts to answer the first research question based on the conducted interviews. The research question being:

RQ1: How do employees construct employment as a commodity?

This section is going to be structured according to the controlling variables, which are at employers' disposal. Although we are well aware that this approach to structuring our data is not common within the CCT school of thought, we are following the interviewee's way of viewing and reporting on their employment, which we feel is important to stay close to our empirical data.

7.1.1 Jobs as Multi-Attribute Services

Jobs were seen as goods or bundle of tangible and intangible attributes meant for exchange and use. Not only did most respondents name a number of job features that were highly important to them when choosing a job, such as "work processes", "team work", "internationality", "growth opportunities" or "trainings", some even tried to quantify these features before making a final purchasing decision. Mark, for example, used the multi-attribute model when deciding between four job offers:

I actually was completely German about that [choosing]. I had a checklist. I just listed a couple of arguments that were important for me, for example the work I would

actually do there [...], the sort of broadness of the perspective I could gain in the job, then the gut feeling I got during the interviews with the people, sort of do I like the way they spoke, they behaved, just was there a connection what so ever, sort of [...]. I actually don't remember my criteria.

As this process shows, job hunters do experience employment decisions as a high-involvement process whereby many different features and benefits have to be researched and considered carefully. As Mark's quote illustrates, employers are successful with communicating their employer value proposition (Martin et al., 2005), which is seen as more than the functional job. The job is expected to bring long-term value both due to the enjoyment of the tasks and the growth opportunities. As illustrated here, Mark doesn't see himself as the resource or product that companies use to make money, but rather he looks as the company and its services and value to him.

Employment as a service is also underlined by the fact that the features our interviewees looked at most were intangible, rather than tangible. Although money, as the most tangible object, is considered, it is not the main decisive factor. In fact, only two of our interviewees even name salary as one of the top attributes they look for in a job, and even then, they use expressions like "I wouldn't start with it" (Mary). Furthermore, three of the respondents openly say that they chose the offer with the lower salary, emphasizing that other, more intangible features of jobs are more important. However, it has to be noted that none of our interviewees actually considered a low paying job and deciding against the bigger paycheck is indisputably easier when both options satisfy monetary needs. However, our interviewees respond that some of the job offers they rejected provided up to € 10k more in salary yearly, a difference one would feel in an entry level position. Deciding against this higher salary option ties back into the earlier conversation about having satisfied survival needs already, employment loses some of its functional value and takes on a more hedonic and symbolic function (e.g. Slater, 1997).

The high involvement character of the employment service and the way in which power has now shifted from companies that used pick candidates at random, to employees who pick their dream employer, is also illustrated by the way students 'test drive' jobs via internships. All interviewees stress the importance of internships to find out where your future career path should lead. Anna is an excellent example of using the internship offerings of companies for her personal development:

I think internships are a great way to figure out what you want to do and more importantly what you don't want to do. I realized from the beginning that international marketing is something that I really liked, but when I went into advertising thinking that maybe this is also a branch I could pursue I realized it's just not for me. So in the end I'm still really thankful to have gotten that experience, to test your interests, test your strengths and weaknesses, and find out what you want to do with your career, because it'll be a long one.

Here, Anna stresses that she utilizes companies and her employment at those companies as a resource. She does not see herself as an intern being cheap labor for the companies, but rather sees the positions as services to test different possible futures. This behavior also continues today as she is part of the McKinsey talent pool, which recruits high potentials by offering different mentoring

sessions, workshops and events before signing a contract. Anna has the opportunity to complete an internship with them over the summer as well to get to know the company further:

I never really thought about doing consulting. And this was for me some sort of opportunity to test it without committing myself to anything at all. Also not just test consulting, but the company culture, I get to interact with a lot of people and I know it is not in the business environment for now so it's, the atmosphere is obviously a lot lighter, brighter than it might be in everyday business, but it's still a way for me to check out if my interests and my working style are compatible to what they are doing on a daily basis [...] And yes it is a lot of money they invest in me and I haven't even signed a contract yet. Yes I am testing them out in the same way that they are testing me (Anna).

This quote illustrates how the powers in the employment relationship have shifted. Anna is aware of her worth for the company and uses this fact to receive many free services from them. Because of the on-going war for talent (Wilden, Gudergan & Lings, 2010; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Martin et al., 2005; König, 2008) employers are fighting for the best candidates, just as much as they are fighting for customers. The employer becomes a good and a resource for the employee, not the other way around.

7.1.2 Jobs and their Exchange Values

Every good or service has an exchange value, meaning a value determined by the other goods or services it would be or is traded for. Since we established before that employment can be seen as service engaged by employees, they see long working hours, the sacrifice of personal life, and the endurance of undesirable tasks as the price they have to pay.

A good work-life balance was named numerous times as one of the main criteria for choosing a certain job. Stephanie, for example elaborates on why she chose MAERSK in Denmark over BCG in Germany:

During the interviews with MAERSK I had a really good impression, and I also see the possibility in Denmark to combine life and work and that was also an important criterion for me.

This quote highlights that employees are also looking for a 'good deal' when signing a contract. They are willing to pay for the opportunities employers offer with their time and labor, but they do not want to overpay, hence, they consider going for the cheaper job that requires less time investment. Interestingly, the psychological price levels definitely vary. For example, Brandon expresses:

I'm French so I don't like to work 15 hours a day. That's one of the other benefits of working for my firm. Basically almost no one stays later than 5.30. The 9-17 is not possible for sales people because we have to work harder. I'm an early bird, I work 7.30-17.30 nonstop almost, and then they let you go and enjoy your evening as much as you want so that's good.

Mary, on the other hand, has a different understanding of what a high price is. She says: "I also value free time and not so long working hours. So it is fine to be done by 8 or 9 pm." Consequently,

depending on who the target customer for the employer is, different prices or time requirements have to be set and are expected.

It seems though as if employers are looking to offer 'rebates' to their employees. Mark, for example, explains how he can counterbalance his overtime in the summer months, where accounting firms are less busy:

I mean I am in a lucky position at the moment that all the overtime I do, I can take that during summer, so it's not like a motivational factor to work long hours that would be just stupid, but it's nice to compensate for those long hours during summer. If you see it on a yearly basis I probably don't work more than in any other job.

As Mark expresses, the cost or investment he has to muster are relativized by company offerings. Hence, he does not see his job as a highly expensive product that he would have to sacrifice much for. In the end, in his view he can have a relatively normal work-life balance despite the high demands of the company.

The same holds true for Mary, who emphasizes the exchange character of her relationship to Deloitte:

I think it is not always balanced from the beginning to the end [employer-employee relationship]. It goes in phases. Sometimes you just give more than you get. For example, I have to say that in the beginning the firm offered me a lot or invested in me by bringing me directly to the client and that was kind of a buy in for them and after a while I was assigned to projects that I didn't like at all but I offered to stay there and do my best so that was kind of the effort I took for the company. So I think it always fluctuates.

Unequivocally, Mary does pay a price for her employment. It is not always a fun task. Just like her, many of the interviewees explain that their jobs are stressful and demanding. However, she does see a clear benefit in investing in the employer-employee relationship as she expects and sees a return on that investment. Many of our interviewees argue that especially in the beginning, employers invest heavily in their new recruits to teach them, which they enjoy very much and see as an adequate service for the time investment they commit to. The manifestation of this in the quote almost leads to the assumption that instead of employees being compensated for the work they do with a paycheck, companies are now compensated for the investments they make in their recruits by their labor and commitment.

The companies seem to be very good at value-based pricing, meaning that they match the required investments of their recruits with their offerings. Anna and Lena, for example, stress that multinational corporations are attractive because of their great service portfolio, including "internationality", "trainings" and "career perspectives". Hence, these are the companies that attract a large number of applicants and are able to choose those ambitious and bright scholars who are willing to pay the premium price. Consequently, even this employment pricing model is based on the simple logic of supply-and-demand.

Mary underlines this supply-and-demand relationship by explaining the interview process as follows: "You just want to try out what your market potential is or how much the market values your

experiences and how far can I get with my CV. So you are looking for your own market value.” Consequently, she wants to see how high her exchange rate is and how much services and perks she can achieve with her currency of skill and experience.

Overall, we can conclude that employment is definitely an object with an assigned exchange value that is priced similar to other commodities. However, interestingly, employer branding literature usually disregards the exchange value of jobs as employers do not openly advertise the price employees are expected to pay. However, new and potential hires, on the other hand, are well aware of the exchange relationship and are looking for an employer who is offering a balanced deal.

7.1.3 The Touch-Points of Job Products

Going back to our definition of consumption, consumption encompasses the actions of purchasing, owning, using, maintaining, repairing, disposing, giving gifts and producing (Ekström, 2010a). When the employee becomes a consumer, the definition used would, hence, suggest that it is not only the actual act of working that counts as consumption, but all other touch-points in the entire value chain of working. Obviously, employers offer a great deal of consumption opportunities within the actual workplace as well. However, since these are going to be discussed in more detail in the next chapter, we focus this sub-chapter on how employers place their products outside their own employer-employee relationship and, hence, make it accessible to future employees.

Interestingly, we found that one touch-point where our interviewees consume their job is in their fantasy. Already before graduation they start to imagine how it would be to work for different companies. The triggers for these fantasies were mostly university career fairs, websites and through word of mouth from personal contacts. This can be tied back to Gabriel’s (2008, p. 314) “society of spectacles”, where the society made up of tangible goods has shifted towards a society made up of dreams, fantasies and images. Furthermore this is also applicable to Holbrook and Hirschman’s (1982, p. 132) definition of hedonic consumption, encompassing “fantasies, feelings and fun”.

Lena exemplifies the multitude of employer touch-points she experiences in a great way:

I think the exposure I had to all the companies during my studies helped to paint a picture of who I think is an interesting company to work for. Now when I’m looking for jobs I do have alerts activated from different websites. [...] It can also be because I had an interesting case study, which makes me believe that I fit in to this company. And some brands just stick in your mind like L’Oréal or Henkel for example, perhaps because you use the products yourself, and this can also be a way to get the idea to apply as long as you can see yourself in that company and industry and are interested and passionate about what they do.

Lena’s quote is a prime example of how jobs are presented and distributed via different channels, such as corporate websites, case studies or simply the usage of company products. This is nothing new or surprising, but note how she mentions how all these different company touch-points that she encountered helped her to “paint a picture” of who she would like to work for. Lena hence consumed employers through her imagination when fantasizing how it would be to work for a specific company.

Another, more tangible, touch-point where students come in contact with job products is the university. Universities have started to play an increasingly important role in being a place for distributing job products, and a place where many students get their first encounters with employers, as explained by Stephanie:

...the university has agreements with companies, and then you get to choose between them kind of, so you apply to the company, you have interviews with them, but also in the end the contract is made with the university, the company and yourself, so the university is basically always involved in the whole process.

This is to say that the university does not only present different employers to its students, but even functions as a retailer or middleman to the point where it is legally involved in the distribution of job products. Anna also talks about this, and elaborates more on the reasoning behind the university being such an important distribution hub:

I think those programs I picked, they are realizing more and more that you know, proximity or collaboration with corporations is really key to attracting good students, so I've always felt that both at ESB in Germany and also at Northeastern and Stockholm, the university has always been very helpful to get us in touch with great companies.

As Anna mentions, universities are starting to realize the importance of attracting students that become consumers of the universities, and hence do this by making sure that these consumers can meet attractive employers where they can continue to consume. The university thus becomes a win-win hub where career fairs and close collaborations between universities and employers work in the interests of all three parties: universities attract students, students find employers, and employers secure high-potential future employees. Consequently, the university is a vital channel in the distribution of job products.

7.1.4 Promotional Tools in the Job Market

Promotional tools are of great importance in marketing, and encompass all “activities that communicate the product or service and its merits to target customers and persuade them to buy” (Kotler et al., 2008). Since we found that our interviewees, just as consumers, do not believe in the artificially created advertising messages as much anymore, personal contacts and word of mouth seem to become increasingly important for employers to make a great impression throughout the personal touch-points. Our interviewees expressed that what they actually experience when coming in contact with employers is worth much more than the glossy lines companies write about themselves on their websites, or what they can offer in terms of salary. This should definitely lead to some reconsideration of how companies believe to reach their target market. While mass advertising might work to attract applicants, personal experiences, especially during the interview process, seem to close the deal.

We have in our interviews tried to identify what persuades the interviewees to make a purchasing decision, hence to accept a job offer and start to consume the job product. We identified different promotional channels, some being obvious and straightforward ones such as career fairs and word

of mouth, but also one that stood out as both surprising and interesting that were talked about by most of the interviewees, being the interview process itself. For this reason, the interview process as a promotional tool will be the focus of this section as we consider it a main finding.

In the literature review it becomes clear that employer branding consists of company activities that has the purpose of marketing their firm and job offers to potential employees. This promotion is mostly carried out via career-fairs, company brochures and advertising at business schools: companies hence consider these elements as most important in their employer branding and promotion. However, when asking our interviewees how they chose what company to work for, the interview process stood out as the main promotional tool, the tool that either sold the job to them or made them reconsider and decline it.

The interview process is in general considered to be a process where the interviewee is to present him/herself in the best manner possible and make a lasting and professional impression on the interviewer. We, however, found that it is also an opportunity for the employee to explore the behavior of the employer and its representatives. When asking Lena how she reasons when choosing between two offers, she says the following:

I also consider the general impression I got during the interview process. The consultancy was very impersonal at times and it is more of a take it or leave it offer. The company offering the traineeship really tries to recruit you and gives you a lot of attention to convince you. They are aware that the good people get a lot of offers and they want you to choose them. For example, they have given me almost 2 months to make my decision and my 'mentor' has called me multiple times during that time to ask if there is anything else I need to know to make my decision. That definitely makes me feel very valued and works in their favor.

What Lena expresses is that one of the companies that made her an offer does not seem to care too much about whether she will take it or not, which makes her feel less valued, while the other company is very personal throughout the entire process by giving her time to consider the offer while simultaneously supporting her in the decision-making. This is good promotion to her, as it persuades her to go for the company where she feels more valued and comfortable. It seems like one company is very aware of the selling position they are in, while the other one still believes that the recruits are selling themselves to companies without reflecting on the employer's behavior. This could be compared to a salesperson selling a product: if the salesperson takes time to explain the features without stressing the customer, and allows the customer to ask any questions so that he/she will not leave without feeling satisfied with the purchase – then the customer will most likely feel more satisfied than if the salesperson stresses him/her into purchasing the product without giving enough time or information.

Mark talks about how he chose between as many as four different offers, and more than anything else underlines the interview process as being of vital importance for making his tough choice. He explains that the processes with the employers he eventually did not choose was too formalized and structured, while he needs something more relaxed and personal:

When I walked into the room with Price Waterhouse Coopers guys, and EY guys, exactly the same questions were asked. It was just the way they asked that I sort of

liked Price Waterhouse Coopers more than EY, but the questions were the same. The process with KPMG was completely different, the guy sitting in front of me would make jokes about himself, about the company about everything, and I completely liked that, in that moment he sort of had me.

Mark had not decided to go for a specific employer beforehand, would he get an offer, but rather analyzes the employers during the interviews and makes his choice based on the feeling he gets from sitting together with the recruiters and analyzing the way they speak to him. Eventually, the decision comes down to the simple question of who he would rather like to work with. Going back to the salesperson metaphor, it is often said that salespersons need to know the people they sell to in order to close the deal. One of the 'salespersons' Mark meets during those four interview processes is better than the others. He might sense what type of personality Mark has, that he, as he explains to us, is extremely sarcastic and loves to joke around, since the tiny detail of joking eventually convinces Mark and secures the deal. Although it could simply have been a personal fit that made the recruiter and Mark click, it might also very well have been a sales technique. And in either of these scenarios Mark is still a customer: although he is in a stressful interview situation, he still analyzes and judges the interviewers' behavior just as much as they analyze and judge his.

Our interviewees repeatedly mention the gut feeling that stems from the interview process impressions. Stephanie is an interesting case because she decides for the job offer that gives her that particular gut feeling, although the offer she declines might be better from a career perspective:

At the end I would say it was a gut feeling. During the interviews with MAERSK I had a really really good impression [...]when I sit in interviews, I always ask myself if I would like to work with them, so at the end like the atmosphere and culture of the company, that's important for me [...] if I think about my decision between MAERSK and BCG. I think like BCG would open more doors for me and create a stronger network as well, but I haven't decided for that cause I think at the moment the other one is the better choice for me right now.

As she explains, being able to work with the people that interviewed her is very important, and she, just as Michael, goes with the feeling she leaves the interview with, rather than what would look better on paper or open more doors. This statement could be seen as something arguing against consuming work, since she, as a consumer, does not choose the best job 'product' in the end. However, we would like to argue that it does support consuming work, as we in this thesis do not just see the actual job as something to be consumed, but also everything surrounding the offer, such as feelings, imaginations and excitement, which is tied to hedonic consumption (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982). As established in the literature review, there is both a functional and a symbolic value to a product (Ransome, 2005), and generation Y members are found to look for deeper symbolic meaning to a greater extent than functional benefits, even though both values are important (Parment, 2008). It becomes clear through this quote that Stephanie indeed focuses on the symbolic value of the offer: She mentions the organizational culture and atmosphere to be more important than the rational considerations of being a door-opener and a CV-booster. When adding hedonic and symbolic consumption to the equation, then, Stephanie indeed does choose the product that gives her most symbolic and hedonic satisfaction in the end.

Another interviewee, Brandon, also mentions how important the interview process is in giving a first impression and how detrimental it can be if the employer is unable to make that impression a positive one:

I had a bad experience with the company [...] they are growing massively, but it took them 6 months just to write me a contract [...] I met 12 people, 4 times in London from Paris, costing 300 Euros every time. In the end 'ah we don't know, we'll see', so in the end I was like – you know what, I'm not going to work for a company that cannot even control F, replace by my name, and send the contract. Shows some management issues inside, a bureaucracy, and that kind of turned me off.

What Brandon explains is that even if this company wanted him, the way they handle his application is unacceptable to him and reflects how the company work in general on a day-to-day basis.

What our interviewees express might, hence, suggest that highly educated graduates analyze the employer through the interview process by searching for the right feeling to tell them if they should take the job or not, would they get it, rather than only looking at the instrumental benefits surrounding the offer. Companies have to be aware of the fact that their applicants are judging them and that the interview process is a vital decisive criterion that is believed to be much more than a formal process. It is representation of the company and of what is to come for new recruits.

In summary, the previous chapter has illustrated how students and recent graduates experience jobs. We found that our interviewees perceived employment as a commodity that is marketed to them under capitalist circumstances where symbolic values are at least as important as functional values, making the attractiveness of the 'employment product' consist of more than just the compensation that comes with it. Our interviewees actively assigned exchange values to the job offerings and viewed their job offers and positions as commodities that can be packaged, priced, distributed and promoted like traditional consumer goods.

7.2 Employees Taking on Consumer Roles

Now that we have established that employment is, in fact, seen as a commodity by current and recent graduates, it is interesting to investigate how they consume this good. Hence, we ask:

RQ2: How do employees perceive themselves as consumers in the workplace?

We have found that employees take on multiple consumer roles in the realm of work. However, we limited the following to the three most predominant ones. Although other roles were exhibited by some respondents, they were not exhibited by many and were only mentioned as side-notes, which disabled us to really build an argument for how these additional roles were assumed. Hence, for the purpose of structuring the data, we utilize Gabriel and Lang's (2006) definition of consumer roles that we have previously covered in the literature review chapter as our empirical data suggested these roles. Consequently, the following section will be divided into three parts: communicating consumer, hedonic consumer, and identity-seeking consumer.

7.2.1 The Communicator Employee

We have found that almost all of our interviewees utilized their employment as a means to communicate with others. In their perception, the meaning of what certain companies and positions express are shared among the people around them. For example, some companies are deemed more desirable and reflect that the employee holding this position or working for this employer is more intelligent or ambitious than other employees. Hence, by choosing a certain employer, they express that they belong to a certain elite group that manages to build an envy-worthy career. However, there are multiple functions this system of signs can fulfill. It can be a source of pride, it can open doors or it can open a conversation with people.

Robert, for example, explains that he chose to work for Scotiabank in New York City because of its reputation and because of the imagery it evokes in others. He derives a great deal of pride from his employment:

I guess one part is also to be able to say 'I work on Wall Street, I work for a big bank on Wall Street' which for me was a way of bragging a little bit. It's every finance person's dream to work in Wall Street, because it's the heart of finance, and finally yes – definitely a resume builder. Both because it's a big institution – a big name, and because it's New York – definitely.

Here, Robert sees employment as a means to let people know that he has made it, that he has achieved a goal, which is longed for by many. He sees “Wall Street” as a sign within the “system of signs” (Baudrillard, 1998) that others will recognize as desirable. Hence, his job becomes a metaphorical badge that identifies him to the world as an intelligent high-achiever, which ties back to McCracken’s (1988) theory about the symbolic meaning of brands being a tool for social distinction. Robert touches upon two target audiences for this badge; his acquaintances that he can brag to directly and possible future employers that understand what working for this institution means in terms of his skill set and qualification.

This CV-building aspect of the communication tool of employment is further expressed by Anna, who explains that the choices she made regarding her education were highly influenced by the school’s reputation and status because recruiters also speak the language of brand names:

I have to admit that I think reputation or brand is important. Not only from a professional point of view, so recruiters obviously want to see big brands on your CV, but I think big brands, meaning good brands, attract good people, which is why I wanted to study with really ambitious, motivated and bright students. So, yes, I mean I'm not going to lie, rankings and also reputation did play a factor when I selected my schools.

Anna is a great example of utilizing this status to develop further. She is not happy with just having gone to a great school; she wants to build on that achievement to gain more status by attracting great employers later on. Hence, she does not only use what a certain employment brand stands for as a door opener but also as a way to get into those environments that allow her to develop herself further. She wants to learn from the people around her and, thus, needs to get into an environment that pays much attention to reputation and brand. Based on this, we assume that people do not only

communicate with others through employment to socially distinguish themselves (such as Robert) but also to enable themselves to develop further.

Thirdly, we have found that the shared meaning certain positions and employers hold open up conversations for employees. They like to tell stories about where they work and what projects they work on. Employment therefore helps them quite literally to create the “story about me” previously discussed (Salzer-Mörling, 2010). Hence, employment becomes a more literal means of communication, it becomes a conversation starter and a story in and of itself. Yvonne depicts this aspect of employment as a tool of communication very nicely when she explains how she tells people what she does for a living:

Yeah I'm definitely proud to work for this firm. It's mostly difficult to explain that because I'm just like 'I work in financial services' and everybody is like 'oh, wow', and [...] we do this and this and this. And then they are 'ah ok, now I get it'. But, what I say usually is just that we work in the investment community and that we help identify experts for them, we can help them get smart in an industry pretty fast, and that we set up calls with these experts or interactions with them in the way of meetings. So I'm trying to explain it [...], but I always have to make a little bit of a swing there. It's interesting and each time I'm trying to get better at that.

Here, Yvonne expresses that she enjoys talking to people about what she does. It is not enough for her to simply gain everyone's admiration for working in the desirable financial industry. She wants to really engage in a conversation with people and explain what she does and how she contributes to the industry. She sees it as a personal challenge to make people understand her field and wants to improve in that aspect. Consequently, she literally attributes employment a communicative function in using it as a topic of conversation and communication. Stephanie is similar in this aspect. She does not use the status function of her job as much as the story function: “But I think it's not that I have to be proud over a certain company name that everyone knows, but it's more that I can tell them it's great, they do this and this, so it's more in that sense.” Hence, telling a meaningful story is more important to her than everyone already having an opinion about a company in their heads when you tell them where you work.

An interesting example is Brandon in that respect. He works in sales and uses his employer's name as a way to start a meaningful conversation with clients:

When I say that I work for ICIS – everybody knows it in the market. Something big that could help me have an impact on the market. Because I've worked for small companies, and it's nice with start-up culture and blabla, but when you want to sell it's really really tough because no one knows you [...] they know us, so it's a pride to work for a big company like this that is respected on the market, and to have big responsibility at the same time.

Brandon sees the company name as a way to engage with his customers. Many might not even have listened to him if it weren't for the name, and it makes him proud to have an impact on the market. He then goes on to explain how the company's name helps him in utilizing a more consultative selling style (in contrast to push selling). Based on this we might conclude that the communicative function of employment is not only important to receive intrinsic satisfaction and engage in interesting conversation with others, but also to actually carry out the job. Since salesmen represent

their companies to such great extent, using the companies as a communicative tool seems vital for the act of employment and goes back to our discussion about the service industry making a distinction between consumption and production impossible, as goods and services are simultaneously consumed and produced.

Steven also talks about how the name and status of a company can be important for carrying out the actual tasks. For him, it is not so important to get the job done, but rather to get the motivation to do a great job. When asked why he wants to work for a large corporation, he replies: "Yeah because, I like the fact that they are well known, and it motivates me too, to work for a well known company that has a good reputation." Consequently, we might conclude that the communicative role employers and their brands play are also important for increasing an employee's motivation and commitment.

Interestingly, the shared meaning that employers and positions obtain mostly starts at the university level, where they are familiarized with the system of signs in the employment world. Students are taught or guided in what certain employment choices mean in terms of desirability and value:

The longer I stayed at ESB [European School of Business] the more I became aware of what the reputation of schools mean on my CV, I got more and more concern with that – whilst in the beginning I had no clue what a nice reputation means. (Lena)

According to this statement, reputation did not really play a role in the student's life. However, once at the university, certain standards were pushed so that consent of what each employer means developed. Lena is not the only one who experiences this. Most of the interviewees express that they experience a strong regulation of what they should be doing after graduation. Mary, for example, explains that because of the limited exposure to start-ups or medium sized companies, she was definitely stirred into the direction of going for a multinational corporation. Lena explains that this stigma started during her interview with the university, which determined whether she would be accepted to the school's program. Here, one representative of the school and one alumni were present:

One of my interviewers was from McKinsey, and when he told me, I had never heard that name before. I think he was kind of shocked that I didn't react when he told me where he worked. Especially because McKinsey has a close partnership with ESB and the school encourages students to join the consultant world and try to get into those companies.

It is interesting that Lena did not even know about the consulting industry before she started at ESB but is immediately confronted with the desirability of that industry in the eyes of the school. Now, she is even applying for a job in that industry, which underlines how influential the meanings are that certain employers get assigned through the universities. Interestingly, even Yvonne, who decided to study a more start-up focused field of innovation, strategy and entrepreneurship and felt more comfortable in her start-up internships than her BMW one, was drawn in by these assigned meanings and what certain employers stand for:

Yeah I was looking at the big consulting firms, BCG and McKinsey and stuff like that but that was just like a first idea as many people that we studied with just went there, so I was like 'hmm, maybe this is also something for me?', [...] I also applied to

some consulting firms who are specialized in innovation and like new product development and stuff like that, so I was looking at that as well, but I didn't have that much experience from their point of view so it was difficult to get in.

The language we speak through our employment choices is dominantly cultivated at a university level. Even Yvonne, who emphasizes multiple times throughout the interview that she does not feel comfortable in a corporate environment, still applied to big corporate consulting firms. It is safe to assume that the meaning her university had assigns to that industry is pretty dominant in her mind still and that she wishes to communicate characteristics such as skill, brains and success through the means of getting a job in that desirable consulting industry.

However, the interviewees do express that the communicative function of employment becomes decreasingly important during their careers. It seems as if status and expressing social distinction via employment is especially important when starting one's career, but with more experience and personal reflection, employees fall more and more into a hedonic consumer role, where they seek enjoyment more than status.

It seems that internships and first professional experiences are important for gaining more insights into what working really means and which aspects are important for employees to be happy. Stephanie expresses how her focus has switched from reputation to enjoyment:

I'm looking for companies where I would like to work, where I feel a good atmosphere. At the beginning I wasn't really looking for that because I didn't really know how important it is, so I kind of learned during my jobs how important it is to get along with the people and to have kind of a similar mindset with your colleagues, so yeah, I think that kind of changed. Yeah, and I think for the beginning, it was also with employers more reputation-based than it is now, so now it's more that I'm looking at what I like and how.

This quote illustrates the transition an employee undergoes while working. While reputation might be the most important thing when you first look for a job, because you want to tell others that you are successful and studying has paid off for you, finding a job that makes you happy, even if no one knows the company, becomes more and more crucial. It seems like the social distinction aspect wears off after a while and you need to re-consider which aspects of a job are important to you personally:

Actually in the beginning I thought it was very important but I noticed very quickly that not everybody knows Deloitte [...] But now after working there for a few months, I don't care about it anymore as much as I did in the beginning. Because you tell everybody where you are going to start and you are really proud of where you are but after a while you recognize that it is not really important as long as you are happy with your work. It doesn't really matter whether everybody knows what Deloitte is or how large Deloitte is. (Mary)

When you first start at a company, you have more people asking about your job and your position, which makes it more important that you can drop a name that everyone is familiar with and that everyone shares positive perceptions about. However, as you continue on actually working for the company, you are less faced with answering to others about what you do and where you do it. It

becomes more about whether you are happy intrinsically as you can no longer gain extrinsic motivation by the admiration of others.

An interesting comment made by Robert also reveals that one reason for why reputation is important in the beginning is the lack of understanding what the job really entails. Once you are in the job and actually understand the nuances and differences of each job, you are better able to distinguish them and utilize this as the basis of your decision. If you do not have that understanding, the most predominate feature of a job offer, is the name of the company and what it can do for you:

Well it's definitely different because now I have a better understanding of what I would want and what would make me happy to be doing or to be working on, of course there's still a lot to learn but I think I better understand what I like and what I dislike of different positions now that I've heard from friends working at other banks or even other industries. I guess for me, since I'm already in a big bank on Wall Street, I think for me now the next step is what makes me happy, what makes me want to be doing this for the rest of my life – [...]so yes, it does change it has changed, yes.

In his statement, but also in the statement above we can definitely see a transition from using employment as a communicative tool to express social distinction, status and pride towards using it as a means of gaining personal fulfillment and enjoyment. It seems that with the distance to university and with more experience, employees start to consider different attributes of a job. Anna expresses this development in the following way:

I think there's also some sort of learning curve that you go through. Many of the alumni from my schools I talked to said yes, the first job was probably the most prestigious ones, but then the second job was the one that they really loved and that they stood behind to a hundred percent, and the one which also allowed them to combine their private life with work life, so finding a balance. Honestly I don't think I've reached that level of wisdom yet.

After our interview she even admits to admiring those people who go for their dream job, the one that makes them happy, right out of college. She feels that usually people make the career choice first and really follow their heart in their second profession. It seems like going with your guts and disregarding the standards and stigmas demands some courage, and it can be hard to detach yourself from the fear that not working for a Fortune 500 company tells others that you have failed. Hence, you need some kind of distance from that university life and the pool of highly ambitious people to start trying to please yourself.

In conclusion we can summarize that most of our respondents use their job to express something about themselves to others. We have seen that mostly status was displayed through employment choices as recruits wanted to express that they are smart and elite by the employers they choose. However, we also saw that this became a decreasing priority, which might lead to the assumption that employees who use employment as a communicator might be in danger of distracting themselves from what is really important in their employment relationship and prioritizing unsatisfying features of a job over long-term satisfying ones.

7.2.2 The Hedonic Employee

In contrast, the hedonic consumer of work emphasizes the enjoyment the employee can derive from working. During our interviews, we identified three different forms of hedonism in the workplace. Firstly, employees could consume the work tasks themselves. Secondly, they could consume the perks and processes that surround the work. And lastly, employees could consume the outcome of their work.

Enjoying the work itself is the most obvious form of hedonic consumption. Here, the employee enjoys the experience of going into work every day and completing the job he/she was hired for. The reoccurring job characteristics that make working fun were: working in a team and having tasks that are challenging, flexible and fast-paced.

Lena expresses why she decided to go into marketing and why she feels like she can live out her passion every day at work:

... I am both very creative and very analytical and structured, and that's what you need in marketing, because you analyze a lot of data and have to make decisions based on data – but you also have to be creative in order to reach consumers, who are not impressed by everything anymore.

Here, she explains that a vital part of enjoyment for her is to utilize her skill set effectively and find a job that is a perfect fit for her personality. In her eyes, jobs that are able to capitalize on her strengths are fun and enjoyable as she chose this field for her continued career because of that fit. Consequently, hedonism is enjoying the experience of doing the daily tasks required of your job. However, we also found that daily tasks have to be diversified and interesting to keep our interviewees happy:

... they [international students] are always looking for assignments which provide some sort of challenge, so unstructured problem, every day is probably different and you don't really know in the beginning of a project or an assignment where you're heading, but that precisely is the exciting part of it, so something new, something unpredictable, and something that probably scares you a little bit in the beginning.
(Anna)

Anna explains here that to be able to enjoy work and really consume it to its fullest, assignments have to change rapidly and offer new and exciting tasks. None of our interviewees express an enjoyment for routine. Many say that they want to work on a project-basis so that the object of their work would change periodically and keep them interested in their job for a long time. This also explains the appeal of many graduate programs and traineeships that offer job rotations and job variety. This behavior is almost comparable to children playing with toys. Each toy loses its appeal relatively quickly and becomes boring as the child has gained the skill set necessary to master that specific toy. Hence, it moves up the age rating with a constant flow of new toys. The students we interviewed definitely depict such a behavior in that they were constantly looking for challenges and new tasks that would expand their horizon. Dullness is, thus, the death of hedonism. As Mark puts it: "Yeah comfortable is nice but comfortable is boring." This ties into Hirschman and Holbrook's (1982) explanation that hedonic experiences have to engage our senses, make us excited and bring

forth emotions, whether that may be fear or ecstasy. It seems like our respondents consumed work constantly looking for a new kick of that thrill.

One example is Yvonne when she talks about her company's expectations:

We have four offices worldwide and yeah, the growth objectives this year are crazy I would say, fairly aggressive, but it's really challenging and I really like it so far.

Here, Yvonne expresses that the ambitious goals and challenges the company sets out for its employees are part of the reason why she enjoys her job so much. She feels challenged and that intrigues her. In contrast, however, although Mary also expresses an interest in big projects and challenging tasks, she also emphasizes that part of the enjoyment of her work is being comfortable with what she does:

Before you give 180% every day – also during internships where you really have to show yourself and be very attentive. When you do your job for a few months and you do your job well and get recognized for it you get calm and you are not very stressed. You are more comfortable because you have already shown yourself. You know a lot of people and you are better connected in the firm and you are also taken more seriously because you are part of the firm and you are not an intern anymore.

What Mary experiences is that she enjoys her work more now that she feels more secure doing it. Since some of the stress is lifted off of her, she can relax and enjoy the work experience more. It seems like before, she worked more to prove herself while now, she works for her own enjoyment.

Moreover, team work was a buzz word that came up constantly during the conversation with our interviews. All of them expressed how important it is to work with people you like and who share your enjoyment for the job. Although there are many good examples of this hedonic aspect of work, Brandon expresses it very nicely in the following way:

..my team is really a team, it's true coaching, people help you, they listen to you, they help you grow, if there's an issue they talk to you. Everything is really meant for you to grow and to feel comfortable in the team. [...] So I think it's very important to have both monetary benefits and feel a support from the organization and getting responsibility, it makes a perfect world.

Brandon really emphasizes that a team spirit is crucial for enjoying what you do and for being good at what you do. Along the same lines, many have expressed that the jobs in different companies are pretty much the same. What makes the difference and what distinguishes one from the other, are the people. Hence, team work and feeling comfortable in the team, learning from the team and feeling that everyone is pulling for the same cause, it definitely a hedonic experience that employees ravish. If employees would see employment simply as a way to get a paycheck, how one gets the work done would be irrelevant. However, in today's experience society (Kapferer, 2012) everything we do has to be a consumable experience in itself. In connection with this team spirit also stands a desirable management style. Brandon goes on to explain that he also really enjoys the freedom he is given by his employer:

That's a life-changer compared to all the internships I did before, when managers tell you what to do from nine to ten, ten to eleven. But it sales, you know, you bring

in the numbers that you're required to bring in and it's fine – it doesn't matter what you do as long as you do it. So there's a lot of flexibility.

As this statement illustrates, Brandon enjoys his work and one important contributing factor is that management lets him enjoy it freely. He is in control of what he does and enjoys this freedom to go his own path and find his own strategies for closing a sale. In conclusion, we can see that the work one is doing can really be an act of consumption, something employees enjoy doing, just like other experiences like going to a soccer match. However, the tasks have to be interesting and challenging and the team and management has to support the employees.

In a second instance, interviewees reported that they enjoy the working experience because of the side benefits, all the processes and offerings that employers may provide besides the actual working task. Here, we found that both monetary and non-monetary benefits are important.

Firstly, some interviewees reported enjoying for example workshops in Florida (Mary) and free food or subsidies cooking or guitar classes (John). They expressed that their employees are trying to keep them satisfied by providing them with perks:

The firm does a lot for us as well, so for example they paid the whole trip to Rotterdam, the hotel and everything for us when we had the basketball competition, we get like you know, perks such as free drinks and sometimes they pay lunches and stuff like that (Yvonne)

Yvonne is a great example of enjoying an employee-friendly working environment. Throughout the interview, she repeats multiple times what her company offers her besides the usual of salary. And it seems like that is really an experience for her. Working is not simply sitting at the computer all day but going to lunch with her co-workers and engaging in sports, all paid for by the employer. The employer creates a 'spectacle' around the work tasks (Gabriel, 2008), which is enjoyed very much and, hence, contribute to her being a hedonic consumer of her working environment.

On a more critical note, John evaluates those perks more discerningly when he reflects on whether they are means to keep employees happy and productive or whether they are true signs of interest in the staff:

Well of course we have all the perks; we can go to the gym, to the pool, we have free food, pretty cool events, and there is always something going on. So I think Google gives us a lot of opportunities for our leisure time [...] But what we give Google is obviously our knowledge and since Google is a data-driven company, it only lives, it can only succeed, if we do a good job [...] I'm really torn between thinking that they actually exploit us, and that's why they give us so many things so we don't feel like we're being exploited. It's like giving us drugs so we're numb and can't feel the pain anymore, or that they actually believe in us and that's why they want to support us.

Here, John expresses strong concerns that perks and incentives are merely means for the company to achieve their goals. However, this behavior would be similar to the behavior of more traditional marketers in the consumer goods sector where topics such as corporate social responsibility are also often called window-dressing to simply keep their customers happy and coming back. We wonder whether such activities, even with the motivation of satisfying egoistic means, aren't better than not

offering them at all. Regardless, they definitely offer the employee customers to hedonically consume the workplace with all that it has to offer.

Furthermore, other goods and services that the employer offers their employees for hedonic consumption include location, which was named by more than half of our respondents as a decisive factor of where they want to work. It seems like the workplace enables hedonic and experience consumption outside of work because depending on where you live and how many hours you have to work, you can enjoy your surroundings. Hence, the employer can offer the opportunity to benefit from locality.

Lastly, the side benefits of jobs also include more intangible aspects. Yvonne, for example, expresses that it is important for her that the workplace allows her to implement her own ideas:

I went from big company names to smaller unknown players, because I didn't really like the corporate structure that much and wanted to be in a field where, you can voice your concerns you can have an innovative idea and just put it into practice and that was really not the case at BMW or AOL advertising but more so now at AlphaSights.

This quote really shows how employees do not only consume the hedonic aspects of the work itself, but also those of the entire work environment. Yvonne, for example, goes on to explain that she brought the idea of new employee brainstorming sessions to the management's attention, which is now in the process of being implemented. It really is a holistic experience employees are looking for.

A last point that was mentioned repeatedly was the opportunity to work internationally. Mary explains her reasons for choosing a large company such as Deloitte in the following way:

When I applied for Deloitte I also thought of a company that is represented everywhere in the world. You might, at some point in your career, get the chance to work abroad or meet people who are from other countries. But I also thought that I might get the chance to work on really big projects, which is mostly the case if the company is of a certain size and has a certain reputation to get very interesting projects that you might be able to be a part of. So it was mostly the interesting projects and the size of the firm that might give you more opportunities and maybe also more flexibility in your career development.

This quote really brings together all the hedonic aspects of employment that we have been discussing so far. For Mary, work has to offer interesting tasks (big projects), flexibility and internationality for her to experience new cultures, people and environments. It appears as if employment is one all-encompassing experience that needs to be savored. Hence, it is not surprising that the outcome of work is also enjoyed very much. However, for employees the outcome is not the paycheck they receive at the end of the month, but rather the recognition and reward they experience from both clients and colleagues.

In this context, Yvonne explains how clients can provide feedback to herself and her company and how this is celebrated by her employer:

... when clients they get back to us after a project is completed, they're just like 'oh this was exceptional, you found the best people for us, we actually were able to

decide on the future strategy and this was incredible' etc, so we have a screen and, if you have a comment like that, you can post it there and everybody can see it. [...] and each client gets a feedback form [...]. Since we have a turn-around of like a day or something and most projects complete within let's say three days or so, it goes fairly quickly and it's always great when you get an e-mail after a project and the client says 'this has been great, we want to continue working with you', or after a trial, which actually happened quite recently, a client signs a longer contract with you, and you've been a part of working with that client, then that's great as well.

The success Yvonne has with her clients hence seems to make the working experience more enjoyable for her. Receiving positive feedback and growing the client base is rewarding to her and increases her motivation to work and the fulfillment she finds in her job. The fact that her employer supports this and celebrates successes openly, supports this feeling even further. This ties nicely into the discussion of Fordism and the division of labor (Ransome, 2005) that turned work into a means to merely satisfy survival needs. Here, the company wants to counteract such alienation of the worker by highlighting the outcomes and achievements of its workers. Thus, employment goes back to being an important tool for employees to achieve satisfaction and hedonism.

Similarly, the impact Brandon has on its clients is very rewarding to him because he can see that he makes a difference in their business:

I thought sales was fun, and now I work in a B2B strategy, information services – and I know I like it cause there is a meaning to what I sell, help people decrease their costs in companies by selling strategic reports, pricing, market trends, whatever. Now I kind of shifted to what I really wanted to do and have an impact.

Unequivocally, a job is more than a place you go to endure your work. It is a place where you are looking for similar hedonistic experiences as in consumerism, such as self-fulfillment and self-actualization. The more an employer supports those goals, the more can attract valuable resources. Another way in which this can take place is in the allocation of responsibility. As Mark explains, getting responsibility is stressful but rewarding and definitely a goal in the advancement of his career:

Pretty interesting position, pretty exhausting, and as I said it came earlier than I expected, but that's always, I mean if you get that responsibility and people trust you that much – that's also sort of rewarding experience for me at least and I really enjoy it.

Mark feels the trust that the company places in him and feels not only appreciated but also able to really unfold his talents and capabilities in the realm of work. So work is no longer a means to an end but an end in itself that fulfills hedonic desires of its employees.

7.2.3 The Identity-Seeking Employee

Lastly, we have found that all of our interviewees employed their workplace to build their personal and social identities. In this sense, employers assist their workforce in determining who they are as persons and which groups in society they belong to. Consequently, employees develop a strong

sense of self through the job they occupy and through the people they associate with during their workday. In the following, we will give some examples of this identity-seeking behavior, i.e. employees utilizing the symbolic meaning of the work commodity to tell them who they are and what makes them different. Just like some people consume certain types of clothing brands to identify themselves as fashionistas to fit in with the fashionista crowd, employees consume their workplace to construct a story about themselves.

Firstly, most of the respondents underline that they needed to be able to identify with what the employer stands for, including its products, its values and/or its people:

For me it's very important to be passionate about the things I do, and this is why I really have to work for a company with products I can identify myself with [...] for example I could never work for Shell or BP, and oil companies like that or for companies producing weapons and selling weapons because I would feel bad about it. I couldn't stand in and do the marketing for them. So, for me, let's take for example Arla Foods; I can really identify myself with the company and its products because the company focuses a lot on sustainability and they have great products and they have great advertisement – they do a lot of advertising in relation to nature and freshness and so on. I consume the products myself, so that's how I identify myself with companies. (Steven)

This quote of Steven illustrates in great detail how important it is for employees to find an employer they can relate to. They have built a sense of self before starting to work; Steven puts a lot of emphasis on sustainability and is looking for an employer that can support this notion of self and further develop it. According to our definition of consumption, any good that offers value to its users can be consumed. As Steven emphasizes, he is only able to derive value from his employment, e.g. satisfaction, if his identity is matched. This is similar to the findings of Löow and Bredberg (2013). Because of the symbolic meaning employers and their organizations carry, they can be viewed as extended selves (Belk, 1988), commodities that mirror the personal identity of their employees and, hence, become their natural prolongation.

Anna goes one step further in expressing that she not only needs to find an employer, who matches her sense of self but who also pushes her to develop further:

So, I think that is also something very important for me, that the company allows me to stay myself while at the same time forcing me to become someone else, meaning learning new things.

Anna sees employment not only as a verification of the self, but also as an opportunity to develop the self. She expects her employer to put her into situations she has never been in before, which will inevitably expand and change the understanding she may have of herself now. Thus, this might suggest the workplace not only as a place where the personal self is manifested, but also where it is shaped and developed. Employees consume the resources of their workplace to progress. This ties nicely into the discussion of using objects to bridge personal narratives and fantasies (Gabriel & Lang, 2006). In the same manner, Anna uses her employment to bridge who she sees herself as now and who she would like to become. Employment in this function can be the object that is desired to solve identity crisis (McCracken, 1988) in the same way consumer goods are used in this manner: "If only I had that job, I would be who I want to be!"

Our interviewees appreciate their employers for what they have to offer development-wise. However, they do not have a feeling of loyalty for when they reach a level of proficiency to really stay at the company:

I think it is more like to get kind of my career started now so like get into the first job, have my learning curve there, but I also.. I think I won't stay in in-house consulting forever, I probably won't stay at MAERSK forever, so I will also change and see also different jobs and different industries. (Stephanie)

As Stephanie expresses, she is looking for a learning curve in her jobs and is certain that this learning curve will eventually flatten at every employer. Switching jobs when this happens is important for the way she sees herself: as a high-achiever who does not get too lazy and comfortable. Employers are therefore necessary consumables for shaping and illustrating who we are or who we see ourselves as being. Most importantly for our investigation was to learn how reflective our respondents handle the subject of identity through work. They seem very aware of the personality-shaping functions of employment. All of them like those function and even actively seek them when choosing an employer in the sense that they want to build their skills through work and undergo personal development. Most interviewees see work as an environment for personal and professional growth that they want to consume to its fullest capabilities.

Anna is great example of this. Employers do not only offer Anna skills, but they also change the understanding she has of herself:

I think what I've learned throughout my internships is just to be a little bit more self-confident about what you can bring to the table and not plan to much ahead because as long as you work hard and try to do good things, things will fall in place. (Anna)

Being in a work environment and standing her ground has given her the confidence to believe in herself and see herself as a worthy resource. While she had previously mentioned that the university environment had made her feel insecure at times because she always compared herself to the brightest students, the workplace had changed that self-image and now she is more comfortable with her understanding of who she is and what she can accomplish. She is self-worthy. Consequently, the project of self that she is undertaking is guided by the experiences she makes in the workplace and the meaning she derives from those experiences. She sees her self-concept as a project that can be advanced through work similar to Gidden's (1991) definition of a reflexive project of the self.

However, while Anna has mostly experienced the identity development through work as a positive one, others have also warned that the influence employment can have on your understanding of self can be negative if you lose yourself in the process and hand complete control of shaping you to the employer. Therefore, many sought out old friends and family to stay grounded and not be carried away by the personality shaping activities of work. Mark, for example, warns that tying your understanding of self to one aspect of your life completely might hinder you in living out your actual self and explore all the sides of your personality and, hence, he is keeping friends close that are active in very different fields than business. This more critical view of employment consumption and its danger of negatively influencing the self-concept of consumers is quite interesting. It might be

seen as a warning sign for consuming work as a symbolic resource (Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998) to construct our self-identity may place the control over our identity in the hands of external forces.

Another critical aspect we experienced during our interviews was the risk of accelerating that identity project to the point where you can never be satisfied with yourself anymore because you are aware that you could always achieve more. Mark compares this circumstance very fittingly to a treadmill where you run and run without seeing satisfying results. Mary is a very good example of how this indefinite project of the self can actually destroy your sense of self, more than it can build it up. Although she is happy in her current position, she cannot enjoy it because she feels like she could be doing something even more prestigious at the moment:

I feel comfortable and it is the right place to be at the moment because it combines everything that I was looking for and the things I enjoy. I think I am not really proud of it because I am still not in the department or position I could be in right now. Perhaps I could be in a better position or in a better place or in another country. So that's why I wouldn't say I am proud. (Mary)

Mary seems to suffer from a quite disturbed sense of self. Although she has accomplished so much for her age; has managed to graduate from a prestigious school and get a job at one of the big four accounting firms, she is still not satisfied with herself. She goes on to explain that she feels like she has a problem because she does not know what she wants to do in 5 or 10 years and, hence, is unable to continue the project of the self in that specific direction. It seems as if the drive towards constantly improving herself is in the way of her hedonic consumption of the workplace. Hence, the building of identity becomes a rat race with herself, which is inevitably driven by the people surrounding her and influencing her opinions of what an adequate job is. It is not surprising that in the light of these statements parallels to the consumer goods market can be drawn, where the product lifecycles are ever decreasing and consumers are constantly longing for something new, better and bigger. It seems as if the same holds true for the consumers of work, who are looking for the next better and bigger employer before even exhausting all the resources the one before has to offer.

Moreover, we did see a somehow conflicting definition of what the self is and how it relates to the role of a worker. On the one hand, Anna highlights that it is not only important that an employer matches her professional self and her professional values, but also that the employer accepts her private self as she is searching for an integration of both sides:

I cannot separate my private life from my work life, so I cannot be committed eight hours of the day to something but then be a completely different person in my private life [...] it's becoming more and more important for me to also be appreciated as an integrated or holistic person, and not just a professional, that person you are in a professional setting.

In this example, we can clearly see that the roles employees play goes beyond the hours of the working day. The meaning of a job transgresses into the private sphere, and, as Anna says, makes the two parts of her life indistinguishable. Anna is searching for a way to unite her multiple definitions of self. She internalizes the employment commodity to achieve symbolic completion (Wicklund & Gollwitzer, 1982 in Elliott & Wattanasuwan, 1998. This ties nicely into the psychological discussion of multiple selves (Allwood, 2010) where people are seen as adapting their selves to

different environments and surroundings and look for convergence. However, we also heard from many interviewees that they rather try to distinguish their professional and private selves. Robert , for example, talks about how and with whom he spends his free time:

Most of the time I spend outside work, I spend with people I don't work with. Sometimes, but mostly I don't. It is still important to meet with people from work now and then. It's part of building your corporate personality I guess, having friends inside of work, that maybe at some point [help you]. Sometime you need something from someone and you need it fast, and because you had beers with that person you can be like ' Hey man how are you, how's everything, remember that time when... ok can you do this for me really quickly?' – Yeah sure.'

Robert is aware of his “corporate personality”, which is not necessarily comparable to his private personality. He tries to spend most of his time outside of work with non-colleagues. However, in order to increase his personality at work, he sometimes spends his free time with colleagues, even if he enjoys his other friends more. He seems aware that he plays two different roles during the day and that his personality adapts to whatever people he is around. He, in contrast to Anna, consumes the symbolic functions of the workplace to live out two different sides of himself which is in line with the trend of fragmentation in our postmodern society (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995). Lena underlines this assumption with her statement about the different social groups she interacts with:

I have groups of friends I rely on for different things – I would ask my ESB friends for career-advice, but go to my high school friends for relationship advice. One group of friends doesn't cover your entire personality – they fulfill different roles.

It seems as if Lena is aware that she has heterogeneous selves and that no group is able to truly and comprehensively cover all those selves. Hence, she is looking for different social groups, whose symbolic meaning she can consume to live out those different parts of her personality. Hence, multiple groups have to work in parallel to satisfy that need. This relates to the idea of neo-tribes or affection-based collectives we talked about earlier (Maffesoli, 1988 cited in Moisander, Rokka & Valtonen, 2010). Consequently, it seems reasonable to believe that the understanding of the self one is looking to explore at work does not necessarily encompass all of the sides there are to you.

Regardless, the role work plays in our interviewee's development of a self-identity and self-image seems vital. Work does not only allow them to express their identity in finding an employer who shares their values, it also shapes identities. By looking at our respondents, we might conclude that employees are constantly looking to the employer to equip the workplace with symbolic meanings they can utilize to construct identities. Most often, respondents reported that they either received a positive self-identity through a feeling of self-worth, or a negative one by feeling inadequate.

Furthermore, we found that work also offers a space for employees to develop their social identity, meaning that they see themselves as member of a certain group that is distinct from other groups in society. We noticed that most interviewees used words such as “we” and “us” to describe their work environment and even when asked about people at work, they include themselves in the answer “we Scotia bankers” (Robert) “we Googlers” (John). It definitely seems like there is a strong sense of community and belonging connected to the workplace. In the same context, Yvonne explains how her co-workers are all very similar in other characteristics than just profession:

Yeah, definitely, that's, I guess, one of the reasons we're all doing this all together and most of the people just see it as one firm. We have more or less all the same background and values and all very passionate about the firm, so I feel like everybody pulls into the same direction.

Yvonne expresses that she definitely feels connected to the people she works with. They are similar to her and they build a strong unit against other groups, such as competing firms. Working for the firm defines where she stands in society because of the social interactions, goals and values she consumes through and in her workplace. This social distinction (McCracken, 1988) seems to already begin at a university level where schools influence students with a strong spirit and pronounced feeling of belonging. The ESB becomes a global network of likeminded people who give each student a social identity as an "ESBler". Lena expresses how "ESBler" contact each other when moving to a new city. She highlights how students from the same university identify with each other and how that makes them feel truly connected to each other. In a working environment, Google is probably one of the most famous corporations with a strong corporate culture. As John explains, this really binds them together:

Yeah, I think that the culture is really strong. People are proud to be Googlers [...] Let's say people here have a circle of friends, 90% is at Google usually. So your life here is basically at Google because whoever you interact with outside of work, it's really likely that this person is from Google.

Being part of the exclusive Google community shapes all aspects of one's social life. Saying that you are a 'Googler' automatically evokes pictures about your position in society and Googlers wear this badge of social distinction proudly. They even limit their social interaction somewhat to people with the same professional background, which underlines their position as a unified group even more. Just like owning a Chanel bag identifies you as a wealthy fashion interested person, being a Googler identifies you as a fun tech-savvy employee. This community aspect of employment can also be found in the statements of other interviewees. Brandon, for example, explains his social interaction with colleagues as a "bubble", a confined group that is determined by his work. The positive side of this social interaction and social distinction is the team aspect:

I really liked about auditing for instance was the team-spirit, you're always out in teams and even though you meet high profile clients, you're always in a small group and you stick together and you sort of fight for each other [...] then I'm not working, I don't feel I'm working for KPMG at that time, I feel like I work for the team I am with at that point in time, I'm working for the manager who's sort of the team captain, I work for my colleagues and support them the best I can (Mark)

Mark reiterates that he feels like part of a team when he is working for KPMG. It is safe to assume that even within the company, smaller social groups form, which build an employee's social identity. As Mark says, he feels more responsible for his direct team members than for the company as a whole. Hence, he receives a sense of self from the people he works with and their combined success. These experiences definitely shape him. In the same way, Robert confirms this assumption when he explains how the people and the environment at his bank have influenced him:

I definitely think that for me there is a big part of my professional culture, if you could call it that, that's completely relatable to Scotiabank [...], and I think that's important, for me that's definitely part of who I am as a professional.

Robert admits that the way people work influences him personally. He is part of the professional group of bankers not only via his contract and paycheck but also via social means. He has been subject to a process of acculturation where his colleagues have made him similar to them, admitting him to their community. Therefore, Robert consumes his workplace as a means for social interaction.

Interestingly, similar to the discussion of brand communities by Shouten and Alexander (1995), employee communities identified in this thesis also exhibit three characteristics that make them stand together and stand out. Firstly, they have an internal structure via the means of job seniority and formal titles. This is underlined by Mark's comparison of a manager to a team captain. Secondly, they share rituals and traditions. These can, among other reasons, be attributes to the amount of time people spend together and the rituals of shared lunches and after work drinks, as well as the acculturation process to make newbies fit in. Lastly, employee communities do share a common ethos as is illustrated by the strong social norms that exist within Google:

I think people take it [codex] seriously, so whenever someone is being a douche, people go to that person and say 'hey, you're not being google-y' and that person actually feels bad. So I think yes, it does exist [...] people automatically do it, cause they don't want to be reminded that they need to be google-y, cause I think it's a bit embarrassing, so people try to avoid to be perceived as ungoogle-y.(John)

John reports on the way Google employees regulate themselves and consume common values. They have established within their community what it means to be an employee at Google and now, this understanding is openly practiced and reinforced. That also means that Google employees build a strong social identity based on the definition of what a Google employee should be. They see themselves as a group of people who care about the world and make it a better place, in contrast, to for example Microsoft. This statement ties nicely into the discussion of building social identity via dissociative groups. The membership to such a strong social group reflects on the self-concept of its members, which John also confirms during his interview.

However, some of our interviewees also caution that the association to a strong social community can have negative effects on the understanding of the self in that it might hinder the individual development of a self-concept. Mary speaks of a type of brainwashing that she experienced at her university ESB:

It started with the professors telling you that you were at the best school - at the best business school. So you also started to talk about it a lot and you were also influenced by the companies that came to the university. You really got the impression that you were pushed by the professors and the companies that attended the university and you really got the impression that you were - special, I would say, which is also kind of brainwashing.

Mary is very careful to report on her experiences at school. It seems like she tries to repeat what she has been told while reflecting on it critically. She is aware that because the social group she belongs to believes something, she is more likely to believe it too. It seems like she counteracts this by being

aware and conscious. However, she cannot say that she has managed to escape this peer pressure and is aware that the membership she has to the ESB student group influences how she sees herself, which can be dangerous depending on the difference between the socially indoctrinated and her actual self definition. Anna, for example, experiences a discrepancy between the social identity she had built at ESB and her own self-definition, which leads her to believe she is inadequate and unworthy. Because her undergraduate class seems to form such a tight unit where everyone seems to pursue the same goals, it was difficult for her to enjoy what she was really longing for. She sought acceptance by forcing herself to adapt to the standards and the ethos of her social group. Obviously, such behavior can be very damaging for the self and highlights how forming social identity through work might have negative consequences if it is in too much variation of the personal self.

Another example is John, who explains that he does not fit the code of conduct Google expects from its employees work-wise:

Sometimes I feel not in the right position, especially when we have discussions about revenue, how to tackle our problems. They actually think very analytically while my approach is usually you just do it and then you see what's going to come out. But people here they really take it seriously and they really consider these signs, like we need to analyze our client's portfolio to see the potential for new revenue and blab la bla, and yeah, I don't really care about this I just go about my job and if I can create more money it's good and if not then yeah..

John explains that he is unable to connect with his colleagues on a working level and, hence, is unable to really enjoy his working experience. Because his definition of who he is and how he approaches problems is in direct conflict with the way the social group Google expects him to handle things, which makes him unable to consume his work environment to the fullest.

Consequently, we have found that employees consume their workplace as a means to build and develop personal and social identities. Employers become symbolic resources, much like brands, which allow employees to express who they are and bring similar people together. Hence, workplace communities are similar to brand communities.

As we have shown throughout this chapter, our interviewees exhibited the key characteristics of three consumer roles while at work, namely the role of a communicator, a hedonist, and an identity-seeker. Although it seems like all interviewees took on all roles to some extent, it became clear that some leaned more towards one of the three categories. Whether this is because of personal predisposition or because of age and experience, we cannot say. There is reason to believe that the importance of different aspects of consumption of work become more and less important during a lifetime. However, we do not have the means to prove such a circumstance with a study of our resource limitations. Nevertheless, the analysis of our interviews leads us to believe that consumerism has entered the work sphere and that employees see themselves and act as consumers in a professional environment.

8. Conclusion

In this chapter, we present our most important findings regarding the proposed research questions and connect them to our initial review of available literature. We further explain how we see our work contributing to theoretical and managerial discourses. Lastly, we present the limitations and further opportunities in this field of research.

8.1 Summary of Findings

In common parlance, consumerism is thought to be the ideology that supports the ever-increasing acquisition of commodities. In this belief, work is seen as a means to an end, a necessity to fulfill the fantasies created by the race for material wealth:

“we work jobs we hate so we can buy crap that we don't need.” (Fightclub, 1999)

However, this statement no longer holds true for the highly educated and privileged generation Y employees we interviewed. These ambitious and challenge-seeking students and recent graduates are looking for meaningful work. They don't settle for just any job to pay their bills and, therewith, become increasingly demanding towards their employer. They become consumers of their work environment as they view jobs as packaged, priced, distributed and promoted commodities. And employers have to be aware that even if they succeed with making their offerings attractive for candidates, the product life cycle is short as employees switch frequently and willingly to continuously strike a deal. Today's employment market for highly educated talents goes beyond a paycheck.

Thus, consumerism, in this context, is not piling on more and more goods and services, which are only able to add marginal satisfaction to its owners. It is the commodification of every aspect of our daily life. It is turning citizenship into an act of consumption, where people make political choices via the means of their purchasing decisions. It is turning welfare into an act of consumption, where people choose freely and actively between offerings of social benefits such as hospitals. It is also turning employment into an act of consumption, where employees feel as active consumers of their work environment and assign exchange value to their work. Consumer culture is now all encompassing.

In order to argue for this point of view, we have answered our research questions via the means of personal interviews with 10 highly work oriented students and recent graduates.

RQ1: How do employees construct employment as a commodity?

We have seen that our interviewees constructed work as a good, produced under capitalist circumstances, in their minds. It is seen as a product with different features, which is subject to test driving and bargaining. It is priced according to its offerings and, although our respondents are willing to invest time and labor resources, they expect an adequate return on that investment. It is placed and, hence, made available via many channels, most importantly through universities which act as middlemen and distributors of employer offerings. Lastly, it is promoted via company websites

and mass advertising, but more effectively via personal touch points and word-of mouth. The interview process itself was identified as a main tool to sell the deal. All interviewees were well aware that work can be seen as a service provided by the employer to further their personal and professional development and which can be bought and returned at their discretion. Therefore, the commodification of work goes beyond employer branding activities, as suggested in the theory part of this paper. Employment is not only branded but actively marketed to students by the means traditionally known from the consumer goods market.

RQ2: How do employees perceive themselves as consumers in the workplace?

Our interviewees presented themselves as empowered consumers who were choosing between employers, just like they were choosing between brands of tooth paste. This view of themselves stands in contrast to the more critical perspective that, for example, Chertkovskaya (2013) adopts when investigating employment consumption of university students. They took on three main consumer roles in their work environments, namely those of a communicator, a hedonist, and an identity-seeker. Although all of our respondents exhibited attributes of all three consumer roles, most leaned more towards one of the three. Regardless of the role they assumed, however, we saw that our respondents derived a great deal of meaning and satisfaction from their work and expected their employer to support them in their quest for furthering their self-concept. It was an important mean to distinguish themselves from others in society and to understand who they are and what they stand for. Most interestingly to us was the fact that the consumer role they assumed changed with increasing experience in the work field as they transitioned from communicators to hedonists. Furthermore, we were very interested to see the conflict that arose when employment was involved in the construction of a personal identity. While some interviewees were looking for one integrated self that would function both inside and outside of work, others were aware of and actively supporting multiple selves to distinguish their personal and professional lives.

In summary we were able to see that employment no longer only fulfills the lower levels of our personal hierarchy of needs, such as physiological or safety needs. It also becomes a means to receive love and belonging by creating a social identity, esteem via the communicative function of employment and self-actualization because of the hedonic and personal identity creating attributes of work. Therefore, it is not surprising that work and choosing a place to work is no longer dominated by the paycheck for highly educated talents, a paycheck that satisfy their monetary needs wherever they work. For them, work goes beyond the paycheck to become a commodity that helps them in determining and expressing who they are and where they stand in society.

8.2 Contributions

In the following chapter, we will cover the theoretical and practical contributions our study has made. Therefore, we will first explain how our thesis offers new and interesting insights and then elaborate on how these findings are interesting for the participants of the employer-employee relationship.

8.2.1 Theoretical Contributions

There are two different assumptions on how a theoretical contribution is made depending on the ontology of the thesis; either knowledge is objective and is not dependent on the object of study, or the knowledge is subjective and completely dependent on the object of study (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997). The socially constructed knowledge perspective has recently gained increasing acceptance in academia, and this is also how we view the knowledge in this thesis. As Weick (in Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997, p. 1026) argues: "the contribution of social science does not lie in validated knowledge, but rather in the suggestion of relationships and connections that had previously not been suspected". This is also called "Synthesized coherence" (Locke & Golden-Biddle, 1997, p. 1030), meaning that you connect concepts not previously coupled.

According to Whetten (1989) a theoretical contribution is something that is new, unique and different from previous research in the field of study. Further he argues that one needs to answer three vital questions when contributing to theory: *What* factors are to be considered, *How* are the factors related, and most importantly *Why* is this new combination of terms interesting?

The *What* in our thesis consists of the terms employment and consumption. The *How* treats how the increasing predominance of consumer culture has changed the relationship between employment and consumption, as the terms have become increasingly interrelated to the point where employment is consumed as a commodity. This is based on the new perception of highly educated employees using work as a means of self-expression and self-actualization. The most important question regarding theoretical contribution is the *Why*, i.e. why this new relationship is interesting. By using the theories and frameworks previously established in the consumption sphere of our economic life and applying them to employment, we suggest the extended relevance of consumption theories in our society today. We suggest that consumer culture is penetrating new aspects of our life and, hence, our producing self can no longer be viewed as distinctly separated from our consuming self.

Our empirical material shows that the interviewees, and possibly other generation y individuals, consume work in ways such as identity, pride, status and experiences while they are also producing for the firm. These individuals, hence, not only work for a living, they also live for working. Consequently, work has been commodified, and our findings suggest that employees assume consumer roles as identity seekers, communicators and /or hedonists. We hence extend the relevance of Gabriel and Lang's (2006) framework of different consumer roles to a completely new context; that of job consumption.

In addition to these contributions, commodification of work has in previous research almost exclusively been studied from the employer's perspective, e.g. research on employer branding. This thesis has added understanding to the commodification of work by flipping the coin: We take the perspective of high potential students and recent graduates in order to investigate how and why they consume certain employer offerings and to what extent they see themselves as consumers. We believe this transition period of student to employee is extremely relevant and interesting as they are the ones being marketed to, and their perspective on employer branding and work consumption has so far been absent from the literature. Our thesis thus brings the high-potential graduate's view to the discussion.

8.2.2 Managerial Implications

We believe our study has major implications for management when hiring highly educated graduates in the sense that it will aid their understanding of these individuals, what they are looking for in an employer and most importantly how vital work is for them as they are consumers of their jobs.

When hiring highly educated talents, managers in all industries may be able to benefit from our findings. First of all, our thesis brings to awareness the fact that these individuals search for employers and positions they can consume in an identity-seeking, hedonic or communicative way. This means that they increasingly see the job as a product that, just like in the marketplace, should satisfy their wants, needs and desires. High potential graduates of today do not look for a well-paid, but boring, desk job. They crave challenges, international assignments, experiences, status and perhaps more than anything to be able to align their personal identity and values with their job, which makes the job meaningful and fulfilling to them. Awareness of this is a first step for managers to get to know their new hires and adapt in order to retain them in the long run. When considering the high-potentials interviewed in this study, all of them are prepared to look for a job elsewhere if their employer does not offer them the mentioned features, as they are well aware of their value in the job market. However, we also found that they are extremely prone to put in a lot of work if they feel invested in and if they have a meaningful and fulfilling job. Hence, if you invest in them – they will invest in you.

Another important managerial implication concerns the way that high potential graduates react to employer branding, i.e. promotional activities undertaken by employers to attract talents. We found that the promotional aspect in employer branding has become more and more like in the consumer goods market, where graduates believe more in word of mouth than in glossy company brochures and websites. Furthermore, to our surprise, we found that the interview process is perceived as being a promotional tool of major importance for high potential graduates when choosing between offers. To them, this process is not just a forum where the employer checks out and tests the graduates, but also a forum where the graduates equally check the employer out and consider if they fit in the company. Several interviewees reported on accepting or turning down offers because of the feeling they had during the interviews. The importance of the interview process as a promotional tool can thus not be understated, and managers should be aware of this.

Further, the thesis has implications for high-potential graduates, as they, with the help of the empirical findings of this paper, can benchmark their experiences with others' in the same position. This might help them to evaluate employers or positions in a new way, and to realize what kind of consumption role they desire to take when looking for a job.

In short, we believe our thesis overall is a source for managers in all industries to increase their understanding of how future and current employees see their job, how they respond to employer branding and the importance work plays in their lives. We believe this understanding will enable management to adapt and better market job opportunities to attract high potential graduates. This study can also be a guidance to highly educated graduates in understanding their position in the employer-employee relationship and the role they take on when consuming work.

8.3 Limitations and Further Research

We believe this thesis has come up with very interesting findings in the area of work as consumption among highly educated students and recent graduates. However, we are of course aware that the study also has its limitations.

As a first limitation, we only chose to investigate members of generation Y. It would be interesting to investigate if other generations also see themselves as consumers of work or whether they maintain their traditional relationship to employment and their employer. For example, we would suggest exploring the difference between generation Y and generation X talents in regarding work consumption. Therefore, future studies could analyze whether this new phenomena of consumption of work is embedded in a generational transition or whether it can be seen throughout the ranks of seniorities in companies.

Second of all, we mostly found our interviewees to fit to the three roles of identity-seeker, communicator and hedonist, all three being part of Gabriel and Lang's (2006) framework to classify consumers and their roles. We are aware that our questioning or our selection of interviewees might have limited the consumer roles we could see in the workplace. Hence, we suggest further investigating whether or not others, or even all, of the consumer roles presented by Gabriel and Lang (2006) can be found in the work environment.

Moreover, we interviewed solely high potential graduates with Master degrees from top universities that are very prone to have the skill- and mindset suitable for consuming work. These individuals are likely to find high-paying jobs and are, hence, less concerned with salary already when they graduate. If we had looked at students who, for example, only chose to pursue a Bachelor's degree, alternatively less educated members of generation Y, the findings would most probably be different. Consequently, future research in this direction should cover a different object of study with a less pronounced orientation towards work, to determine whether the trend towards consumption of work penetrates all classes of society and/or how their approach to work differs to the consumption of work approach found in this thesis.

Based on our findings, we could see that the consumer roles employees play change depending on their experience and age. We found that communicator roles became less important as hedonic roles became more significant. Hence, it would be interesting to see how work consumption changes in different stages of life and whether this observation of changing roles with changing life phases proves to be correct. Consequently, we would propose a longitudinal study aimed at exploring how employees' work consumption attitude changes as they get older and gain more work experience.

Because of our background in marketing, we hold a relatively supportive standpoint in favor of consumerism, consumer culture and consumption of work. However, the findings of this study are also open to critique by other disciplines, such as critical management studies, to investigate which negative effects consumption of work can have on its participants, first and foremost employees.

Overall, we wish our thesis to be a base for other studies to build on so that the knowledge in the field of consumption of work may be extended and intensified. We are aware that there are many angles one can take with this subject and are proposing a few that we see as particularly interesting.

9. References

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10. Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Guide:

General Information

- Can you tell us something about your career path?
 - What have you studied?
 - Where have you worked?
 - Why here?
- **Specify:** Countries, schools, employers
- How did you find your school/employers?
- Do you think internships are important? Why?
- Do you stay informed about jobs? How?

Motivation

- Can you elaborate why you choose a certain profession, school, employer?
- Which positions/ employers seem particularly desirable to you? Why?
- What are you looking for in a job?
- What would you like to achieve? What is the end goal?
 - **Specify:** personal or professional goal? dream profession?
 - Do you have a plan how to get there? Certain steps? Or more spontaneous?

Identification

- If you would have to describe the typical (insert dream job or company) how would he/she look like?
- Would you say you fit this description? In what ways are you similar or different?
- Proud representing company? Is that important to you?
- Which role does work play for you in your life?
- Important for your personal development depending on what job you choose?

Social Interaction

- Would you say you interact a lot with people who have similar goals/careers? How?
- Do you spend a lot of time with the people you work with? When? How?
- Personal bonds with the people you work with?
- Similarities?
- Are your friends' opinions important to you when choosing or considering an employer?
- Does your personal network relate to your professional network?
- Is there a specific codex in how your employee community should behave?
- Do you see the relationship to your employer as a give and take relationship?
- Private life vs. work – interrelated? Bring work into personal life or personal life into work?