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Two Sides to the Same Coin:

The Dual Life of Consultants in Employee and Employer Branding

by
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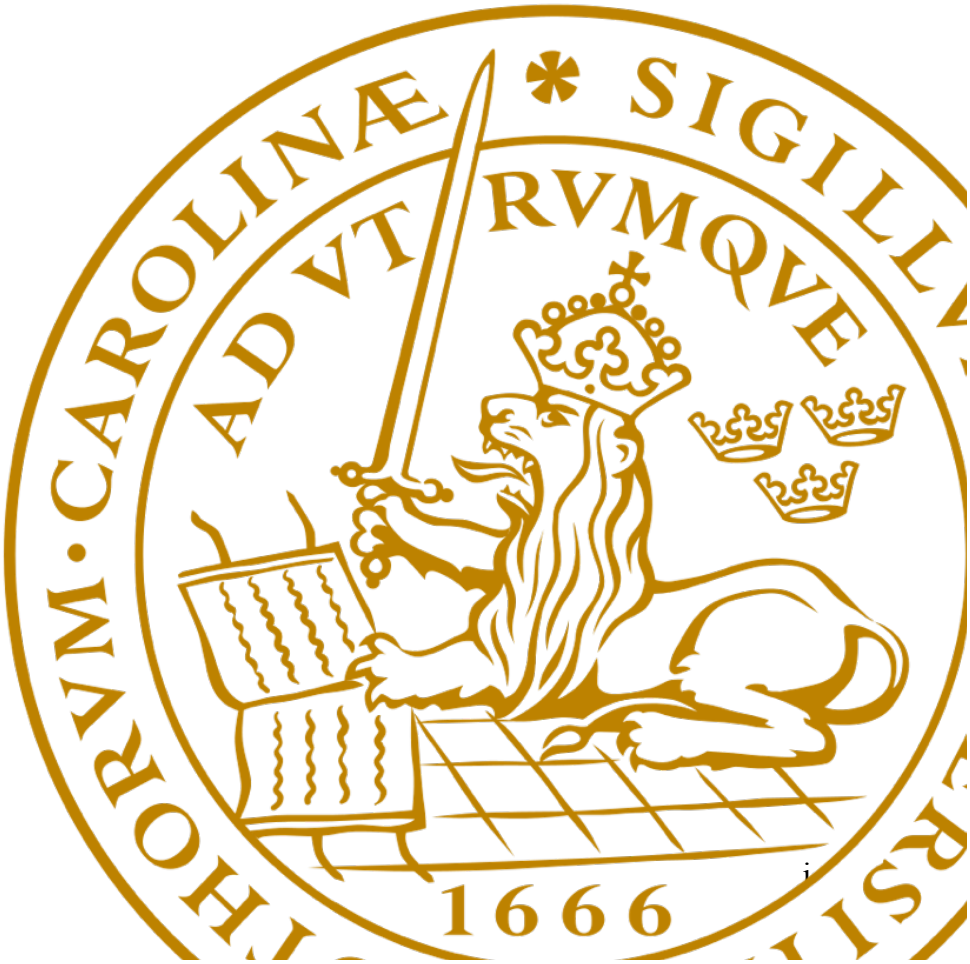
Vita Shanna Josepha Bosmans Alessa Juliane Rickmers



Abstract

Title	Two Sides to the Same Coin
Authors	Vita Shanna Josepha Bosmans and Alessa Juliane Rickmers
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Purpose	This research aims to gain an understanding on how consultants in small consultancies, who also hold internal human resource responsibilities, promote their organisation in employee and employer branding.
Relevance	Due to the ambiguous consultancy profession and the high potential for individual influences on the corporate brand, branding becomes a very germane topic in our particular research setting. Furthermore, the combination of the two tasks, which consultants take on, reveals an interesting phenomenon in employee and employer branding.
Methodology	Following an interpretivist paradigm, we conducted a basic qualitative study. Since we are specifically interested in how our participants take meaning from their particular experiences of the above described phenomenon, we have conducted fifteen semi-structured in-depth interviews with German and Swedish consultants.
Findings	Our research indicates that consultants, in our particular research setting, do not only live the employee brand, but also the employer brand. Furthermore, our research points to possible conflicts when one consultant is living the employee and the employer brand simultaneously.
Contributions	We contribute to employee and employer branding literature by providing a new theoretical framework regarding practices vis-à-vis small professional service firms. This framework acknowledges that employees live the employer brand, as opposed to what is written in most academic literature. Furthermore, we argue for a connection between the concepts of employee and employer branding and the importance of building the two brands on the same values.
Keywords	Employee Branding, Employer Branding, Brand, Consulting, PSFs, Small Firms

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1 Introduction

A coin has two sides. Commonly these sides are referred to as heads and tails. When tossing or flipping it either side will naturally appear on the upside. Besides tossing or flipping it, a coin can also be spun. It then twirls between the two sides.

Just like a coin gets constantly switched and exchanged, it is frequently needed in consultancies to switch between different projects and tasks. Consultants are the executing body in consultancies and just like a coin is switched, they likewise need an ability to shift constantly. However, what happens if the consultant is not only working on the client side, but also holding an internal role in human resources? Should the consultant then promote the employee brand side or the employer brand side of the coin?

In this context this research is studying employee and employer branding, when conducted by the same person. On the one side of the coin is employee branding. It refers to motivating the organisation's employees to represent the corporate brand towards clients and other external stakeholders (Edwards, 2005). In consultancies the employee brand is crucial due to the ambiguous and intangible nature of the 'product' (Alvesson, 2004). This branding practice is delivered through the employees, as they are constantly in contact with the clients and are representing their organisation at all times (Alvesson, 2004). Employer branding, on the other side of the coin, aims to attract and retain current and future employees by representing the organisation as an employer of choice (Robertson & Khatibi, 2012) and is usually performed by human resources personnel (Edwards, 2005). Both branding practices are absolutely key for consultancies, as they, firstly, attract and retain their core asset, the consultants, and secondly, as their brand image is used as a substitute for the missing tangibility of their product (Alvesson, 2004). Nevertheless, in small consultancies it is not unlikely for consultants to take on an internal task, such as human resources and recruiting. This means that those specific consultants are involved in both branding processes. However, little is known on how consultants promote their coin, if they are involved in both branding practices. Therefore, there is a knowledge gap in academic context. This study was conducted in order to gain further in-depth insight into how specifically consultants promote their organisation in employee and employer branding as well as to lessen the knowledge gap.

Various scholars recently focused their research on the concepts of employee and employer branding (e.g. Edwards, 2005; Miles & Mangold, 2004, 2005, 2007; Robertson & Khatibi, 2012; Tarnovskaya, 2011). While the studies on employee and employer branding were enlightening and contributed considerable knowledge to the two research streams, the majority embraced a normative approach (e.g. Miles & Mangold, 2005). Most scholars looked at the concepts from a meta-level (e.g. Mangold & Miles, 2007), whereas, in our research, we seek to add to the few existing descriptive and micro-level studies (e.g. Tarnovskaya, 2011). Taking this perspective is critical as there is insufficient knowledge on how consultants promote their organisation when they are involved in both branding processes. It is, for instance, questionable if consultants then promote both sides equally or if they emphasise one side of the coin.

Consequently, as outlined, our research seeks to understand how consultants promote their organisation in an employee and employer branding context. We are focusing on the two concepts of employee and employer branding, as the employee is involved in both concepts. Moreover, we look at both concepts because even though they have the same actor, they target different stakeholders. While employee branding is focused at the client or customer, employer branding targets current and future employees.

1.1 Aim and Objectives

Due to our interpretive standpoint the aim of this research is to reach an increased understanding of how consultants promote their organisation in an employee and employer branding context. Furthermore, we aim to contribute a meaningful in-depth research and a novelty to current employee and employer branding literature. These aims guided us to the following research question:

- How do consultants promote their organisation with regard to employee and employer branding?

In order to answer this research question a qualitative research study was conducted, drawing on semi-structured interviews. In total fifteen consultants from Germany and Sweden contributed to this study.

1.2 Research Context

We believe it is crucial to illustrate the context of our study to allow a better understanding of the relevancy. Therefore, before continuing with the next chapter, we will briefly introduce the environment of the participating organisations: small firms in the professional service sector.

Small firms differentiate themselves from large firms through several distinct features (e.g. Doherty & Norton, 2013; Williamson, Cable & Aldrich, 2002), which are important to consider when looking at their respective employee and employer branding. As employee and employer branding are related to human resource management (Edwards, 2005), it is appropriate to regard human resource management characteristics of small firms. Newman and Sheikh (2014) argued that small firms typically make less use of proven human resources practices than larger organisations and often run an informal human resource management. This might lead to various challenges in managing their human resources effectively and likewise when engaging in activities such as recruitment, selection, training and retention (Newman and Sheikh, 2014). Furthermore, the general existing 'resource poverty' amongst small firms limits its financial budget for human resource management (Doherty & Norton, 2013; Welsh & White, 1981) and thus employer branding. Yet, the limited resources do not only affect financial resources, but also personnel. Small firms often do not have a human resources department or even a full-time human resources employee, leading to a more flexible integration of human resource tasks in the daily business of other employees (Doherty & Norton, 2013). This 'role ambiguity' is also seen among our participants, as consultants take on internal responsibilities within human resources functions as a side task. Another important point was made by Williamson, Cable and Aldrich (2002), who emphasise the "lower level of external awareness of their existence and image" (p. 84). This leads to an increased need for small firms to engage in branding activities, such as employee and employer branding.

Besides being small, all our participating companies are consultancies. Even though consulting is not always categorised as a 'true' profession (we do not want to engage further in the debate about professionalism) it shows several characteristics of professional service firms (PSFs) and thus is often seen as a PSF (Alvesson, 2004; Løwendahl, 2005; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). PSFs are commonly classified as a subcategory of knowledge-intensive

firms (e.g. Alvesson, 2004; Løwendahl, 2005). Knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs), differentiate themselves from other organisations through several key aspects: highly qualified individuals executing knowledge-based work; offering an intangible product (their service); containing a higher degree of autonomy for employees; downplaying of organisational hierarchies and a greater flexibility in their work (Alvesson, 2004). This again offers greater freedom to the consultants in making decisions and representing their firms individually, thus offers them more possibilities in branding the firm. The major asset of PSFs is their employees: they market, produce and sell the service at the same time (Alvesson, 2004; Løwendahl, 2005). Various scholars emphasise the importance of human capital as the distinct competence and core competitive advantage of PSFs (e.g. Alvesson, 2004; Von Nordenflycht, 2010). However, employees in PSFs do not only contribute through their knowledge-based work, but are also essential to their company due to their professional relationships and networks, which form the base for employee branding. The intangible service work and the importance of employee's professional relationships intensifies the need for PSFs to retain and motivate their employees, for which an overall good company reputation and image is essential (Alvesson, 2004). As Alvesson (2004) accentuates, PSFs depend greatly on their image (corporate brand) as it becomes a substitute for the absence of a tangible product, and thus they can be referred to as 'image-sensitive' organisations. The central role of consultants and their high degree of interaction with clients leads to a situation where they have great potential to influence their corporate brand and overall image. Therefore, it is even more critical for organisations to utilise employee and employer branding to ensure that their employees represent the organisation as desired.

To conclude, when looking at the consulting industry, it is possible to identify one group of firms for whom their brand seems to be particularly important: small consultancies. The consulting industry is a highly competitive market and dominated by the prestigious consulting firms, such as *McKinsey & Company*, *The Boston Consulting Group* or *Bain & Company* (Adams, 2011). The big firms generate more than 50 percent of the industry's revenue, even though the vast majority of consulting firms in general, around 98 percent, are small and medium-sized (Brett Howell Associates, 2007; O'Mahoney & Markham, 2013). With this in mind, it seems to be even more critical that small consultancies utilise their potential within employee and employer branding to establish a strong corporate brand and eventually gain a competitive advantage.

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis is structured in five main chapters: introduction; literature and theory review; methodology; findings and discussion/ conclusion. After having introduced our study in this chapter, we will set the theoretical base for the study in the second chapter. It will outline the relevant literature for the concepts of employee and employer branding. Moreover, it will provide an insight into how the concepts and literature are further referred to in our research. In the third chapter, the methodology, we will introduce our adopted research paradigm. Furthermore, we will outline how we conducted our research and which methods were used to analyse the empirical data. In that context we will also elaborate on the reflexivity in this study. The fourth chapter is concerned with data provision and will likewise present our findings. The fifth chapter contains our discussion and conclusion. In the discussion we will interpret the findings of the previous chapter and relate them to back to the outlined literature. Additionally, we will present our main findings at this point. In the last section, the conclusion, we will summarise our research project and advert to practical and theoretical implication, which can be deduced from our study. Finally, we will self-critically discuss the limitations of our study and draw attention to possible further research.

2 Literature and Theory Review

Recent literature highlights increased attention in employee and employer branding (e.g. Edwards, 2005; Mangold & Miles, 2007). The proposed reasons for growing interest in these areas are manifold. Edwards (2005), for example, ascribed it to the change in the labour market and an increased desire from employees to work for an organisation with values, whereas Mangold and Miles (2007) ascribed it to the greater power of employees to influence the brand. Consequently, several scholars argued that employee and employer branding are essential activities for organisation nowadays (e.g. Edwards, 2005; Martin & Beaumont, 2003). Even though the ultimate goal of both branding activities is the same, namely to establish a corporate brand and communicate this through various ways to different stakeholder to ideally achieve a competitive advantage for the organisation, there are distinct differences between the two concepts, such as the direction of branding, the branded entity and activities involved (Edwards, 2005, Mangold & Miles 2007; Tarnovskaya, 2011).

This chapter will outline the most relevant literature regarding our research topics and introduce the theoretical framework, which guided our empirical research. The two separately emerged literature streams employee and employer branding are generally well-developed. In the following, we will briefly look into the corporate brand and then outline the two concepts separately. Finally, we will put the presented literature in context with our theoretical framework.

2.1 The Coin: Corporate Branding

Many scholars have highlighted the importance of branding for organisations in recent times (e.g. Edwards, 2005; Ind & Mariussen, 2015; Martin & Beaumont, 2003). A successful brand can, amongst others, lead to an increased market share and financial benefits (Martin & Beaumont, 2003). The most holistic brand for an organisation is the corporate brand, which is targeted at internal and external stakeholders, including employees, clients and citizens (Ind & Mariussen, 2015). Ind and Mariussen (2015) defined the corporate brand as “a company-wide

philosophy and a visual, verbal and behavioural expression of an organization's unique business model" (p. 152). They continued and explained corporate branding as "a systematic and continuous process of maintaining a favourable image and reputation, that involves managing employee behaviour and attitudes internally and spreading positive signals about the company externally" (p. 152). With this definition Ind and Mariussen, in our opinion, pointed towards the two concepts of employee and employer branding. The holistic corporate brand is consists of several specific brands, such as the product brand (Ind & Mariussen, 2015; Keller & Richey, 2007), but also the employee and employer brand (Edwards, 2005).

A brand should incorporate and represent the organisations values, attributes, personality traits and human characteristics towards the various stakeholders (Ind & Mariussen, 2015; Keller & Richey, 2007). Various scholars have emphasised employees as a vital source to communicate that brand image towards the various stakeholders (e.g. Harris & de Chernatony, 2001; Ind & Mariussen, 2005; Martin & Beaumont, 2003). Harris and de Chernatony (2001) further explained this by stating that employees are "becoming central to the process of brand building and their behaviour can either reinforce a brand's advertised values or, if inconsistent with these values, undermine the credibility of advertised messages" (p. 442).

It becomes, in our opinion, even more critical to regard employees as a central part of the branding process when looking at PSFs. As outlined in chapter one, PSFs do not have a product brand and highly depend on their consultants service work to support the organisations image (Alvesson, 2004). However, at the same time, their image is key for their business at it acts as a substitute for the intangibilities (Alvesson, 2004). Therefore, we decided to focus on employee and employer branding in this study.

2.2 On the one Side of the Coin: Employee Branding

Miles and Mangold (2004) defined employee branding as "the process by which employees internalise the desired brand image and are motivated to project the image to customers and other organizational constituents" (p. 68), which is widely recognised and used by most scholars today (e.g. Edwards, 2005; Tarnovskaya, 2011). Miles and Mangold (2004) contributed greatly to the employee branding literature by offering a conceptual model of

employee branding process. This offered a better understanding of employee branding and demonstrated how organisations could utilise the employee branding process to achieve competitive advantage (Miles & Mangold, 2004). They argued that through the employee branding process, organisations are able to deliver its desired brand image to customers, thus creating a distinct image in the minds of their employees and eventually customers alike. Core elements of the branding process are: the organisation's mission and values; the desired brand image; the various internal as well as external sources of messages; the employee's psyche (knowledge of desired brand image and psychological contract) and the employee brand image (Miles & Mangold, 2004; 2005). Throughout their research (2004, 2005, 2007), they drew attention to the importance of the organisation's mission and values, clear and consistent communication about the desired brand as well as the fulfilment of the psychological contract, as those three elements are essential for any successful branding. Scholars like Edwards (2005), Mitchell (2000) and Tarnovskaya (2011) support the importance of the organisations values. Edwards (2005) added that within employee branding, "the norms, values and goals of the organisation are made explicit, and are presented as an ideal that all staff should identify with to guide their work behaviour" (p. 271). If the desired brand image is successfully internalised by its employees and if they are motivated to represent that image to the organisation's customers and other stakeholders, then they successfully establish an employee brand (Mangold & Miles, 2007). As 'successfully internalised' indicates, the direction of the branding activities is internal towards current employees, thus they are the branded entity as Edwards (2005) phrased it. Even though the employees are being branded, the targets of this branding process are customers and other external stakeholders (Edwards, 2005). Activities to encourage employee branding include, for example, the induction, training and development or performance evaluation (Edwards, 2005). Overall we agree with the above-stated notions of employee branding. However, we believe that in most literature the employee branding process appears to be almost completely manageable by the organisation. Thus, we remark the dependence on the individual employee and how s/he eventually represents the brand to customers.

It is widely acknowledged that the roots of employee branding are anchored in internal marketing (Mitchell, 2000; Tarnovskaya, 2011) or internal branding (Edwards, 2005). Yet Edwards (2005) argued that it exceeds the purely internal branding part as it utilises all organisational systems to influence the employee's demeanour, appearance and manner of interaction with customers to eventually ensure that customers experience a consistent brand

experience when interacting with the organisation's employees. Whereas most scholars agreed on, and highlighted the potential benefits of successful employee branding, such as: increased customer satisfaction and loyalty through employee satisfaction (Edwards, 2005); strong brand image (Tarnovskaya, 2011); high level of service quality; repeated purchase behaviour and ideally a sustainable competitive advantage (Mangold & Miles, 2007; Miles & Mangold, 2005, 2007), they seem to be more reserved with criticism towards the concept. Tarnovskaya (2011) cautiously criticises by acknowledging the view of employee branding on "organizational staff as a vehicle to communicate and manifest the brand to customers and other stakeholders. In this perspective, employee branding as strong positioning tool towards organization's stakeholders" (p. 128). This statement leads to the possibility of seeing employees as 'means to an end' to achieve the organisational goal. This view is supported by Edwards (2005), who, in our opinion, is one of few the scholars, who is taking an active and more definite stand in this debate:

> [e]mployee and internal branding attempts to develop employees, to mould them to become walking talking brand agents. Principally it involves an employer managing staff attitudes to influence how they interact with other staff and customers. With employee branding, the employee is part of the brand, they are exemplars of the brand, they have been branded (p. 271).

By relating employee and internal branding to the debate around organisational control and the management of culture, in which we do not want to engage further, Edwards (2005) questions the ethicality of overly ambitious employee branding activities. Even though we do not want to oppose Edwards's concern entirely, we argue that for the success of the employee brand, it is essential that employees identify themselves with the brand, become 'walking talking brand agents' and eventually 'live the brand' in their daily job.

2.3 On the other Side of the Coin: Employer Branding

Unlike employee branding, employer branding has its origins in human resource management and marketing (Edwards, 2005), which explains the close interwovenness between employee branding and HRM. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) argued that the employer brand "encompasses the firm's value system, policies and behaviour" (p. 502) towards new recruits,

which indicates the view of employer branding purely on recruitment. However, we agree with the majority of scholars that argue that employer branding is about being perceived as an attractive employer as well as presenting the organisation as an 'employer of choice' to current and potential employees (e.g. Edwards, 2005; Mosley, 2007; Robertson & Khatibi, 2012; Tarnovskaya, 2011). This is in line with how Martin and Beaumont (2003) related to employer branding, namely as managing a "company's image as seen through the eyes of its associates and potential hires" (p. 15). Sullivan (2004), additionally, does not restrict her view of employer branding to employees only, but also regards it as a broader strategy targeting other stakeholders as well. However, we would treat this notion with caution. Nonetheless, there is a general distinction between the external employer brand perceived by applicants, and the internal employer brand, which is the perception of current employees (Edwards, 2005; Robertson & Khatibi, 2012). Furthermore, we argue in line with Robertson and Khatibi's (2012) view that every organisation that employs people has an employer brand, regardless of whether they realise and utilise it or not.

Ambler and Barrow's (1996) definition of what is the employer brand, "the package of financial, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing organization" (p. 187), is widely used by scholars in respective literature (e.g. Edwards, 2005; Robertson & Khatibi, 2012; Tarnovskaya, 2011). However, Edwards (2005) regarded this definition as insufficient and expanded it by adding "employer branding initiatives often involve an active construction or adjustment of the benefits provided by employment to make the organisation look more attractive than its competitors in the labour market" (p. 273). Furthermore, Tarnovskaya (2011) remarked to the definition given by Ambler and Barrow, that it is strongly influenced by the consideration of product and corporate branding within the employer discourse. Considering the intangibility of the product of PSFs, this definition then becomes slightly problematic as it greatly depends on the product image and should be treated with caution. Therefore, we remain with our initial above-stated understanding, namely that employer branding is about being perceived as an employer of choice towards current and potential employees.

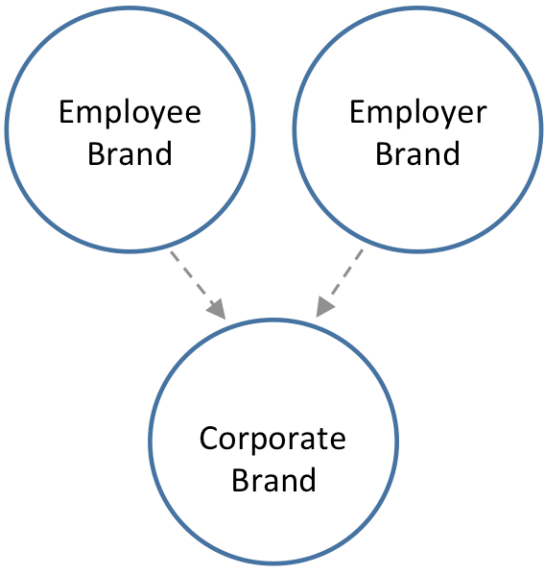
According to Robertson and Khatibi (2012), employer branding consists of five stages: examining the current employer image; formulating a desired employer image; developing the employer value proposition; implementing the employer brand and lastly evaluating as well as modifying it. Edwards (2005) includes activities such as recruitment and selection of

applicants, advertising and external as well as internal communication in the employer branding process. Furthermore, there is a common agreement in existing literature about the importance of the organisation's mission and values as a frame for the employer brand (Barrow & Mosley, 2005; Edwards, 2005; Robertson & Khatibi, 2012). At the same time, scholars stressed that the employer brand needs to represent an accurate image and does not create unrealistic expectations, which could lead to a breach in psychological contract (Barrow & Mosley, 2005; Edwards, 2005; Tarnovskaya, 2011). As most authors, we follow Rousseau (1990) who narrowly formulated the psychological contract to be the individual's beliefs about mutual obligations in the context of the relationship between employer and employee. We extend this thought by agreeing with Miles and Mangold (2005) who argued that it is "central to the employee branding process, in that the degree to which organizations uphold the psychological contract influences employees' trust in their employers and their motivation to serve customers and co-workers" (p. 538).

2.4 Relating the Branding Concepts

According to Edwards (2005) employee and employer branding are two distinct activities and are clearly separable. His main argument for this distinction is the entity which is being branded, the organisation in the case of employer branding and the employee within employee branding. Martin and Beaumont (2003) share this clear view on the two concepts by arguing the employee brand bolsters the corporate brand with its customers and that employer branding aims to increase the quality and loyalty of staff, thus contributing to better organisational performance. Tarnovskaya (2011) objected to those stances on a clear differentiation as "the two perspectives of employee and employer branding are inherently interlinked since both deal with the employer-employee relationships as the basis for branding" (p. 131). However, she agrees that there is a distinction between the concepts due to the way they treat their employees, either as "a vehicle for communicating the brand image" or as "human capital which is important per se" (p. 131). We acknowledge Tarnovskaya's point in differentiating the two branding concept by how they treat the employee. However, her linkage of the two concepts through the employer-employee relationship is rarely recognised in literature, therefore we refrain from using it as our theoretical underpinning. Our theoretical stance is in line with the vast majority of scholars,

such as Edwards or Martin and Beaumont, who regard the two branding practices as distinct due to their different activities and branding targets. Yet, considering the overall corporate brand, we acknowledge that both branding practices ultimate goal is to improve the brand of the organisation (e.g. Miles & Mangold, 2005; Robertson & Khatibi, 2012), which connects employee and employer branding on a more strategic level (Edward, 2005). We will adopt this understanding as our theoretical framework in this study and use it to look upon our empirical data and the relationships between the various concepts in the discussion. Figure 1 illustrates our adopted framework and shows the separated influences of the employee and employer brand on the overall corporate brand:



Theoretical Framework

Figure 1: Theoretical framework

2.5 Summary

To summarise, even though scholars treat the concepts of employee and employer branding with some variation, they all agree that the branding practices can help to improve the overall corporate brand and eventually generate a competitive advantage for an organisation (e.g. Edwards, 2005; Miles & Mangold, 2005; Robertson & Khatibi, 2012). This might be

especially interesting for small PSFs as they typically lack a strong brand and they face various barriers when competing with larger organisations. Most research focuses on employee and employer branding on a meta-level of the organisations (e.g. Mangold & Miles, 2007), which results in a lack of understanding of the individual employee's engagement in the branding processes. This study will address the question how consultants promote their organisation in the context of employee and employer branding. Our findings, which will be looked upon under the presented theoretical framework, will help to minimise the gap in existing literature regarding this issue. We attempt to contribute to the literature of employee and employer branding on a micro-level. Furthermore, we aim to contribute to the gap in literature that considers employees who are engaged in both branding practices.

3 Methodology

Any social research is shaped by its metatheoretical stance and methodological framework, which both include the basic ontological and epistemological assumptions of the researchers (e.g. Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000; Bryman & Bell, 2007). In this chapter we will first discuss our interpretivist paradigm and our beliefs about the nature of knowing and reality. Secondly, our qualitative research methods will be reasoned by considering our research design, sample, data collection and data analysis. Lastly the weaknesses, validity and reliability will be articulated by discussing our reflexivity in this research.

3.1 Research Framework and Paradigm

This study ascribes to an interpretative perspective, believing that reality is socially constructed. We think that individuals' realities are subjective and therefore there is not one fixed, single agreed upon truth (Merriam, 2002). Since we believe that there is not one 'objective' truth, our relativist ontological assumption is that reality as we know it is subjective and constructed intersubjectively through meanings and understandings developed in social and experiential constructions. Therefore we aim to recognise the multiple truths that consultants in this research present us with. We, as interpreters, are interested in understanding how these experiences interact with their social world at this point in time and in this particular context (Merriam, 2002). From our epistemological standpoint, it is not possible to separate ourselves from what we know. Therefore we acknowledge that our values are inherent at all phases of the data collection and analysis. Hence in the final section of this chapter, we discuss our assumptions, which must be considered when evaluating this research.

This research strategy links the empirical material and theory in an abductive way. This approach provided the researchers with the ability to let the specific data gained in the interviews, make the necessary changes when it comes to structure. Moreover it provided the opportunity to continuously move between the empirical material and theories from literature.

The particular stance we take in this research is the basic interpretive qualitative study; in this type of study the researchers are interested in understanding how participants make meaning of a situation or phenomenon (Merriam, 2002). In this case how consultants in a small consultancy promote their organisation in employee and employer branding. In order to create a sophisticated understanding of the social world, a dialogue between us and our research participants is needed.

3.2 Research Design/ Method

In order to collaboratively construct a meaningful reality, qualitative scholars rely on naturalistic methods and in this research, we draw on the method of interviewing. Using interviews as societal happenings and empirical situations of interest is emphasised by Alvesson (2003) as a relevant method for researching meaning construction, and in particular for micro level analysis (Thomas and Davies, 2005). We use the specific method of semi-structured interviews because this is most appropriate in creating an open dialogue between us (the interviewers) and the consultants (the interviewees) (Bryman & Bell, 2007). The data generated by making use of this method should capture the consultants' subjective understanding on how they promote their organisation in employee and employer branding. We choose neither to use structured interviews as they would limit the possibilities for open dialogue, nor did we chose to use unstructured interviews as this method is known to be more difficult to interpret and compiling the resulting material is more problematic (Bryman & Bell, 2007).

3.3 Sampling and Scene

The scene for this research was selected according to several criteria. Firstly, we decided to focus our research on consultancies as consultancies sell intangible products and the consultant is the key as the only 'tangible' aspect. Therefore the individual and organisational image that the consultants promote is crucial in delivering a consistent experience to clients (Alvesson, 2004). Branding therefore becomes more important because the consultant is the only one with direct contact with clients.

Secondly, we had requirements regarding the size: they had to match the classification of a small organisational size according to the *European Commission*. The *European Commission* regards enterprises with 10 to 50 employees and an annual turnover between € 10 and 50 million as small-sized (European Commission, 2005). Large organisations have been studied extensively, which leads to an underrepresentation of small firms (e.g. Doherty & Norton, 2013; Newman and Sheikh, 2014; Williamson, Cable & Aldrich, 2002). Furthermore, we focussed on small enterprises as theory describes that they have only limited resources with which to carry out employer branding as well as human resource practices in general, therefore they often have a consultant who partially works on these 'internal' function besides their regular function.

Thirdly, we think a dual-country approach is beneficial since it will provide us with a broader variety in perspectives. The dual-country approach makes it possible for us to have a larger target segment to choose from, namely small consultancies in Germany and Sweden. We chose not to compare the two countries because that is not the purpose of this research. Fourthly, we targeted the person responsible for human resources and/or employer branding within the organisation, meaning that we interviewed people with different titles. It was necessary to consider different 'positions' as there is not always a formal/full-time human resource person in small consultancies. Often these areas are covered by other positions with various titles and levels of seniority (ranging from consultant and project manager/senior consultant up to partner and CEO). In this study we will not relate back to the titles as they are not relevant to our research phenomenon. Lastly, concerning the sample size, we conducted 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews as we required to have a broad variety of perspectives on this matter. Since this research is conducted by two researchers and only has a limited time span of two months, therefore only this amount of participants was realistic. This multi-participant approach is strong once perspectives start to occur with more than one participant (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We contacted the consultancies randomly; in the end, the companies and thus the interviewees were selected on their basis of availability and interest in the topic. One consultancy, Company B, had two consultants involved in human resource management which were both eager to participate in this study, therefore we decided to interview both. All interviewees were given pseudonyms, which are provided in Table 1 on the next page:

Table 1: Research Participants

Name	Company	Country
Alexander *	Company A	Sweden
William	Company B	Sweden
Liam	Company B	Sweden
Lukas	Company C	Sweden
Oscar	Company D	Sweden
Hugo	Company E	Sweden
Elias	Company F	Sweden
Oliver	Company G	Sweden
Emma	Company H	Germany
Ben	Company I	Germany
Mia	Company J	Germany
Hannah	Company K	Germany
Luis	Company L	Germany
Paul	Company M	Germany
Thomas	Company N	Germany

* Pilot interview

3.4 Data Collection

Each interview took approximately 45 minutes. This timeframe provided us as researchers with the possibility of gaining insight into the interviewees' perspectives, at the same time as being a reasonable duration for the interviewees to participate. Both of the researchers were present at all interviews and interchanged the roles of interviewer and note-taker.

The interviews took place via skype or telephone since all companies are located in various parts of the two participating countries. Bar one, all of the interviews were conducted in English, this so that both researchers were able to understand and analyse the data. One of the interviewees however strongly preferred to do the interview it in her native language and therefore we conducted this interview in German. We agreed as this enabled the interviewee to speak freely about her perspectives. For the same reason the interviewees were kept anonymous. The non-native speaking German researcher was still able to understand most of the answers and we discussed the outcomes in detail after this interview. Not only the German interview was discussed however; all interviews were discussed afterwards to see if we had gained valuable empirical material.

Having an interview guide present at our interviews provided us with an outline regarding important topics that needed to be discussed (Kvale, 1996). These were topics such as: employer branding and employee branding or organisational values. At the same time, it allowed us as researchers some form of flexibility and offered the possibility to ask follow-up or clarification questions (Kvale, 1996). Typical questions during the interview were: 'How do you feel your consulting and HR work is connected?'; 'What would you say the core values of your company are?'; 'How do you help build your employer brand?'; 'How does your personality align with the employer brand?'.

In order to test our interview guide and to see whether it provided us with relevant empirical material, we conducted a pilot interview before our other interviews took place. After conducting this pilot interview, we restructured and refocused our interview guide. We noticed that the questions where we asked for values and personal values were really interesting, therefore we slightly changed the guideline in that direction. We also made some changes in how we posed some questions because we found, after listening to the interview, we were occasionally asking leading questions. For example, in the pilot interview we asked: to what extend does your personality align with the employer brand? In the interviews after the pilot interview we asked this question less leading namely: Do you think your personality aligns with the employer brand? If so, how?

3.5 Data Analysis and Interpretation

We abductively analysed the data to identify recurring patterns or common themes (Merriam, 2002). This approach provided us with the ability to let specific data gained in the interviews, make the necessary changes when it comes to structure, moreover it provided the opportunity to continuously move between the empirical material and theories from literature. For example we started our research with the focus on employer branding, however outcomes then steered us also towards the concept of employee branding. This restructuring of our research is in line with our abductive approach.

The interviews presented were simultaneously transcribed and analysed with the data collection. This procedure allowed us to look for recurring themes, which led us to a higher reliability and validity (Merriam, 2002).

After we completed the data collection process, we firstly performed an independent and 'open' reading. In this first read, we tried to *identify themes*, looking for the use of *repetitions* and *metaphors* (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). We noticed after the first read that interviews individually carried a lot of themes, but that it was also crucial to identify themes across interviews. Therefore we decided to compare and analyse all interview themes with each other and created more generic labels instead of specific individual codes. By this, we wanted to uncover similarities and differences in more detail and it allowed us to create more fitting labels for the different data aspects in the end. We consciously took some time in-between the first and second read to provide a 'new' look, which according to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009) is easier once a certain distance is taken vis-à-vis the material. With the second read we thoroughly searched for *changes in topic, strength of themes* and *themes that illustrate social contradictions conflicts.* After the second read more detailed codes such as: family friendly consultancy (1), excellent consultancy (2) and alterity claims (3) were created. We noticed after the second read that all the themes and codes were starting to make more sense, and that we could interpret the empirical material available more easily. Ryan and Bernard (2003) described that not all themes that could be identified in an interview are equally important. Therefore, with the third read, we were able to select the most salient themes which we eventually used to group our findings. Furthermore, with the third read we were able to look for missing data.

By not directly mentioning the topic of employee branding during our interviews (we did not want to steer the interviewees directly towards our research themes), we minimised the potential for social reporting or imposing an awareness of identity which might otherwise be absent (Alvesson & Empson, 2008). After reading the interviews, we recognised that the findings contained considerable amounts of data that were pertinent to employee branding, besides employer branding which we were already aware of.

3.6 Reflexivity

'Reflexive' is the aspect which consists of the focused reflections upon a specific method or level of interpretations (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). We reflected on what level the theoretical, cultural and political context of individual and intellectual involvement affected the interaction with our research (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). We believe that everything is based on interpretation: "there are no self-evident, simple or unambiguous rules or procedures and that crucial ingredients are the researcher's judgment, intuition, ability to 'see and point something out'" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 248). Since in this research project we aim to understand how consultants promote their organisation in employee and employer branding, it is important that we are aware of the fact that we are the primary instrument of this study, the researcher and human instrument, who could influence the research both positively and negatively (Merriam, 2002).

Reflexivity as a framework can be achieved when four different elements or levels are played off against each other, namely: contact with the empirical material (1); awareness of the interpretive act (2); clarification of political-ideological context (3); and the handling of the question of representation and authority (4) (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). In order to achieve a high level of reflexivity, we will discuss how throughout our research we actively managed these four levels. Firstly, contact with the empirical material that we derived from the semi-structured interviews. We let the opinions of the consultants regarding how they promote their organisation in employee and employer branding, inspire, develop and reshape the theoretical ideas about perceptions of employee and employer branding. Secondly, our awareness of the interpretive act is discussed. Since we conducted this research in a pair, we ensured that we had a similar understanding on our theoretical framework about employee and employer branding for interpreting the research, which is necessary in a research context

according to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009). We did however try to delve more deeply individually into different complementary theories (e.g. corporate branding, knowledge-intensive firms, branding in human resource management) which enabled us to broaden our common repertoire of interpretations and helped us to ensure a certain reflexive capacity regarding this matter (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). It is important for our study that we stepped back from our data and constantly reminded ourselves that our educational background - influenced by previous knowledge on human recourse management and branding - shaped our understandings and assumptions about the perceptions that employees can have about their role in employee and employer branding (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). We assumed prior to our research that employees play an important role in representing the corporate brand, and that this is even more crucial in PSFs. Moreover we believed that the individual consultant could be an influence in how s/he represents the employer brand. By being aware of our biases up front, we were able to consciously see our interpretive choices and also provide or consider alternative explanations than the ones we had interpreted. We reduced these thought patterns, assumptions and interpretations - or biases - by asking neutral questions during the interviews. We also talked to people that are not directly involved in our research (managing director of one of the big four consultancy firms in Germany and a professor who is specialised on small enterprises). This helped us to check whether we were stretching our empirical material and opened up the possibility of viewing the outcomes repeatedly from different angles (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009).

Thirdly, the political-ideological context for our research is clarified. We took into account that our interview participants could have a biases in relation to answers they provided, which could be socially or personally desirable (Callegaro, 2008). In our research, the social political context is important to discuss because our research participants, consultants with human resource management responsibilities, could carry various ideological images (employer brand image, organisation brand image and professional image) that could influence one's perceptions and understanding that they then wanted to actively portray.

Fourthly, the question of representation and authority, which for our research involved the claims of authority and the selection of the voices represented in the study. We accurately represented different voices in this research by providing our interpretation of the material but also other potentially controversial interpretations (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Additionally, we distinguished between what consultants said literally and what we interpreted from what was

said. We believed by doing so, we delivered a variety of perspectives on consultants' way of promoting their organisation in employee and employer branding. To conclude, by actively managing these four levels of reflexivity we increased the quality and validity of our research.

4 Findings

In this chapter we present our data analysis and findings related to our research question. While seeking to understand how consultants promote their organisation in the context of employee and employer branding, we chose to let the empirical data speak for itself and guide us, thus refrained from making any interpretations. We will introduce and clearly illustrate the two different images we have uncovered during our data analysis process. Eventually we detected two images that consultants refer to when presenting their organisation, namely: heads and tails. After our second reading the two themes were referred to as *family friendly consultancy* and as *excellent consultancy*. However, in order to align the two images with the metaphorical story of the coin, we decided to rename them.

4.1 Heads: One Side of the Coin

After having analysed our empirical material, an image could be clearly distinguished, which we later decided to refer to as the heads side of the coin. Even though the consultants referred to this image in slightly different words, this combined image could be described as: the image of an excellent consulting company always delivering the best possible client service and caring about their customers as well as the relationship with them. Referring to the coin, we decided that this represents best the heads image, as the head can be a representative symbol for the knowledge-work the consultants conduct.

The first part of this subchapter will consist of empirical material where consultants talk about *who they are* as an organisation.

Oscar presented the image of his company being client focussed and putting them first. He stated the following to illustrate this:

> *Our values have to be to put clients first. We build confidence, human capital, because that is basically what a consulting firm is worth and what consultant has. So our values are very practical, because they have to be. – Oscar*

Oscar defined his organisation's image by expressing who they are and what is important for them. Another participant, Paul, also emphasised the need to deliver the best for his clients by referring to quality as one of their core values:

> *One core value and core belief definitely is quality. The quality of our work is part of our unique selling point in the market. This demand for quality is a demand which every consultant really has to push oneself to, every day. – Paul*

Interestingly, Paul framed the high quality demand as a part of their unique offering. Moreover, William referred to the heads image when he argued for having talented consultants to be able to help their clients, since they are very talented likewise:

> *Because our customers are very talented, our consultants have to be, too. Otherwise there is nothing they can help, or bring to the customers. – William*

The following quotes both endorse the heads image that consultants are presenting by expressing alterity images, meaning one tries to endorse what they are by saying what they are not. Even though Hannah and Luis related to slightly different aspects of the same image, a close connection with the company and being concerned with the client is something they both referred to:

> *We are not a typical consultancy in that aspect. We use a lot of concepts, but we are always working inside the company in workshops with the employees, and we in the implementation phase it is very important to have a very close alignment with the company. And we see to it that we stick with them until we see the switch. – Hannah*

> *We are kind of pragmatic and when I present the company then I say 'okay we are doing these conceptual consultant services but we are also there to help you to bring it to the business you know'. So when I am presenting the company, I am emphasising the point that we are kind of different to the, to the big ones because we are closer to the customer, we are more different people in the company as well. – Luis*

Oliver also endorsed his company's image by using an alterity image. Oliver referred to the overall image by linking it specifically to 'being the best' and being 'very knowledge based'.

We are niche and we need to be the best in our areas. That is also part of the culture. We are a very knowledge based compared to the American firms. More knowledge based and not so much methodology. – Oliver

Besides the fact that the consultants pointed towards *who they are* to support the heads image, the participants also supported this image with providing various claims of proof of *what they do*. In order to emphasise the heads image Hugo, for example, described how they organise their working process:

So an example could be that we try to work in a simple and pragmatic way with clients. That may sometimes require that you simplify or change things. That may mean that you do not exactly plan according to theory and that sort of thing, but that you actually are open to this discussing in the best way forward in a particular situation. – Hugo

Ben and William also pointed how they deliver excellent projects by relating it to how they do practical work:

Anybody at our place is willing to use their hands, to get their hands dirty, to help and to do whatever and everything it takes to make the project successful. – Ben

McKinsey, BCG what they do, they deliver reports. They leave it to the customer to implement. We also deliver reports, but our task, our job, is much more about actually making it happen. – William

We consult with head and hand. – Ben

In order to be excellent consultants and deliver high standard projects, Liam and Lukas explained their very high quality standards.

I think we have always tried to make sure that anything that goes out is up to really high quality, because quality assurance is a huge issue for us. That is really important; we cannot just let something go out. It has to be checked, that is very very important. – Liam

> *When you are at work, and delivering projects to our clients, you do it with the uttermost quality. – Lukas*

One aspects relating to how they deliver the heads image is training and development in small firms, which was emphasised by Paul as:

> *We have seen different a concept, especially in in-house consulting this was very often this is outsourced. I mean you hire somebody external and then these guys train your own people, but training and developing your own people is very important to us and we feel that that should be done by ourselves, both to show that we take it really serious and to make sure that on the other side, those elements are trained and transferred that we feel should be in such trainings. I mean that is very important. – Paul*

These examples about *what they do* allowed us to gain insight into how the firms support their claimed image. The third aspect when reflecting on the heads image is *what the consultants personally do* to promote the same image. Liam and Paul expressed the following concerning how they deliver quality:

> *We always try to promote ourselves in a fashionable way, knowledgeable way. Just basic things: being on time; trying to read things; asking the right questions and delivering quality documentation. Basically that is it from my personal perspective. That is all I do every day to make sure I am actually on top of my game. Clients and potential clients or whomever I work with, feel like they are getting a good quality service from us, and on time, as it should be. – Liam*

> *It is all about the answer, it is all about what I do every day, and it is part of me. I just contribute to the company, contribute towards what the company does, and try to deliver good quality service. And try to organise people so that things are happening on time. That is what I do every day. – Paul*

Mia also agrees with the importance of 'being there for the client'. Mia and Hannah both referred to the heads image when they stated the following:

> *Okay, for example being there for the client. That is kind of a big thing, but being available also lets say on Friday at 8 pm when I am at home and when the client calls me that I can answer the call, I can talk with the client or I should talk to the client for example. This is how we also want to be that even if it is not normal working time, we are still there for the clients. – Mia*
>
> *The company wants us to be there for the clients and I am there for the client. But I think this is the point, that I am as person see the point of being there for the client by myself. – Hannah*

Hannah furthermore referred to living the employee brand in the context of contributing ideas in every project, whereas Liam referred to the overall importance of employees to live the employee brand towards customers:

> *Let us face it, as a company everyone of us has a role in terms of how we promote ourselves, how we conduct ourselves. If we would conduct ourselves in a non-professional way, if we would go to conferences to meet clients and conduct in a non-professional way that would of course reflect back on us. So, I would say, that honestly everyone has that role. That is for making sure that we live up to the standards of the company. – Liam*
>
> *For example, I mean the ideas, we have to bring in ideas in every project. Otherwise we do not have work, so that I think is something we live every day. – Hannah*

Our empirical material guided the creation of this theme, which, in context of the coin, we then defined as the heads. In this part the heads image was illustrated through many examples given by the interviewees. The interviewees reflected upon this image of their organisation by providing us with information about *who they are*, *what they do* as organisations together and *what they do as the individual* consultant to support their organisational claims. In the next subchapter, the interviewees will present us a second image of their organisation.

4.2 Tails: The other Side of the Coin

When analysing our empirical data we found that many consultants highlighted their company as an organisation with an enjoyable atmosphere and a positive working environment. Furthermore, the participants included in their answers that their respective organisation promotes a good work life balance and that colleagues feel more like family or friends. These factors combined represent the second theme we uncovered. Relating to the metaphor of the coin, we later decided this theme represents the tails side. Even though the connection is not as obvious as with the heads, we thought about the animal's tail that normally indicates a friendly gesture, thus relating to this family friendly theme.

Throughout the interviews the consultants presented us with statements about *who they are*, *what they do as collective* and *what they do individually* regarding this image, likewise as they did for the previous image. It seemed to be a matter of the heart to them to get this employer image about *who they are* across.

Luis, for instance, emphasised that his company does not see the consultants as an anonymous workforce, but that they are especially valued as an individual person. He accentuated this as follows:

> *We are individuals, we are people and we are not machines or robots. – Luis*

Valuing the individual employees and to not just regard them as workforce, also relates to Emma's statement, who believed their family atmosphere is an attractive factor:

> *What makes us attractive is, which I always find quite funny, we are a relatively small consulting firm and many say they have the impression that it is rather a family atmosphere. Yes, we are not a big firm where you are just a number, but you are really part of a team. – Emma*

Additionally, as becomes visible Emma stressed the point that they are a small firm, which enables them to better integrate their employees. By doing so she is intentionally contrasting her organisation with large firms, where according to her, consultants are only seen as a number. Paul also referred to a family atmosphere by emphasising that every colleague knows everyone:

It is still very much everybody knows everyone else and it is quite a familiar setting and that is what we are trying to converse and I hope we succeed a little bit in that. – Paul

Furthermore, our interviewees described their organisations atmosphere, for instance, as friendly, helpful and respectful to illustrate *who they are* and how they interact as whole. They exemplified this by stating:

We are very respectful to each other. We are very honest to each other. If someone needs help and the other one recognises it and if its fits in his daily work time, he should help the other one. – Luis

There is also a big need for a person to be interested in the rest of the team. They need to be respectful and warm and all of these qualities, which you want to have in a professional friend. – Hugo

For example that we are open; that we are nice; that we are helping each other; that we are competent and that we are helping the client. These kinds of values are important, that it is not like you know like a system. – Mia

The one that sticks out is probably compassion, so I would say that we show more compassion, both towards our colleagues and towards our clients. So compassion is one word that describes it quite well. – Elias

It seems that promoting a positive work life balance is seen as a crucial aspect in the tails image. Our interviewees frequently made claims about their work life balance to give us an idea about the concept and to emphasise that it is lived in their organisation:

Work life balance is not just a word for us. It quite obviously happens. We have not been challenged to chase it, but it also combines our work with a private life. It is not just a word as for other people, but it is what actually happens. That is a big difference. – Oliver

We would also like to position ourselves as an employer that really respects the individual's spare time, and work life balance. The work life balance in terms of fun on the job and work together with people you like, being home in time to see your family and not spending more than one or two nights a week in hotels, is very important and this is the reality in our company. – Lukas

Likewise, our participants highlighted structural aspects, which influenced how they represented their organisation. Oscar and Oliver for example both gave an example of their flat hierarchy as an attractive factor:

> *I have never been a fan of hierarchies and I am not a fan of calling someone junior or senior, it is not what we do here. – Oliver*

> *I do not like hierarchies too much. I would not do very well in the military for example. So, I think that is sort of aligns with this company values as we do not have a clear hierarchy. – Oscar*

In connection to the organisation setting, Luis explained that they are rather a community:

> *We are kind of a community and we are often doing activities outside work. For example, last week in the evening we played poker and there were about 10 people and so we are doing not directly work related stuff. – Luis*

In his example, Luis did not only give us insight into who they are as an organisation, but also provided us with an example of *what they do* in order to support their claims in the tails image. Many of the participants illustrated their interviews with examples on *what they do as an organisation* in order to support the above-described statements about *who they are*. In the following are a few examples for *what they do*:

> *We go skiing, we go sailing and we have internal tournaments in squash and golf. And we do a lot of fun things together I think that is something that strengthens our employer branding. – Lukas*

> *We are going on small holiday or vacations; we call it retreat, two times a year with the full company, in fall and in spring. In spring the retreat is going from Thursday till Sunday and from Friday evening all families are allowed to come and join in the place where we are, the hotel, and stay till Sunday and the company is paying everything. So there are lots of things, or we try to involve the family of our employees. Sure we have a summer party, christmas party, where the families of all our employees are invited. – Ben*

> *We have fun together. We like to do things together within the company. When we are in on ski trip, everyone feels it is almost like going with your closest friends. We have a lot of fun together, I think that it also shows to our clients,*

that we have fun together with our clients. We think that that is important coming to their organisation for a limited period of time and we think that they want to have fun at their work as well, so we try to take that culture with us to our clients as well. – Elias

Besides those examples of doing fun activities, such as small holidays or sport events, Mia provided us with an example on how their work life balance is felt exactly, internally and externally:

As a small consultancy we have so much positive things on our side to be more than just a consultancy. People have the expectations of a small consultancy to be very, let us say, worker friendly, so they do not have to work the whole night. And that is true, we have a work life balance, for example. We have direct communication ways and this kind of stuff is getting more and more important. And I think because of our awareness of these things we are more self-confident to present ourselves in that way. – Mia

By explaining what their organisations are doing to achieve the claims of the heads image, several interviewees drew our attention on the personal aspect when they recruit new employees. By doing so, they highlighted *what they as a whole* do to support the organisation's image, which they presented in the beginning of this subchapter. Our participants elaborate as follows:

This is a small company where we do a particular type of consulting and it means so much to us, to get new people in our team. It is extremely fun to: scan the application, talk to students, and because of that it is, in a sense, like dating, where you are very interested in finding someone who you can have more fun with later. – Hugo

We need to bring in people that are able to do exactly the things that we need to do in the projects, and competency wise, we need to have skilled people, but we also need people who become a family member to our company since we are such a small company. – Lukas

We focus more than our competitors on these personality interviews and maybe a bit less on case interviews even though we have those parts as well. – Elias

Moreover, the organisational structure appears to be an influential part. Not only for the above made claims about *who they are*, but also for the way how things are done in their respective organisation. Luis, for example, related to their working time rules:

> *We do not have working time rules written down. So it is kind of a trust model, you know. So everyone decides when they work. This is a good example, we are doing home office work, and it is typically for us. So today I am in the home office as well. – Luis*

Whereas Mia referred to the usage of informal addresses for colleagues, in a language where a formal address could be used likewise. It is exemplified by you ('Du') in German:

> *We are saying you to each other, we are very flat on this side. And that creates a great feeling of being a team, being helpful to each other and to also have the possibility to speak openly for example. – Mia*

Besides addressing colleagues in an informal tone, it is also common practice to communicate across different hierarchies:

> *A student, who is working for us, now, is just sitting together with one of our partners to talk about and discuss a presentation. This means we really include them in our projects and I think this is what creates an employer brand. It does not matter on which career level you are; you are really active in our company. – Emma*

> *I can speak directly to my supervisor and do not need to think 'oh my, should I or is it allowed for me', to for example, as a consultant talk directly to him (note: a superior colleague) or not. – Mia*

When presenting their organisation in line with the projected tails image, our interviewees did not only give general examples of *what the company does*, but many of them actually supported the organisational claims by referring to examples *what they individually do* to contribute to the tails image.

The majority of the interviewees draw upon how they incorporate the support of the values and characteristics of the tails image in their daily work by specifically talking about their work and company:

> *I, personally, definitely help with the employer branding, but by talking about the way how we look at business and our work here. I think everyone who works at our company helps with that. – Lukas*

> *We always put Company M in a light that surely explains how it is to work here. Mostly just talking about it is a good way for this brand… the employer branding. – Paul*

> *Because in my role I talk to a lot of people, as an employer. When I run interviews with candidates in the office or telephone interviews, or when I am at recruiting fairs and talking about Company I. So the biggest contribution from my side is to be talking about Company I as an employer. – Ben*

> *I make sure that I talk to people who are curious, and I tell my friends, and people I meet, about Company E and give a good picture of what Company E is. – Hugo*

However, it seems that talking about their organisation does not only take place in a strictly professional environment, as several participants indicate:

> *As a recruiter, I am possibly meeting them (note: prospective employees) for breakfast and lunch, and just tell them something about us. Before they are even entering the process. – Lukas*

> *I also pick lunches with the prospects and take them out to different events. – Oliver*

> *I talk to the student over a beer. I think, the reputation through word of mouth is extremely important, for the company I work for. – Hugo*

Other interviewees also provided us with more detailed examples in specific working contexts. Emma elaborated on how she supports employees through the organisation of working time:

> *For example, if I have an employee, who has just become a parent. Basically I have to look at what I can do, so that I enable them with flexible working hours from a time management perspective, so that they can alternate with their partner in childcare. I have parental leave for both, man as well as woman, which I can offer. But I can also see if I have a colleague who is maybe older, who suddenly has a nursing case in the family. That means I can maybe offer them an attractive timeframe in which I enable them to take care of their parents, who are normally the nursing cases. – Emma*

Whereas Mia gave insight into how she tries to create a good working atmosphere even in tense situations:

> *For example when I am in the position of the senior consultant I have two consultants with me and I try to make the atmosphere very friendly, very nice also for them. Especially when the situation is very tense, the client is not happy at the moment, for example, or we have to do a lot of work, then I try to be friendly, to support them, to help them. This is, I would say, for the internal part very important that even if the times are tense and rough, that the people feel okay. We have still a friendly way to be with each other, we have still fun, we try to concentrate and we try to solve the problems together. It is not like 'okay now it is tense and I am not in a good mood and I have to show that to all my colleagues now'. So as person I try to make a good atmosphere, to motivate and to support my colleagues. – Mia*

In this section the outlined tails image was illustrated through statements by the participants and the examples they made use of in their interviews. Firstly, they provided us with statements about *who they are,* and referred to aspects, which make them friendly and fun company to work for. Secondly, they elaborated on *what they together as an organisation do* to support those claims and lastly, they shared personal examples on *what they individually do* when living the described claims.

To conclude, our research participants, the consultants, presented us with information about the heads and tails image of their organisation. In both cases they claimed what kind of organisation they are, and supported those claims by drawing upon examples from their

collective as well as their individual practices. In the next chapter, we will discuss these two images and elaborate on how we connected the two sides of the coin, heads and tails, to the concepts of employee and employer branding.

5 Discussion and Conclusion

In the first section of this chapter, the discussion, the previously outlined findings will be interpreted, discussed and related to existing literature. They key findings will be highlighted and the research question answered. The second part of this chapter contains the conclusion, in which we will summarise our research and present our practical and theoretical implications. Furthermore, we will address this study's limitations and reveal areas for future research.

5.1 Discussion

While fourteen different consulting companies were interviewed, sooner or later every participant referred to the two different themes by declaring who they are as a company. We have already introduced the two metaphoric images related to the two sides of the coin, heads and tails. We will now discuss how we reached from the heads and tails images to a connection with employee and employer branding.

5.1.1 Linking Heads and Tails to the Concepts of Employee and Employer Branding

One of the images identified in the last chapter is heads. This image refers to an excellent consultancy, always delivering the best service and caring about their clients as well as the relationship with them. In our opinion this image is closely related with what we interpret as employee branding, by agreeing on the definition of Miles and Mangold (2004) on employee branding: “the process by which employees internalise the desired brand image and are motivated to project the image to customers and other organizational constituents” (p. 68). Employee branding is attained when organisations are able to create a distinct image in the minds of their employees and, eventually, customers alike. As the participating consultants described precise images on how they want to represent their respective firms, we regard this as accomplished. Therefore, from now on, we will refer to the first image as employee brand.

The second image, referred to as tails, describes the company having an enjoyable atmosphere and a nice working environment. Furthermore, this image represented the organisation offering a positive work life balance and employees feeling like family and friends, rather than just colleagues. In our opinion this image is closely related to what is stated in literature about the concept of the employer brand: being perceived as an attractive employer and presenting the organisation as an 'employer of choice' to current and potential employees (e.g. Edwards, 2005; Robertson & Khatibi, 2012). Thus, from now on we will refer to this image as employer brand.

To further investigate the heads and tails images presented by employees we looked at how a consultant referred to these two brands. The consultants we interviewed referred to these two brands in three different ways: by saying *who they are*; *what they do as an organisation* and *what they do as an individual*. We will now further look into the three different stages.

Initially the consultants tended to refer to the employee and employer brand by explaining *who they are* as an organisation. They pointed towards their organisational values, core beliefs and unique characteristics regarding these brands covering employee and employer branding. According to scholars, aspects as values, beliefs and characteristics are part of both, employee and employer branding (e.g. Miles & Mangold, 2004; 2005; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). At the same time consultants endorsed these two brands by saying what they are not like; by providing alterity images. This way of emphasising an organisational image is typical for the consulting profession according to Alvesson (2004).

Secondly, in order to support these more abstract claims about values and organisational characteristics, consultants provided practical examples. In our opinion, these practical examples provided 'proof' and 'evidence' for these brand claims by stating *what they do as a company*. Our participants typically related to how they, as an organisation, do 'practices' and 'activities' which show that they really are behaving in the way the brand claims to be. For the heads image (employee brand) consultants related, for example, to delivering the best possible quality and being available after normal working hours. Whereas for the tails image (employer brand) consultants related, for example, to having an enjoyable working atmosphere and flat hierarchy.

Thirdly and lastly, the interviewees provided us with examples of *what they do as individual* to support the two brand claims. Providing oneself as evidence of 'living the brand' in

employee branding is a common practice. Edwards (2005) noted that by making the norms, values and goals of the organisation explicit, and presenting them as an ideal that all staff should identify with, the organisation creates a guide about the desired work behaviour. In employee branding the employees are the branded entity and are representing the organisation's brand through their actions to clients and other stakeholder (Edwards, 2005). Thus, their daily job is to 'live the brand' and act as brand ambassadors (Edwards, 2005; Tarnovskaya, 2011). In contrast, in employer branding the organisation is the branded entity and aims to presents its own image to current and future employees (Edwards, 2005). In this case, the employee is generally not treated as an active brand asset or as 'living the brand' (Robertson & Khatibi, 2012). However, our findings oppose those views, which regard employees as an inactive part in employer branding.

5.1.2 Living one Side of the Coin, living both Sides of the Coin

As explained above, it is common practice for employees to live their employee brand – to live the heads side of the coin. However, it is rarely acknowledge by respective literature that employees live the employer brand – the tails side of the coin. The main finding of our study is opposing exactly this perception about employees in employer branding. Our study strongly indicates that the employee is not only living the employee brand, but also the employer brand. This becomes clear when the interviewees provided us with not only evidence and proof of collective practices, but also of individual practices. This is a surprising result, which is barely touched upon by literature, and therefore it led us to our key finding:

Main finding: Consultants do not only live the employee brand, but also the employer brand.

We elaborated above, that employees often supported the claims of their organisation's employer brand through using evidence of their individual performance. When promoting the employer brand, the consultants make close connections to their individual practices and what they specifically do, which represents the claimed employer brand. We therefore argue that this is a clear indication for the consultant being a brand ambassador for the employer brand and living it as well. In literature, the employee promoting the employer brand is typically not considered as an active brand ambassador (e.g. Robertson & Khatibi, 2012), which, based on our findings, we contest.

By opposing the established view of employee's engagement in literature, we need to reconsider the rare literature, which argues in this notion. Our finding supports the rare literature, which argues in favour of seeing the employee is an active constructor in employer branding (Tarnovskaya, 2011). Consequently, it is necessary to reconsider Tarnovskaya's view, which we have introduced and actually contested in chapter two. As our finding is contradicting with our adopted theoretical framework of employee and employer branding, we identified the need to reconsider and adjust the initial framework. Therefore we suggest the following new framework (visible on the right):

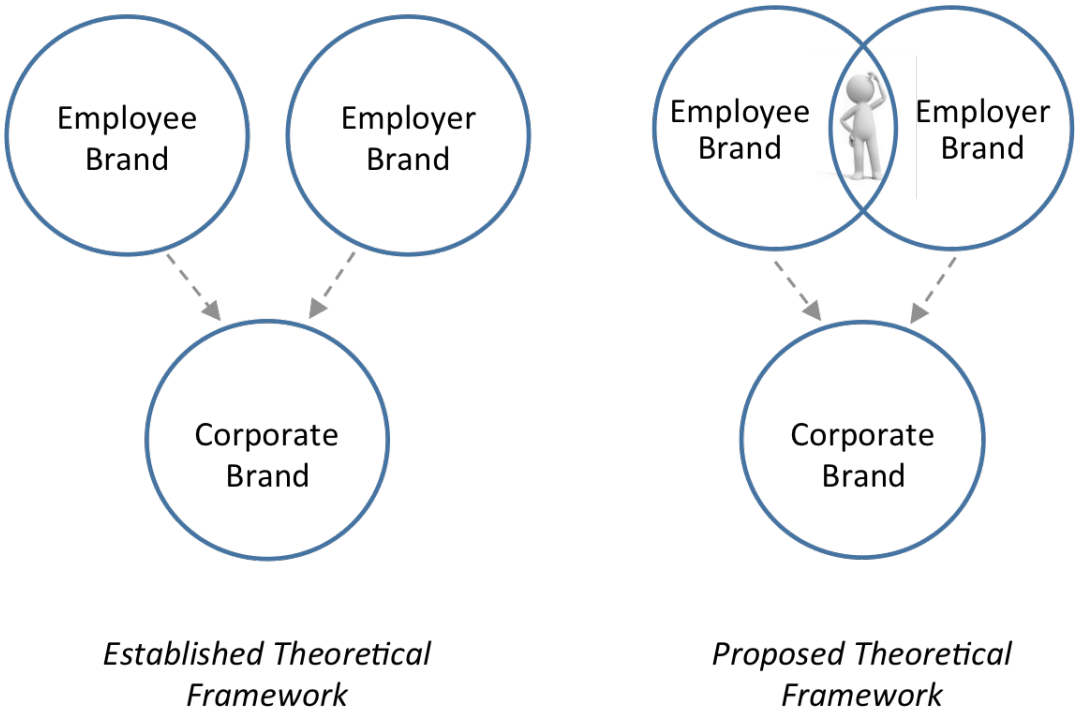


Figure 2: Established and newly proposed theoretical framework

The left figure shows the established theoretical framework, which we already introduced in chapter two. The right figure presents our newly proposed theoretical framework, in which the two sides of the coin are connected through the employee, who is the connecting factor. According to our finding, this theoretical framework shows how employee and employer branding are connected in our specific research setting.

We explained, in chapter two, that employees need to internalise the employee brand characteristics before they are able to 'live the brand'. As we do not see a difference between living the employee brand and living the employer brand, we consequently argue that employees also for employer branding need to internalise the brand before they can live it. The employer brand is typically solely conducted by human resources personnel, which can draw their entire attention on presenting the tails side of the coin. In contrast, the core function of the participants in our study is foremost being a consultant, while simultaneously holding internal human resources responsibilities. Consequently, one consultant is required to live two brands and act as two brand ambassadors at the same time. Metaphorically speaking, s/he needs to promote both sides of the coin simultaneously. We argue that this outcome of the study represents the specific setting of small firms, where employees have to carry two responsibilities, which in our findings leads to a brand ambiguity. In larger firms it is common practice to have a human resources department, which is not involved in client related projects and arguably rather follows best human resources practices (Newman & Sheikh, 2014). Therefore, the human resource personnel do not have to represent the employee brand and employer brand simultaneously.

Based on uncovering that consultants do not only live the employee brand, but also the employer brand, we come back to the question proposed in the introduction: How can a consultant promote the two different sides of the coin at the same time? It seems to us, that at this point, the coin might start to twirl. Our empirical data showed that the consultants 'live the brand' on both sides of the coin, heads and tails. This is unique as an employee normally only lives one brand, depending on his/her role either the employee or the employer brand. However, we argue that for living, the employee and employer brand, the consultant needs to each internalise the brand characteristics and values. We identified in our analysis, the core aspects for the heads image, thus the employee brand, focused on aspects such as doing excellent consulting work, delivering the best possible service and caring about the clients. Whereas the tails image, the employer brand, included aspects such as having a family atmosphere, a positive working environment and the organisation offering a good work life balance. It appeared to us that the two brands incorporate different aspects, which the consultant both has to live. Looking back at the literature, it is argued that the organisation's strategy, mission and especially the core values build the base in both branding practices (Edwards, 2005; Miles & Mangold, 2004, 2005). However, if consultants are confronted with two at least partly different brand values and characteristics, it seems to us that this bears a

potential conflict. Therefore, our assumption is that the two branding processes might interfere and work against each other, as they have to be promoted by the same, single employee. This again seems to be specifically relevant for small firms, as the two branding processes cannot be disconnected in small firms, as is customary in larger firms. This deduction led to our additional finding:

Additional finding: Living the employee and the employer brand might interfere when simultaneously practiced by the same consultant as the brands might have different demands.

However, our data is limited in a sense that it data does not give enough evidence for analysing this additional finding. Thus this represents the missing data in our empirical material. Yet, we would argue that the two brands, which the consultant promotes and lives, might be conflicting. If this would be the case, it would potentially include conflicting messages of what is desired form the consultant and eventually indicate a role conflict between the two brands, which the consultant needs to promote. This notion offers potential for further investigation and research in an academic context.

5.2 Conclusion

The dual role of the participating consultants offered a unique and unknown combination in branding of PSFs. Our study aimed to gain a better understanding of how specifically consultants promote their organisation in regards to the concepts of employee and employer branding. In order to answer this research question and aim, we contacted fifteen employees that work as consultants and carry responsibilities within human resources simultaneously in small consultancies. It was not difficult to target employees holding these dual roles, as it is common in small firms to carry an internal responsibility besides the main consulting work. We then conducted semi-structured interviews with all participants. Due to our interpretive standpoint, it was not our aim to generalise findings, but rather to gain in depth insights into the issue.

Our study uncovered that consultants promote their organisations through two brand images, referred to as heads and tails in relation to a coin throughout this research thesis. We later identified that the heads image represents the employee brand of the organisation, whereas the

tails image represents the employer brand. Furthermore, as the consultants frequently used examples of their individual practices as proof for their organisations claims about their employer brand, they thus provided evidence for them living the employer brand. 'Living the brand' is common practice for consultants in employee branding, however, not in employer branding. A potential conflict might occur, when the consultant has to internalise two different brand characteristics. This led us to our findings:

- *Consultants do not only live the employee brand, but also the employer brand.*
- *Living the employee and the employer brand might interfere when simultaneously practiced by the same consultant as the brands might have different demands.*

As a deduction of those findings, we identified the need to adjust the established theoretical framework and proposed a new framework. Summarising, it can be said that the consultants promote their organisation through living the employee as well as the employer brand. As a result, the consultants might see themselves in a situation where they have to 'live two brands' simultaneously, thus being a twirling coin. Based on our findings, we argue that the two different brands might interfere.

In this final section, we will present how these two findings can be deduced in practical as well as theoretical implications. Last but not least, we will critically reflect upon on this study's limitation and point to further research areas.

5.2.1 Practical Implications

We, as interpreters, aimed to understand how consultants promote their organisation in employee and employer branding. Our empirical data showed that the consultants in this specific setting are surprisingly 'living two brands': the employee brand and the employer brand. In order for the consultant to be able to represent two brand images we reason the following:

Firstly, we recommend that the employees need to be aware of the two brands they have to represent. It is crucial that not only the consultants acknowledge the potentially different demands of their brands, but that their organisations do so as well. Creating awareness and transparency of the different brands, what is expected from representing which brand and how

consultants should handle potential conflicting branding situations needs to be addressed openly in the consulting firms.

Secondly, we advise the consultancies to base the brands on the same foundation, which includes aspects as values and mission, to reduce the possibility of conflicts between the different demands of the brands. Additionally, the firms should provide their consultants with a guideline regarding employee and employer brand images. By acknowledging all employees of the firm as active participants of branding, these could be constructed collaboratively. With this support, the consultants might be able to more likely represent the employee and employer brand simultaneously without providing stakeholders with conflicting messages. Furthermore, by doing so the employee and employer branding could provide a strong corporate brand to help reduce the ambiguities present in the consultancy industry. Eventually, a strong corporate brand created through employee and employer branding, can lead to a long-term competitive advantage.

Thirdly, we argue for continuous reflection upon the values and characteristics of the employee and employer brand, as they might develop over time to 'fit' the organisational environment. We do acknowledge the context dependency and therefore know that these practical implications should be suited and adapted to fit the organisational circumstances such as size and industry.

5.2.2 Theoretical Implications

The outcome of our study indicates two main theoretical implications. Our main finding argues for the fact that consultants do not only live the employee brand, but also the employer brand. Employee branding literature widely acknowledges the employee as 'living the brand' and as being a brand ambassador. In contrast, employer branding literature barely regards the employee as 'living the brand' or being an active brand ambassador. Consequently, this outcome supports the few scholars who have recently been arguing to also consider the employee in employer branding as active (Tarnovskaya, 2011). Therefore, we reason that this gap in employer branding literature in the context of small firms must be filled by acknowledging that an employee can also live the employer brand and be an active ambassador. As a result, the two practices of employee and employer branding become partly overlapping, through the employee as connecting factor. Figuratively speaking, the employee is bridging the two sides of the coin. These theoretical implications are considered in our

newly proposed framework, which is illustrated in Figure 2 on page 39 and presents a major contribution to literature of employee and employer branding in the specific context of small PSFs.

5.2.3 Research Limitations

Arguably every research has limitations, including ours. We aimed for a high degree of reflexivity, since we wanted to acknowledge our limitations and weaknesses to protect the legitimacy of our research.

The first research limitation concerns our research sample. By taking a relatively large research sample size of fifteen participants, we aimed to receive a broad variety of perspectives. Even though this large research sample from two geographical backgrounds provided us with a variety of perspectives, we believe that an even larger research sample would increase the understanding in the described phenomenon. The second research limitation, likewise regards our research sample. Studying employees in small PSFs, who carry responsibilities in consulting and human resources was the 'determining' factor in our sample. However, by doing so we inevitably ended up interviewing consultants with a broad variety in seniority and strategic responsibilities (from consultants up to board members). By knowing this beforehand, we analysed the data by strictly looking for the consultants' perspective and did not consider their various managerial perspectives. The third research limitation regards our research topic. We did not originally intend to make employee branding a central aspect in our research. This was a meta-theme that emerged from our data analysis and is nevertheless, in line with our abductive research process. Since this study did not set out to focus on employee branding, no direct questions concerning this topic were asked during the interviews. Nonetheless, questions surrounding the concept were asked, which is how this topic emerged as important alongside employer branding anyway. The final research limitation concerns our resources. Due to time and access restrictions we were unable to engage in further research practices, such as observation, which prevented us from experiencing and eventually visualising the work and the engagement of the consultants practicing the various brands by ourselves. Thus this also leaves options for further research.

5.2.4 Future Research

Our research provided evidence that consultants are actively living the two sides of the coin, the employee and employer brand. The setting in which this study took place was specific for two reasons. Firstly, it was conducted exclusively within small PSFs. Secondly, the participants are unique in occupying dual responsibilities, their normal consulting tasks plus human resource responsibilities. Thus, we would recommend conducting a similar study in a slightly varied setting to be able to gain further empirical insight in this matter. Both, with regards to our findings, but also in order to be able to potentially generalise them. Lastly, relating to our second finding, the potential interference of the two brands when they 'channelled through' the same employee, we would highly recommend to investigate potential difficulties and conflicts, which could arise for the individual employee due to the two brands s/he is required to live. It might be particularly interesting to study this by applying an identity perspective to see not only the 'practical individual involvement', but also to examine to which extend the consultant relates the brand images to his/her own identity.

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