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Talent acquisition gamified: Insights from playing the game at PwC Hungary

Master Thesis

by

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Abstract

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Thesis purpose: The purpose of this research was to explore how gamification in talent acquisition can be used as a tool to attract the right talent to organizations by studying the perceptions of those individuals involved in the process, as well as to increase knowledge within the intersection of both fields.

Relevance: The emergence of gamification in the field of talent acquisition evoked the interests in researchers and practitioners alike. However, as research on this topic is still in its infancy, we sought to explore the intersection of both fields within a PSF to extend the perspective on the understanding of the use of gamification in similar contexts.

Methodology: Following a social constructionist, interpretivist epistemological paradigm and a relativist ontological paradigm, we explored how talent managers and recently hired young talent at PwC Hungary socially constructed their experience on the use of the gamified intervention Multipoly. Through the conduction of a qualitative research study, recurring patterns found in our interviews served as starting point of our investigation. Following an abductive, inductively oriented approach we related research to theory.

Findings: The paper establishes an insight as to how gamification can be used in talent acquisition. The findings suggest that Multipoly can be viewed as a vehicle to align prospective employee's identity to that of the organization and that it acts as a pre-socialization tool that may ultimately make employee onboarding easier.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and problem statement

In today's highly competitive business world, organizations are increasingly looking at innovative ways to attract and acquire top talent. When it comes to knowledge-intensive firms (KIFs) such as professional service firms (PSFs), the race to attract the best talent has become extremely heated as it is seen as a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Dery, Tansley & Hafermalz, 2014). In particular, the 'skills gap' between what employers seek in suitable candidates and what candidates offer is becoming increasingly difficult to bridge (Saeed et al., 2015). Since the most important resource in PSFs are its people – or human resources – it is paramount that these firms view human resources management (HRM) as a strategic activity and that all HRM practices (e.g. attraction, recruitment, training, onboarding etc.) are aligned to its strategic objectives (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). This has led some of the PSFs to turn to one of the innovative ways, namely gamification, as a means to achieving this goal and to fulfill their strategic objectives. Gamification broadly refers to “the process of game-thinking and game mechanics to engage users and solve problems” (Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011, p.14), and interest in its application to a variety of different processes with human resource management (HRM) is growing in popularity. The “game mechanics” referred to in Zichermann and Cunningham's definition include elements such as live leaderboards, the allocation of points and badges, as well as prizes, and is intended as a way to motivate and engage users and to guide their behaviors to achieve stated business goals (Simpson & Jenkins, 2015). To illustrate the possible use of gamification in the talent acquisition process, the following example is appropriate:

British intelligence and security agency, the GCHQ – the U.K. equivalent of the NSA – created an encrypted message on a website CanYouCrackIt.co.uk and used it as part of their application process for all wannabe spies and hires. Candidates had to literally crack the code and decipher what the hidden message was in order to advance in the process. So, not only did applicants get a sense if they were up for the challenge of the job, the GCHQ was able to weed out candidates who sent in an application or a resume en masse and have an objective ruling on whether they met the job requirements (White, 2015, n.p.).

However, studies on the use of gamification in talent attraction and acquisition are scarce and are mostly in the form of popular literature. Little information is available on how employees in organizations and candidates going through the talent acquisition process perceive its use and how it works. Since gamification is changing the way organizations like PSFs are attracting and acquiring talent – especially for young talent – it is important that the intersection between gamification and talent acquisition is studied.

Lastly, instead of limiting ourselves to whether the use of gamification is perceived in a positive or negative light, we are interested in the various ways it is perceived in order to find patterns of how it is constructed socially. Such patterns will help us to get a better understanding as to where and how gamification can be used during the talent acquisition process. As Master's students that will be graduating soon and will be looking for employment at KIFs ourselves – perhaps even through a gamified process – it is also in our interest to get an understanding of how gamification is perceived during the talent acquisition process.

1.2 Research purpose

Since PSFs are facing the challenge in how to attract the best talent that effectively contributes to the success of the company, the purpose of this qualitative study is to explore and outline the use of gamification in talent acquisition through the study of experiences of employees, namely young talent (employees who went through the gamified talent acquisition process) and talent managers (employees who are involved in the gamified talent acquisition process such as recruitment officers, talent managers etc.). As most of the literature available on gamification in talent acquisition comes from popular literature, we intend to view gamification from a more critical lens: through anchoring our study in identity theory.

In order to grasp the phenomenon, we decided to study gamification in a practical environment. This context was provided to us by PwC Hungary who gamified their talent acquisition process through the introduction of their own gamified intervention called Multipoly. The research context will be discussed in greater detail in section 3.4.

In this study we aim to provide new insights into how gamification might be explained. We saw a gap in the explanation of gamification, specifically in talent acquisition. The study further seeks to explore the understanding of participants at our research site, PwC Hungary, in order for us to come up with an interesting way that might be useful for other researchers and practitioners to understand the use of gamification in similar contexts (namely PSFs). Lastly, the research strives to contribute to academia as well as practitioners in terms of how the phenomenon of gamification can be understood in the context of a PSF. We want to conceptualize gamification in an interesting way, so that other people can use it to understand similar gamified interventions.

1.3 Research question

In light of the above, this study aims to explore the use of gamification in talent acquisition, using PwC Hungary's gamified intervention, Multipoly, as an example in the following:

- How do talent managers involved in the talent acquisition process at PwC Hungary perceive the use of Multipoly?
- How do recently hired young talent perceive the use of Multipoly in the talent acquisition process?

Through studying the perceptions of employees involved in the gamified talent acquisition process at PwC Hungary, we hope to gain interesting insights into how Multipoly works and how it can be understood.

1.4 Delimitations

This study focuses on the research setting at PwC Hungary, making this our main delimitation for this thesis. As a result, this research does not intend to mirror the range or variety of this gamification concept. We placed our area of investigation within the broad context of talent management and narrowed our focus down to talent acquisition, which is a further delimitation to this research. In addition, since we are studying the topic through the lens of identity, we also see this as a delimitation as it underpins our theoretical basis. Our research is also influenced by the scope of the thesis, the absence of literature on the use of gamification, as well as personal interests.

1.5 Outline

In **Chapter One**, the scope of gamification in talent acquisition was discussed and motivated. The reader was therefore provided with background information on the research topic and the research questions derived from that. The chapter further provided information about the rationale behind our investigation and about our research purpose. This has highlighted the intended theoretical contribution of this thesis. It was also important to mention our delimitations at this point as they set the scope and boundaries of our paper. **Chapter Two** builds on the aforementioned and discusses literature on gamification in talent acquisition, as well as on identity. **Chapter Three** outlines our research design, the methodological reasoning used to design our interview guidelines, our sampling strategy, and data collection strategy. **Chapter Four** is designed to present our analysis, while the thesis concludes with limitations and suggestions for future research in **Chapter Five**.

2. Literature Review

Recent literature has highlighted the increased interest in gamification (e.g. Zichermann & Cunningham, 2011; Kumar & Raghavendran, 2015) as studied in different disciplines such as education, health, marketing and psychology (Harman et al., 2014, Schoech et al., 2013). However, the concept itself is not new. For example, the professional network LinkedIn uses gamification design elements, such as profile strength and endorsements. “What is new is that more and more workers are familiar with [gamification] and enjoy gaming” (Gartside et al., 2014, p.8).

A motivation for the increased interest in gamification could be the increased “user activity and retention” (Deterding et al., 2011a, p.9) as engaging workplaces are created to facilitate interdisciplinary collaboration (Deterding et al., 2011b). The applications are numerous, as Thianthai and Zhou (2013) described, ranging from recruitment procedures towards attempting to make dull tasks fun and more stimulating. This versatility contributes to the appealing character of gamification “to attract and stimulate their target audience” within different industries (Schoech et al., 2013, p.198).

In the following section of this paper, theory and concepts relevant to our investigation will be outlined and our theoretical framework that was abductively (inductively-oriented) formed. After introducing the broad concept of gamification, it is further conceptualized by connecting it to talent acquisition. Subsequently, insights into employer branding and onboarding are provided as they were recurring themes within our findings. We will end this chapter by discussing identity and where it plays a role in the talent acquisition process with specific reference to gamification. Identity is important in our discussion as we are trying to move beyond gamification as a practice and investigate the field further by grounding it in identity theory.

2.1 Gamification in talent acquisition

The term *gamification* is still finding its feet, with no single academic definition currently available (Deterding et al. 2011c; Simpson & Jenkins, 2015). According to Zichermann and Cunningham (2011), gamification refers to applying “the process of game-thinking and game mechanics to engage users and solve problems” (p.14), while Werbach (2013) describe it as “using design techniques from games in a business context or some other

non-game context” (n.p.). “Game mechanics” refer to elements such as badges, leaderboards, points and levels. After surveying both popular and academic literature in the field, we found the working definition for gamification, as proposed by Deterding et al. (2011c), that states that it is “the use of game design elements in non-game contexts” (p.1). Those non-game contexts have been further extended by Deterding (2012) to “products, and services” in order “to motivate desired behaviors” (p.14). Burke (2014) goes one step further and states that “gamification is being applied to engage people in much more than innovation [...] [as] it can also be used to develop skills and change behaviors” (p.4). Based on the previous definitions, and referring back to talent acquisition, we broadly view gamification in talent acquisition as the application of game elements (such as leaderboards and badges) during stages of the talent acquisition process to engage prospective employees and provide a delightful candidate experience.

From the definitions above it becomes clear that gamification can be applied to an almost infinite number of workplace contexts, because the ‘dividing line’ between gamification and other game studies is difficult to see (Kumar & Raghavendran, 2015). However, it has been emphasized by different authors (e.g. Deterding et al., 2011a; Werbach, 2014; Huotari & Hamari, 2012) that gamification involves game mechanics without designing an entire game (as in serious games), limiting the scope of gamification significantly.

In addition to the gamification example of the British Intelligence and Security Agency given earlier in **Chapter One**, another example of gamification includes Stepping Up, that Xerox created to make their management training process more engaging. After completing classroom-based training, trainees have to log into Stepping Up and complete a series of on-the-job activities in a virtual environment in order for them to complete their training. Their progress is monitored continuously and displayed on a leaderboard for other people in the company to see. According to them this facilitates teamwork and social integration (Donston-Miller, 2012). These are examples that are game-like, but do not involve “immersive simulations like the typical serious game” (Werbach, 2014, p.267).

Looking at the benefits of gamification that contribute to the attractiveness of this trend, Hunt (2014) states that it can help employers gain significant insights into prospective employees’ aptitude and skills (e.g. creative thinking and problem-solving capabilities). Another benefit is the possibility that the gamification intervention can help them to

determine whether the individual will be a good fit in terms of cultural fit for the organization.

Over the last few years, Human Resource (HR) professionals have shown a keen interest in gamification and its use in the HR lifecycle to add business value (Dery et al., 2014), with Shergill (2014) stating that “Gamification is changing the very DNA of HR” (n.p.). Gamification is increasingly being used in traditional HR activities such as recruitment, onboarding, training and development and performance management (Kumar & Raghavendran, 2015; Shergill, 2014; Meister, 2015).

Simpson and Jenkins (2015) argue that gamification can be used to modify almost every existing workplace HR process to make it “more engaging, fulfilling, fun and productive” (p.1) for employees, with Burke (2015) stating that gamification motivates and engages individuals in a playful manner that stimulates them to “achieve goals they may not even know they have” (p.4). This can be achieved through taking existing tasks and processes and integrating game mechanics into it (Deterding et al., 2011a). However, the concept should also be considered with caution, because as proposed by Deterding (2012), gamification can amplify the intrinsic motivation of job applicants – depending on how it is used. This is connected to ‘behavioral control’, which – depending on the goal of the application – can take the form of an ‘invisible behavioral manipulator’.

One area of special interest is the application of gamification to the talent acquisition process (Dery et al., 2014; Meister, 2015). Talent acquisition is defined as “a strategic approach to identifying, attracting and onboarding top talent to efficiently and effectively meet dynamic business needs” (Erickson, 2012, n.p.). The process therefore entails more than simply recruiting and selecting talented individuals, but involves an “ongoing cycle of processes related to attracting, sourcing, recruiting, and hiring (or placing) employees within an organization” (Rivera, 2011, n.p.). Organizations are increasingly turning to gamification to make the talent acquisition process more fun, dynamic and engaging, thereby boosting their ability to acquire top talent in the market (Dery et al., 2014).

This is especially true amongst PSFs who use gamification to attract and acquire young talent – which we define as recent university graduates with a maximum of two years’ working experience. Companies like Deloitte, PwC, and KPMG are incorporating elements

of gamification in their talent acquisition process (Haughton, 2015; Bodimeade, 2014). The main reason for this move is because the so-called “war on talent” has become extremely heated between PSFs, and recent research by Dery et al. (2014) has shown that gamifying elements of the talent acquisition process can enhance the overall graduate recruitment process of PSFs.

Although the application of gamification in talent acquisition is widely discussed in popular literature and hailed as a possible solution to win the war on talent, little is actually written about exactly how gamification can be used in talent acquisition and how it works or fit in the talent acquisition process. Employer branding and onboarding were two areas continuously highlighted within the popular literature as having the potential to benefit from gamification. In the following two sections, we will provide some insights into these two areas as well as how they are linked to gamification in the literature.

2.2 Employer branding in talent acquisition

The relevance of branding as one of the key activities in business has been emphasized in literature by different scholars (e.g. Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Before considering different definitions of employer branding, we would like to trace the term back to its roots of *branding*, since there is a close relationship between the terms ‘employer branding’ and ‘branding’ (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). For instance, the idea of branding was picked up by Kotler (1991) as he defines a brand as “a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors” (p.442). Being more precise in his elaboration, Swystun (2007) explains that “a brand is a mixture of attributes, tangible and intangible, symbolized in a trademark, which if managed properly, creates value and influence” (p.14).

This concept – in combination with employer branding within the area of HR – “suggests differentiation of a firm’s characteristics as an employer from those of its competitors, [as] the employment brand highlights the unique aspects of the firm’s employment offerings or environment” (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p.502). Ambler and Barrow (1996) capture the term ‘employment offering’ as “The package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company” (p.187).

Edwards (2010) digs a bit deeper and defines employment offering as particular employment experience that especially targets potential job applicants and current employees through the use of explicit claims. Edwards takes this a step further in his elaboration and describes employer branding as “an activity where principles of marketing, in particular the “science of branding”, are applied to HR activities in relation to current and potential employees” (p.5). However, within the context of PSFs, Alvesson (2004) does not make a distinction between the term. He uses employer branding interchangeably with brand, image management and corporate image. From all of the above, it becomes evident that the roots of employer branding can be traced back to branding and marketing.

Taking a closer look at employer branding within the context of talent acquisition, companies are increasingly resorting to branding to be positioned as employer of choice for recruits and to “assure that current employees are engaged in the culture and the strategy of the firm” (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p.501). Continuing this line of thought, Dell and Hickey (2002) specify the employer brand as a means to “establish the identity of a company as an employer [that] encompasses the firm’s values, systems, policies and behaviors toward the objectives of attracting, motivating and retaining employees” (p.24). From this, it can be deduced that a positive and constant execution of employer branding keeps potential job candidates and current employees attracted to the company as the employee value proposition (EVP) is actively communicated. Especially in talent acquisition, EVP becomes important as it is used to “attract the prospective employees and [...] lives up to the brand promise made to the recruits” (Srivastava & Bhatnagar, 2010, p.26).

As mentioned previously, a lot of the popular literature talk about how gamification can be used in talent acquisition to attract prospective employees through employer branding. According to Greenberg (2013), organizations that offer prospective candidates a gamified application process provide them with a completely different experience compared to organizations still using a traditional recruitment process. This creates brand differentiation and provides the prospective candidate with a delightful candidate experience that can increase brand loyalty and employer attractiveness. However, although the use of gamification in the talent acquisition process is becoming widespread amongst PSFs, research on how the gamified talent acquisition process is perceived by the individuals involved and how it works are scarce. Schoech et al. (2013) mentioned the scarcity of

research in terms of gamifying the application process. This was further noted by Nikolaou and Oostrom (2015) as they note that “little is known about gamification in the recruitment process [...] [that is] addressing this emerging recruitment technology and its influence on both the size and quality of applicant tools” (p.36-37). Chow and Chapman (2013) also highlighted positive responses on gamified recruitment processes, but took a critical stance towards its as “no clear statistics have been provided to objectively gauge its effectiveness” (p.91).

2.3 Socialization and onboarding in talent acquisition

The increased orientation towards employee retention and selecting the right talent has impacted recruitment processes, making ‘onboarding’ a recurring term (Snell, 2006). A useful definition that describes onboarding is presented by Klein and Polin (2012). Both authors argue that onboarding comprises “formal and informal practices, programs, and policies enacted or engaged in by an organization or its agents to facilitate newcomer adjustment” (p. 268). Snell (2006) again emphasizes the role onboarding occupies in the company as she views it as crucial to form a sustainable bond between employer and employee. She then defines onboarding “as the direct bridge between the promise of new employee talent and the attainment of actual productivity” (p.32).

Nonetheless, there are also authors who use the term ‘socialization’ interchangeably with onboarding. For example, Bauer and Erdogan (2011) do not differentiate between the two and state that “Organizational socialization, or onboarding, is a process through which new employees move from being organizational outsiders to becoming organizational insiders” (p.51). We however, share the widespread opinion that onboarding and socialization are two different concepts that are intertwined. Wanberg (2012) describes socialization as a “process that occurs within a person” and within organizations as “process by which employees learn about and adapt to new jobs, roles, and the culture of the workplace” (p.268). Onboarding, on the other hand, is a practice that helps new employees adjust and integrate by taking away the anxiety and uncertainty that often comes with a new job. Increasingly, companies resort to onboarding as it is believed to be an essential feature “of the newcomer experience and effective in helping to socialize new employees” (Klein et al., 2015, p.263). This also has the competitive advantage, speaking from an HR

standpoint, that individuals take on a role that benefits and fits both organization and individual needs (Klein et al., 2015).

The use of gamification in onboarding is increasing as more and more businesses are turning towards game technology to achieve objectives (Callan et al., 2015). As previously stated, gamification can be applied in numerous workplace contexts that impact employees. Turning to onboarding, gamification can further help prospective employees gain a realistic preview of a job, as “Online games and simulations can also be used to get a sense of what working for an organization would be like” (Hunt, 2014, p.37). Burke (2014) expands this view by stating that, by motivating people to digitally engage in the game, gamification can be used to “motivate [people] to change behaviors, develop skills and to drive innovation” (p.6) in order to achieve their goals. Nevertheless, Callan et al. (2015) call attention to the necessity of measuring the learning progress to determine whether the onboarding process effectively teaches young talent about the job and employer.

2.4 Identity as theoretical perspective

As discussed in **Chapter One**, we intend to study gamification in talent acquisition from the perspective of identity. The field of identity is very broad and ambiguous, but is broadly “based on the premise that the self is constructed from social interaction and the integration of one’s values, meaning, and standards” (Carden & Callahan, 2007, p.170).

Alvesson (2004) defines identity as an individual’s view of him- or herself and describes an individual’s identity work as a continuous process that occurs through comparisons and interactions with other individuals and/or groups. He further states that, in an organizational context such as in PSFs, identity needs to be viewed as social concept that it shaped by everyday interactions with the organization. Identity work can hereby be understood as finding answers to the question “Who am I?” and serve as a means to establish a strong sense of the self that can be used as a basis for interactions in social settings (Alvesson, 2004).

One area within the field of organizational identity that can help us understand how identity is shaped by organizations is social identity theory, which states that individuals

have the tendency to identify with and place themselves into different social categories such as gender, age, and organizational membership. This social classification helps the individual make sense of the world and enables them to define themselves in relation to their social environment, which provides them with a sense of personal belonging (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

Ashforth and Mael (1989) further state that one important source that informs an individual's social identity is the organization they belong to, as well as the "department, union, lunch group, age cohort, fast-track group" (p.22) and so forth. And Kelman (1961) argues that this need for identification arises from the individual's desire for affiliation and to fulfill the feeling of being part of something. Social identity is thus seen as an important element of identity work.

When looking at socialization and identity when new employees join an organization, Ashforth and Mael (1989) argue that "organizational newcomers are highly concerned with building a situational definition" (p.26). Since these new employees are placed in a new environment, they are very unsure about themselves and their future role. They therefore engage in a process of identity work in order to understand their role within the organization and how they should behave within in. This is done through learning the organization's "policies and logistics, the general role expectations and behavioral norms, the power and status structures, and so forth" (p.27).

Verbal and non-verbal interactions with the organization are therefore important as they serve as a way through which newcomers can learn about the organization. Through these interactions – which can take the form of advertisements, onboarding sessions etc. – individuals can begin to construct their identity through resolving role ambiguity and putting an informational framework in place that will frame their experience within the organization. Socialization through these interactions with the organization ultimately leads the individual to identify with the organization, which may facilitate the process of internalizing the organization's values and beliefs (Alvesson & Willmot, 2002; Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

In light of this, Alvesson and Willmot (2002) view identity as a way through which organizations can exercise organizational control. Through certain mechanisms embedded

in the organization, organizations' can shape and direct individuals' identity. They refer to this as identity regulation, and say that it "encompasses the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction" (p.625). They go on to explain that organizational processes like onboarding, training and development, and how performance management systems are structured all have an impact on molding employees' identity.

Furthermore, both authors argue that organizations can have a significant impact on individuals' (self-)identity work though serving as a source of identification. An individual's identity can be defined as "the self as reflexively understood by the person [...] self-identity is continuity (across time and space) as interpreted reflexively by the agent" (Giddens, 1991, as cited in Alvesson & Willmot, 2002, p.626). With regards to gamification in talent acquisition, identity regulation might therefore be perceived by prospective employees as a form of support to shape their own self-identity and the enactment of their desired identity.

3. Methodology

In this chapter we provide information about the methodological reasoning, research design and data collection and analysis process. We will also discuss our reflexivity in this research by highlighting methodological as well as ethical considerations.

3.1 Research Philosophy

Before the details of the research design are explained, Saunders et al. (2009) suggest that you start by clarifying the metatheoretical assumptions regarding “the relationship between [the nature of that] knowledge and the process by which it is developed” (p.108). In our research we are departing from the social constructionist, interpretivist epistemological position in order to arrive at an answer to our two research questions: “*How do talent managers involved in the talent acquisition process at PwC Hungary perceive the use of Multipoly?*” And “*How do recently hired young talent perceive the use of Multipoly in the talent acquisition process?*”. Interpretivists can be described as being concerned with “the understanding of the social world through an examination of the interpretation of that world by its participants” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.386). This stands in contrast to the positivist idea of a single and agreed upon reality, limited to the observable (Hacking, 1983), as reality from the interpretivist perspective departs from the understanding that reality is constructed through dialogue with social actors (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). Accordingly, reality can only be perceived by people “through the lens of [their] prior experience, knowledge, and expectations” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p.15). On these grounds, we believe in the notion that there is not a single ‘objective truth’ in social science as subjectivity is involved. Instead we hold a relativist ontological approach, where many subjective truths exist that are constructed through the multiple understandings of individuals (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Based on this, we also thought it to be important to take a more critical orientated approach when we interpreted our data.

3.2 The role of theory

Our social constructivist, interpretivist frame of reference is reflected in the design of our research process. The practices we employ emphasize the importance we give to understanding different employee perspectives in the context of the circumstances of their

personal and professional lives. This has implications for the way we analyze and give meaning to our data (Ritchie et al., 2014, Travers, 2001).

At the start of our research we used existing literature and research to provide us with a basic understanding of our research topic. This was also done in order for us to map out our research study in terms of design and sampling approach. After we completed this process, we started with the next phase of our research which consisted of our field research.

During our field research (which consisted of interviews) we did our best to immerse ourselves into the social world of our participants by “listening deeply and attentively” (Patton, 2015, p.59) in order to understand the world from their point of view (Ritchie et al., 2014). The goal during this phase was to obtain as much information as possible on how the use of gamification in talent acquisition is perceived in order to find patterns of meanings. Towards the end of our analysis, our findings were put into context with existing knowledge.

Instead of regarding induction and deduction as “exclusive alternatives [...] where it would be difficult to force all research into them” (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009, p.4), they should rather be seen as a “tendency rather than as a hard-and-fast distinction” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.14). Consequently, in order to relate theory to our research, we departed from an abductive approach, using both elements of induction and deduction (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009). However, due to our epistemological point of departure and absence of studies on this research topic, our overall approach is more inductively oriented. The method of abduction allows us to make “logical inference and [...] profound insight [...] with the hope of a new kind of social research which will understand sociality [...] better” (Flick et al., 2004, pp.159-160).

3.3 Research Choice and Research Strategy

In view of our ontological paradigm described as relativist, epistemological position described as social constructivist, interpretivist, and the nature of our research problem, the choice of qualitative research seemed fitting. As studies on the use of gamification in talent acquisition are scarce, we excluded quantitative research from our considerations as it

employs measurement of data through numbers and other means of quantification (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and we were more interested in how it is perceived in order to find out how it works. Perception as such has been defined by different dictionaries such as Merriam-Webster (2016) as a “way you think about or understand someone or something” (n.p.).

By following a qualitative research approach, we are studying the phenomenon in its natural setting (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2009) in order to “understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspective of the participants” (Merriam, 2002, p.12). As qualitative research is “best understood as a craft” (Prasad, 2005, p.6) without fixed boundaries in terms of design or methods, it enables us to be flexible in our understanding of the social world as participants are our point of departure (Bryman & Bell, 2011). According to Easterby-Smith et al. (2012) “this takes place through discovering the views, perceptions and opinions of both individuals and groups through the language they use” (p.126). Throughout our research process, we focused our understanding of the experience on two points of view: those of talent managers and those of recently hired young talent. From our epistemological position, this allowed us to make more credible statements related to our research questions as observations were made from different viewpoints (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012).

Based on our aforementioned rationales of exploring the individual experience of employees who have experienced the phenomenon we decided to implement a phenomenological research design. This design allowed us to “identify the ‘essence’ of human experiences concerning a phenomenon, as described by participants” (Creswell, 2003, p.15). Furthermore, we decided on a mix between semi-structured and narratively based interviews as our primary research method (Bryman & Bell, 2011). This was done because we had two different groups of research participants who experienced gamification in talent acquisition from different perspectives. Where available, participant observations and document analysis were further used as our second and third method to enhance credibility of our results (Bowen, 2009; Bryman and Bell, 2011; Tracy, 2010). Multiple research methods (interviews, observations, document analysis) within the context of a multi-method qualitative analysis procedure was thus used, which further allowed for the increase of confirmability in our qualitative study and the prevention of potential biases (Bowen, 2009; Saunders et al., 2009).

3.4. Selection of PwC Hungary and Multipoly

During our literature review on gamification in talent acquisition we stumbled across PwC Hungary and their gamification intervention Multipoly. As PwC Hungary has been mentioned in various popular literature in connection with gamified recruitment, we decided to make use of them as it seemed like we could gain interesting insights from them in order to answer our two research questions. By using Multipoly, we hoped to explore the phenomenon of gamification within a practical context. This allowed us to reveal different facets of gamification that contributed to our overall understanding of it. Consequently, we decided on exploring this phenomenon through the use of two groups of research participants. The rationale for both groups will be discussed in detail in section 3.5.1.

Multipoly is a recruitment game developed by PwC Hungary that invites students and graduates to find out what it is like to work for them. At the start of the game, potential candidates conduct a simulated job interview and then get the opportunity to try out different roles in the company such as trainee, consultant, senior consultant and manager. Throughout the game, candidates get to solve real-life business cases that they will face while on the job and must also participate in workshops, meet with their mentor and learn. They also get to move around the inside of the office building and interact with colleagues – thereby giving them a chance to see how life at PwC Hungary looks like. The virtual environment in the game aims to simulate life at PwC Hungary as closely as possible and serves as complement to the company's existing talent acquisition process.

3.5 Data collection

Following our aforementioned research philosophy and the exploratory nature of this research, we hoped to reveal relevant contexts primarily through the conduction of interviews. The purpose of this method was to build a professional conversation with the respondents in order to “obtain descriptions of the life world of the interviewee with respect to interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena” (Kvale, 1996, pp.5-6). This view is supported by Longhurst (2010) who concurs that “talking to people is an excellent way of gathering information” (p.103).

A total of seven interviews were conducted within a four-week period. Six interviews were conducted face-to-face on site at PwC Hungary's head office in Budapest and one was conducted via Skype. Each interview took approximately 45 minutes and was held in English. Both of us were present at all interviews and changed between the role of interviewer and distant observer. The latter also focused on asking follow up questions where seen fit.

At the research site in Budapest, we were provided with a quiet and comfortable room. This ensured a familiar environment for the research participants. Before each interview, we introduced ourselves and the topic, asked for permission to record the interview and clarified confidentiality and anonymity issues. With this we hoped to create a pleasant atmosphere for the research participants to feel safe and at ease as interviews were not conducted in their mother tongue Hungarian.

During the interview we focused on our role as researcher as attentive listener to stories that people tell about their world in order for us to "hear them express their views and opinions in their own words, learn about their views [...] [and] their dreams and hopes" (Kvale, 1996, p.1). All interviews were therefore audio-recorded and we abstained from taking notes during the interview as this could have caused disruption which may reduce "the effectiveness of communication between interviewer and respondent" (Muswazi & Nhamo, 2013, p.15). We made notes after the respondents left the room in order to maintain the interviewees' comfort. The subsequent transcription of our interviews allowed us a more thorough data analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

Furthermore, we gathered information through the documents and also played Multipoly through an online link provided to us by PwC Hungary. The documents mainly contained internal presentations on Multipoly. We abstained from playing Multipoly until after we conducted and coded the interviews to prevent our biases to influence the course of the discussion and subsequent interpretation. The decision to play or not to play the game did not have an immediate impact on finding an answer to our research questions as we were not investigating the game itself, but the perception of it. We decided to play the game out of curiosity and it helped us get a clearer picture on what research participants talked about when referring to the game, but did not ultimately influence our findings.

3.5.1 Sampling strategy and sampling profile

According to Bryman and Bell (2011), sampling is described as the process of selecting a subset of a population from which the researchers can gather information related to the research objectives and questions. For the purpose of our research, we decided to use a mixture between purposive and snowball sampling. Both are forms of non-probability sampling which do not allow for the generalization of findings, but Bryman and Bell (2011) argue that both are good sampling methods to follow in qualitative research. It allows for a rich data collection as participants were not randomly selected but “based on their ability to provide relevant data on the area of investigation” (Horsburgh, 2003, p.311). Thus, we followed a three-phase-sampling strategy: (1) selection of PwC Hungary, (2) selection of gamified intervention Multipoly and (3) selection of research participants. The rationale for both phase one and two is explained in section 3.4.

A purposive sample “appl[ies] to the sampling of the cases in which the research will be conducted and then to people within those cases” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.441). Since purposive sampling is subjective of nature, the likelihood that different researchers will select different samples is high. This is because each researcher will use a different set of characteristics to select the desired sampling population. Therefore, we selected initial participants according to characteristics that we felt were relevant in order to answer our research questions, such as their involvement as talent manager or candidate in Multipoly.

Accordingly, we decided on two groups of participants:

1. Young talent that recently went through the talent acquisition process and are now working at PwC Hungary;
2. Talent managers involved in the gamified talent acquisition process (e.g. talent executives, talent managers, and recruitment specialist) at PwC Hungary.

This allowed us to not only gain valuable individual insights, but also professional assessments on potential influence factors such as costs and strategy.

In addition to purposive sampling, snowball sampling was used to identify additional research participants. According to Castillo (2009) this method is often applied in research where participants are hard to identify. Thus, we made use of Morgan’s (2008) classic

process for obtaining a snowball sample by identifying an initial expert and asked this person to assist in the recruiting of additional research participants. By means of purposive and snowball sampling, a total of seven research participants took part in this research. The individuals who participated are either talent managers (three participants) or young talent (four participants). The following table presents the sampling profile of our interviewees:

Name*	Mother Tongue	Perspective
Annika	Hungarian	Talent manager
Nils	Hungarian	Talent manager
Alma	Hungarian	Talent manager
Britta	Hungarian	Young talent
Ida	Hungarian	Young talent
Lasse	Hungarian	Young talent
Olle	Hungarian	Young talent

Table 1: Overview of research participants

*All names have been changed in order to protect the respondents' anonymity. We have randomly assigned names of Swedish book characters to our research participants.

3.5.2 Participant observations

As a way to complement our interview data, participant observations during the face-to-face interviews at PwC Hungary were used to underpin the sense-making process of our findings. According to Patton (2002), these observations can include “activities, behavior, actions, conversations, interpersonal interactions [and] any other aspect of observable human experience” (p.4).

Some of the observations we made include people being uncomfortable due to language. This was notably evident in biting nails, breaking eye contact and vocabulary. An example of this include some interviewees repeating certain words such as “interesting” and “cool”. We therefore responded by, for example, adjusting our choice of words and asking general questions unrelated to the study such as recommendations for sightseeing in Budapest to break the ice. The observations also enabled us to not solely rely on our interview transcriptions, but to also grasp non-verbal expressions of feelings that they might have been unable to communicate due to language (Easterby-Smith et al., 2012).

3.5.3 Interview guide and questions

In order for us to steer our interviews in a direction that would provide us with answers to our research questions we developed and broadly followed two interview guides: one for young talent (which included narrative infused questions) and one for talent managers (which contained questions that were semi-structured into themes). The interview guides can be found in appendix A and B. Both guides provided us with an outline of possible questions and included open-ended as well as some probing questions. The latter served to open and to follow up the conversation (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Some questions were suggested by us (“Please tell us more about ...”, “How come you ...”) and some questions came up during the interview as we asked for clarification (“You just mentioned ... could you tell us more?”).

As mentioned earlier, a narrative infused interview approach was used for young talent. This was to enable and encourage them to tell a story about their experience with Multipoly. By telling stories, it is believed that “people recall what has happened, put experience into sequence [and] find possible explanations for it [...]. [It is thus] an attempt to link [events] in time and meaning [...] [which allow] for the meaning-production of the plot” (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000, pp.58-59). In this sense, we began the interview with a general question (“Tell us how you applied at PwC”). This allowed the interviewee to tell their own unique story. We included this question to gain a general overview on the recruitment process at PwC and to directly stimulate the talent acquisition aspect in our interview. The second question was linked to Multipoly, revealing feelings and emotions of participants when playing the game. During this question, we relied on respondents telling us about their thoughts, motivation and impression of the game as this emphasized the research participants view of the world. Due to the rather unstructured nature of narrative interviewing, our questions emerged during the course of the story (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). In general, we opted for a different approach with the young talent than with the talent managers as we aimed for a broader perspective as young talent did not precisely know about business issues such as strategic intent and could therefore be questioned from another angle.

In contrast to the questions to the young talent, a semi-structured interview was used for talent managers. The guide was broadly based on the interview approach used by Alvesson and Sveningsson (2008) in their research of a culture change project and consisted of six

thematic blocks related to the phenomenon under investigation: background and context, strategy and intended outcomes, design, implementation and interaction, reception and interpretation, results and outcomes. Instead of rigorously asking question upon question, the thematic blocks were used to guide our interview, which allowed us some flexibility and the ability to “vary the order of questions, follow up leads and clear up inconsistencies in answers” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.487).

3.6 Data analysis

According to Bernard (2006), data analysis can be defined as “the search for patterns in data and for ideas that help explain why those patterns are there in the first place” (p.452). Contrary to quantitative data analysis, qualitative data analysis can be seen as a craft (Daft, 1983) as it is “not governed by codified rules” (Bryman & Bell, 2011, p.591). This craft and lack of rules therefore means that qualitative analysis is very open for interpretation and “not a precise science [...] but rather an interpretive act” (Saldaña, 2012, p.4).

Our data analysis was guided by the research questions *“How do talent managers involved in the talent acquisition process at PwC Hungary perceive the use of Multipoly?”* and *“How do recently hired young talent perceive the use of Multipoly in the talent acquisition process?”*.

We formally started our data analysis process by first printing all the transcriptions and then reading each interview as a whole. This helped us gain a general overview of our data and to identify some overall themes. However, we already started subconsciously analyzing the data during the interviews as certain patterns and themes recurred.

In the next step we continued with the initial coding of our transcribed interviews to help us sort through the mass of data and to reduce the materials (Rennstam, 2016). The process of initial coding resulted in “first impression phrases” (Saldaña, 2012, p.5) rather than specific codes. As our research is inductively oriented, we used open coding instead of using pre-defined labels derived from literature. Furthermore, we went through the transcriptions line by line and used different color codes in order to capture the essence of the interviews. We agreed prior to our individual reading, to look for salient details within each paragraph and for other less obvious evidence that helped address the research question, i.e. examples, tensions, anxiety. Working individually helped us to be open

towards the data without being exposed to each others biases. At this stage, we were particularly looking for similarities and differences in discourses, repetitions, metaphors and analogies etc. (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) that aid our understanding of gamification in talent acquisition. We were also mindful to look at the totality of all interviews, which helped us identify variations and contradictions within interviews.

Following up on this, we worked collaboratively in further categorizing data. By asking provocative questions towards each other and towards the data, ensconcing and richer codes were found (Saldaña, 2012). In addition, raising questions relevant to the posed research questions, for example “What was the motivation behind the job-decision?”, the conceptualization of data was further facilitated. This also allowed us to make sense of our data on a more reflexive level.

To narrow down the identified themes further down into a manageable number of key categories that could be addressed in detail instead of having an abundance of themes, we made use of a table. Here, we presented all our salient themes and re-categorized them according to their similarity, repetition or subordinate role. Consequently, three salient labels for categories of how the use of gamification is perceived stood out: image work, knowledge transfer and backstage pass. We will deal with them in more detail in the analysis chapter.

3.7 Evaluation of research

In qualitative research it is important to note that “[it] is imprecise and refers to many dissimilar research methods [...] and therefore different ways of determining whether they are trustworthy” (Krefting, 1991, p.215). As measurement in form of reliability and validity do not lie at the core of qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011), we focused on the criteria credibility, sincerity and ethics (Tracy, 2010).

The criterion credibility addresses the plausibility and persuasiveness of our interpretations (Tracy, 2010). Within our methodology we tried to make our rationales and biases as transparent as possible. Not only have they ultimately shaped our research design, but also the way we approached and analyzed our data. This has also enabled us to address the sincerity aspect of the thesis, as we have been transparent “about [our] biases, goals, and foibles” (Tracy, 2010, p.841). With our sampling choice we demonstrated that the

relevance of research participants to our research questions was of more concern than their randomness or even representativeness. This should contribute to the traceability of our interpretations.

Continuing this thought, we have worked in pairs and thus were subject of constant exchange of ideas and evaluation of our choices and interpretations. We also attempted to present our findings in a structured and interesting manner through persuasive themes. This process made us more aware of limitations of adopted methods and consequently, of our own research. Limitations are also a decisive factor in evaluating the quality of the research, therefore we continuously monitored the studies limitations and addressed them where suitable, which we will highlight them after the discussion of our findings in section 5.3.

Lastly, we also focused on ethics. Since our field research consisted of interviews with research participants whose native language is not English, we were mainly concerned with ensuring their welfare in order to build a relationship characterized by trust. Through building a trustful relationship with the research participants, we hoped to gain rich interview data which is important in a qualitative study. From the start of each interaction with our research participants, we strived to be as trustful as possible by not deceiving them in any way. We therefore explained the nature of the research before each interview and also highlighted potential risk and discomforts which were very low in our case. The research participants were also given the opportunity to ask us questions about the research and how the results will be used. In summary, we aimed to build a relationship characterized by trust with each research participant and strived to conduct our research in an ethical and transparent way.

4. Analysis

In the following sections, we present our analysis and discussion of the insights gained from our research participants during the interviews. As previously stated, we conducted interviews with four young talent and with three talent managers. The results of the interviews show a high level of concurrence between the intentions expressed by talent managers and perceptions of young talent.

During our analysis, we identified two levels on which Multipoly can be understood. The first level seemed to confirm the popular literature's positive stance towards gamification by mainly supporting the view that gamification can be used as an employer branding tool. However, on closer analysis we also identified a second level for gamification where we tried to find out why it works so well. We interpreted it as a way through which PwC Hungary shape prospective employees' identity.

4.1 Multipoly as image work

4.1.1 Target audience

A brand cannot be everything to everybody and not everyone can be pleased. Thus, selections on who to attract and delight are made. It is in the business' interest to know their target audience and what makes the audience react. Interestingly, in our findings the talent manager ambitions and young talent receptions coincide.

During the interviews with the **talent managers**, a common matter that arose was that the intended audience of the Multipoly intervention are university undergraduates and graduates. For example, during our interview with Nils, he stated that "university and college students are targeted" by Multipoly, a response mirrored by Annika who stated that the "*Aim [of Multipoly] was definitely fresh graduates to be honest*". Alma put it simply by saying that Multipoly targets "*graduates and interns*". From all of these responses, it seems like PwC Hungary is aiming to appear attractive to young talent in order for them to apply for positions at the company. As there is a lot of competition amongst the "Big Four" accounting firms to attract the best and brightest talent, PwC Hungary aims to make use of gamification to stand out among the three other firms.

However, it appears that appealing to young graduates is not an easy task and certainly not merely achieved through traditional means, such as career fairs. This was highlighted by one of the talent managers, Nils, who explained the need to be unique:

We normally go to career fairs with the booth and say something. But that is regular stuff [...] I think it is important - the way I see it as a manager – to do something different.

In his elaboration, it seems like Nils is not stating that going to career fairs is the wrong approach to attract young talent, but saying that in order to stand out amongst the competition, something different is needed to characterize their value proposition and company character. This is where Multipoly could be perceived as image work to give PwC Hungary a younger, trendier appearance, which can also be seen as an ‘employer branding through differentiation’ strategy. This may potentially point to PwC Hungary’s drive to build ‘expert power’ through the employment of game-based technology techniques, which may help them to stay on top of industry trends and to be perceived as modern.

Furthermore, it can also be argued that the students and graduates, which are the target audience, become hooked through Multipoly as it seems like a recreational and engaging activity. This view was uttered by Nils when he stated that:

It’s a game. I think these generation[s] can be attracted easily with a game. But, the speed, the attractiveness, and the way of this technology that is in force in the game [Multipoly] – I think it is pretty attractive.

From what we understand from Nils, younger generations appear to be more susceptible and attuned to games and the technology behind it than previous generations. As a result, this gives the impression that young talent are more comfortable with different technology to gain access to information. Hence the motivation for Multipoly. This view was shared by the **young talent**, Ida, when she stated that “*I decided to participate in the game, [...] [because] it was easy to know more about PwC*”.

4.1.2 Employer branding through differentiation

Another discussion that occurred with regard to image work concerned the efforts of PwC Hungary to be perceived as different to other firms. A lot of the answers from both interviewee groups centered around how Multipoly sets PwC Hungary apart from competitors and how they hold a competitive advantage in attracting young graduates because they were first to market with Multipoly.

One **talent manager**, named Alma, summed it up by saying “*We were the first in the market and this game is ahead of our competitors*”, while another, Nils, also mentioned the significance of being first to market and how this gave them “*a head start on our competitors*”. This implies the possibility that the gamified intervention may be copied in the future – in one sense or another – by competitors. To us this points to how much Multipoly is valued among talent managers. It is almost seen as some kind of status symbol and is perceived as a noteworthy invention to be copied by others.

When talking about “competitors”, it was mostly done with specific reference to the “Big Four” (the four largest international professional services networks), which is of particular interest since this occurred spontaneously without prompting from the interviewers or interview questions. This can be seen in the quote below, where Nils not only referred to the Big Four, but also highlighted the homogeneity between them and how Multipoly serves as a business differentiator that simultaneously contributes to the employer branding:

I think the biggest advantage [of Multipoly] is a bit indirect, let's say, and I think that was the purpose: brand, image building. Some kind of differentiator. [...] If you check it and look at the Big Four: We offer the same money, we offer the same career, we offer the same job, we offer the same office [...], so it's quite identical.

The employer branding theme that becomes visible here, was further emphasized by Nils later on in the interview when he repeated his sentiment that Multipoly serves as a differentiator between the Big Four:

I think [Multipoly] makes a difference. Because we are one of the Big Four and in the mind of students it can make a difference in how they see the company. And I

think Multipoly is very specific for PwC and the students can make a connection between the company and the game.

When speaking about the strategic intent and role of Multipoly in general, by far most of the talent managers immediately addressed – either directly or indirectly – the concept of employer or brand building. This was expressed in various ways by different interviewees. Annika, one of the managers who drove the implementation of Multipoly at PwC Hungary put it in very straightforward terms when she stated “[...] *the strategic intent was the employer branding.*” She later repeated herself and gave a more detailed description of what they hoped to achieve through the introduction of Multipoly:

Because the strategic steps to introduce Multipoly was definitely employer branding. So therefore to promote the PwC brand, transfer the value proposition, engage more and more people – so that was why the key performance indicator was more [focussed on] increasing the number of applicants.

Nils shared the sentiment that the objective of Multipoly was to build the PwC brand and increase the number of applicants when he stated:

The success of Multipoly is based on the objective that was for brand building purposes and increasing the number of those students who are choosing PwC as a first option to apply.

Alma repeated the theme of employer branding (although indirectly) and described the purpose of Multipoly as “*To be the best known in the market*”. She went further and said “[...] *I think the main reason is it to be well known and to let the applicants know what we are doing here at PwC.*” From her statement, there seems to be an urge to clarify who the company really is in terms of jobs and tasks. This urge might have been the result of a perceived misconception of what PwC Hungary entails due to its homogeneity with other PSFs, as stated by the young talent, Lasse:

I think the mantra of the whole game is to get university students know more about PwC, how broad it is, to disqualify misconception that it is only auditors like the others [Big Four].

So, the view that Multipoly serves as a differentiator was also not lost on the **young talent**. They did not directly call it a “differentiator”, but it was implied through the use of certain terms and comparisons to competitors when they described how the use of gamification made them feel during the talent acquisition process. This gave us the impression that young talent did not see Multipoly as image work as such – although it works – but rather see it as an image they would like to relate to. For us, they saw the opportunity and got seduced by the unique character of PwC Hungary. It is about their experience and reaction to it as they see it as a place where they aspire to work.

For example, the young talent Britta described her experience of Multipoly as different to other companies when she explained *“It is very special and interesting, and not like the other companies. So I think it gave me a positive view of the company.”* By contrasting her experience at PwC to experience at other companies, Britta is reinforcing the view that Multipoly sets the company apart from its competitors. To become more visible compared to other PSFs, we get the impression that PwC Hungary had to take off with something unusual. It is that ‘very special and interesting something’ that appears to be difficult to grasp and conceptualize that has contributed to Britta’s positive PwC Hungary experience.

This idea of being different than the other companies was also emphasised by another young talent, Olle, who said that *“It was kind of interesting, because I don’t think any of the other companies – but more specifically the Big Four – were trying to advertise themselves through this kind of game.”* It can be seen that Olle not only (indirectly) refers to differentiation, but he also makes specific reference to the Big Four. Multipoly (the “game” he talks about) therefore becomes interesting to him, as he has not experienced it being used by any other company he has interacted with.

Lasse, one of the other young talent, also indirectly mentions that PwC’s Multipoly is different from competitors and explicitly mentions the Big Four by referring to Ernst & Young, KPMG and Deloitte:

I do not think Deloitte has any competitions like Multipoly, and I am not sure about KPMG.

[...]

In Hungary Ernst & Young has a tax game [...] but I believe it is not as compelling or sexy as Multipoly. It is more dry.

The fact that Lasse contrasts EY's tax game as "dry" when compared with Multipoly's "compellingness" or "sexiness" gives us the impression that, without Multipoly to polish up its image, PwC Hungary will look the same as all the rest. The facelift given to the company through Multipoly therefore makes it look less dull and more appealing to a younger audience.

Looking at both interviewee groups what stands out is 'differentiation' as a result of image work. Through the use of recruitment technology that focuses on pre-candidate engagement, it is perceived by young talent as different from the usual. Instead it is perceived as "special and interesting". From the talent managers' perspective, Multipoly is of particular importance as it builds the PwC brand and increases the number of applicants, making it stand out from their competitors. During the interviews with the young talent, employer branding was never referred to directly, but it was implied when they discussed how Multipoly differentiates PwC Hungary from the other PSFs as previously discussed. However, it is not surprising that they never mentioned it directly as they are looking at Multipoly from a different perspective than the talent managers and only see the end results of the employer branding intervention.

4.1.3 'But'

Besides the euphoria of the gamified intervention that might have lead both talent managers and young talent to the view of Multipoly being "attractive and fun", there was also a lingering fear of boredom.

The **talent managers** all highlighted a dangerous side of gamification, namely that it can become "boring". This anxiety was reflected in how talent managers talked about how Multipoly should be continuously improved and updated with regards to actors (employees in the firm that come and go) and challenges to keep it fresh and exciting. This worry was brought up by Nils during the interview by saying:

There is a lot of energy behind [Multipoly]. I would rather say the challenge in the game is that you cannot play the same game every year, then it becomes boring.

Then there will be no differentiator because it is like a career booth. Again, ‘Oh, I’ve seen this last year. Probably if I find the same things let me leave the page in 10 minutes’. I think it is pretty important to put the energy into content and improve it every year.

He thus highlights the dynamic character of Multipoly that requires – in his view – continuous updates and content improvement. This would in turn contribute to the innovative character of the game that has led to the attraction and prevent ‘boredom’.

When we asked Alma what Multipoly’s biggest challenge is, she said that it is:

To improve, to have newer questions, to do something new, because that is why, that is how you get them [to stay] interested in the game.

Like in the case of Nils, it is acknowledged by her that PwC Hungary has to keep Multipoly updated in order for candidates to stay interested. Annika also highlighted this during her interview when we asked her if she received any feedback from candidates, and she summed up the candidate feedback as follows:

They feel that if somebody had one year with the game, then you really need to change it a lot for the next year to not get them bored. Because even if it is fantastic and cool [with] all the pictures and videos, but yeah of course if you went through this experience once then maybe the second time you feel that ‘what else?’.

4.1.4 Success rate

According to the **talent managers**, the success rate of PwC Hungary’s image work in relation to talent acquisition is measured by the number of applicants before and after the introduction of Multipoly. This view was confirmed by Annika when she stated that the key performance area of measuring Multipoly’s success is based on “increasing the number of applicants”. From the talent managers we interviewed, it is widely perceived as a successful intervention, because “*Applicant numbers increased*” (Nils).

When asked about Multipoly’s success, Alma immediately went into some detail about the numbers, focussing on how it increased after the introduction of the game:

I believe it was mainly important from the employer branding aspect, and during my time in the recruitment team I made a lot of statistics and reports, because I like numbers. And when [Person X] joined PwC in 2010, they had around 1500 applicants around, it contained graduates, interns and experienced applicants as well, and when I left the recruitment team in 2014 we had almost 4500 or 4600 applicants.

Annika almost mirrored Alma's response, and also gave some background on the numbers when asked about Multipoly's success:

We have some numbers from the last couple of years that for the same proportion of open positions for graduate and intern positions, how many applicants we have in 2012 – the first year we launched the game and how many candidates we have now, for the same proportion of positions and it increased for more than 50% I think, almost 60%. Of course we cannot let's say, say that directly all of these candidates come from Multipoly, but still the increase is a lot on the number who feel that they would like to work for PwC.

However, apart from the talent managers mentioning the increase in applicant numbers, we also saw several other factors brought up by them to describe Multipoly's success. It seems like success was not only mirrored in numbers, but also in the level of how prepared applicants were and how much PwC was differentiated from their competitors.

Looking at how young graduates were targeted and how employer branding helped PwC Hungary to differentiate themselves, it appears that Multipoly was used as 'Botox' (the cosmetic injections used to temporarily improve wrinkles) to build attraction. The company is using Multipoly to give them the so-called 'X factor', in order to stand out from the crowd. In today's competitive world where it matters how you are perceived by others, looks are becoming increasingly important in building attraction. People are turning to cosmetic procedures such as Botox, liposuction and teeth whitening to look and appear younger and more attractive. This is also done in an effort to appear trendy and up-to-date with the latest fashions. When looking at PwC, which is an old and established brand in the market, we saw Multipoly as a way to freshen up their appearance and to appeal to their younger target audience, similar to the cosmetic operation of Botox injections. This angst

was emphasized by our research participants as they uttered the need to modify and update the game.

From the above, we get the sense that the intention behind Multipoly is to make the organization stand out amongst competitors and give a realistic overview of the company. The intentions of the talent managers are roughly in line with the romantic view of gamification in talent acquisition that is presented in the popular literature. On these grounds, we are of the view that the intention behind Multipoly fits really well with how it is received by the young talent. From our findings, it appears that it works, because the young talent seem excited about it. However, it is not enough for us to ‘buy this picture’ yet. Taking a more critical view, we want to further examine why or how it works. Thus, we delved deeper into our data and reached the second level, where we identified two other dimensions.

4.2 Multipoly as knowledge transfer

4.2.1 *Taste of life at PwC Hungary*

In the **talent managers’** description of what they hoped to achieve with Multipoly, a common theme that arose was that they hoped to showcase *life at PwC Hungary* through Multipoly by transferring knowledge about the company. They highlighted the importance of making sure that Multipoly gives a realistic representation of life at PwC Hungary and how great they believe employment at PwC Hungary to be. They reinforced this message by giving examples of real-life situations that are illustrated in Multipoly. It might be presented and interpreted as such, but we think there is more behind it. Even though real-life cases are given to players, it does not mirror the reality. Situations were selected by talent managers, making it staged, because they were not unbiased in their selections.

The quotes below – taken from our interview with Nils – seems to illustrate this:

So I think what the purpose [with Multipoly] was - and I think it has been achieved - [...] was to show life in PwC and to show what it feels like to work in PwC.

[...]

It is not a [...] shiny, happy description, or idealistic description of the company operation. [The players] can make mistakes, they can get out of the game. Which is

important. So nothing is happening in the game that is not happening in real life. And nothing is more idealistic than in real life in the office.

[...]

I think that was important because I think that would have been the biggest mistake to have: to show an impression that is too positive or only about being fantastic and all the opportunities and things. And then they join and they face realities different. I think that would kill the credibility of such a game intervention and the company.

To conclude, Nils went further and gave an example as to exactly the extent they go to to ensure that Multipoly showcases a realistic view of life at PwC Hungary:

Probably you've heard that when we moved, we had to change the whole graphics because the last previous office was in the game and when we moved we had to reprogram the whole thing to this office. This is a minor thing but I think in this game it is critically important. We want to imitate reality somehow.

In our interview with Alma, the idea that Multipoly is a way to showcase life at PwC Hungary is repeated by her stating that “*The applicants get a lot of information about the company itself, what we are doing and how we are doing it.*” She then goes on to explain how life at PwC Hungary is mirrored by Multipoly pointing out how the players progress through the different managerial levels at the company (“*when they start to play, they start as an intern and they solved different kinds of tasks and problems and then they move on to different career paths, so they become an associate, a consultant, after that senior, after that assistant manager and manager.*”) She concludes by saying “*So, they have a clear picture about what we are doing and how we are doing it, and what our tasks [are that we] have to fulfill in our work.*” By referring to the “clear picture”, the importance of Multipoly giving a realistic view of life at PwC Hungary is again highlighted.

Specific reference is made to the different career paths at PwC Hungary, which follows a very hierarchical structure with regards to the different promotion stages within the company. The audience might interpret this as needing to work hard in order to move on to the next position – much like what Multipoly does when you move to the next stage of the game after completing certain tasks and challenges. The realistic view or clear picture that they aim to give to players through Multipoly could therefore mirror the culture within the

company where the career ladder matters and where hard work is rewarded by moving up onto a higher hierarchical position within the company.

In our interview with Annika, she also described Multipoly as a way to facilitate “*knowledge transfer*” to candidates, and also hinted that it is a way to show people life at PwC Hungary through the use of a rhetorical question:

So, of course everybody knows about PwC: that it is a fantastic professional firm. But who are we as persons, what is the culture here? [...] so it's much more than just audit and tax and I would have liked somehow to transfer this information.

Annika further highlighted the fact that everything in Multipoly is presented in such a way that it is “*not misleading – so not focussing on the bright rainbow side of PwC*”, describing interaction with Multipoly as “*something that is happening in the real life*”. This is because the scenarios given in Multipoly mirrors scenarios in real life (e.g. simulating negotiations in the game), which also gives candidates a taste of the culture at PwC. For example, after each level players attend a virtual performance discussion which mirrors the PwC culture of “*sharing experience, resources and opportunities*” (PwC, 2016, n.p.) within the firm. As a consequence, the job description becomes more clear, which helps the job applicant to either confirm or disconfirm personal beliefs of whether the company is suitable for them. Annika further stated that:

The onboarding is now easy, because they are more pre-educated [...]. Because when you are asking ‘what do you know about PwC’ sometimes they have more information about PwC as I have. Because they had to go through the game, find the information because it was something as a requirement to move forward. So they are much more aware of what we are doing, what our culture is like, and who we are.

Because the theme of Multipoly as a way to showcase life at PwC Hungary was taken up again, it repeatedly indicated alignment of talent manager intention with **young talent** perception. Although young talent are interacting with Multipoly from a different perspective, they highlighted that through experience they learned a lot about PwC and life at PwC Hungary and that it gave them a better idea of what life at the company entails. It

also emerged that they liked that the game gave a realistic view of the company, and almost all of the interviewees liked the fact that the people they interacted with in the game are real people at PwC Hungary. But, as young talent did not specify what company information was new to them, it appears that content played a secondary role to playing this game.

During our interview with Olle he repeated the fact that Multipoly was a good way to get information about PwC Hungary. This is illustrated in the quotes by him below:

Multipoly is a good platform to gain information about the company.

From my point of view, it was more important to gain information about the company while playing this game.

And in the game I had to answer different questions, watch different videos and see how negotiations are going. And I could really learn a lot about different economic topics, about finance and about the company.

On the one hand, this example emphasized the importance of learning to young talent. It was not only important to get a clearer understanding of the role and the different departments, but also of the organizational culture. As applicants learn a lot about the company during the game, it is not unreasonable to conclude that corporate learning is a crucial point within PwC Hungary. This makes it even more appealing for the applicant to be part of the firm. Continuous learning speaks to the company culture, as excellence is one of their values (PwC, 2016). This leaves enough room for personal growth, and also gives them a preview of the corporate culture.

Through his interaction with Multipoly, Olle also found that “*PwC is a great place to work at*”. This again reinforces the theme that, through playing the game, information about the company is transmitted and that it gives a preview of life at PwC Hungary. Hence, a great place to work at entails transparency on what success looks like in any given position, the design of the work environment (i.e. office, team collaboration) and the opportunity to learn. However, it can also be an indication of manipulation. As we will illustrate with the

help of other examples similar to Olle, young talent appear too content with what PwC Hungary displays in Multipoly. Therefore, because responses are similar, it appears staged. Britta had a similar experience to that of Olle, stating that after playing Multipoly: *“I think I know PwC Hungary more. I know the building, the office [...] and people also. So when I came here I felt like I knew where everything is.”* She then went further and said *“I know what life at PwC entails.”* The same points that were highlighted by Olle was also shared by Britta, with Britta adding that *“The best thing in Multipoly was that the participants [in the game] are actual members of the firm.”* This confirms the talent managers’ narrative, who agreed that it was important to make Multipoly as realistic as possible. Britta therefore appreciated the fact that the characters in Multipoly are real people in the company.

Lastly, we would like to highlight what Lasse said:

When I started working with the game, I discovered PwC is much more [than an auditing company]. Off course auditing is the main business, but still there is consulting, tax advisory, legal services etc. And basically when I discovered that I [started thinking] about working for PwC. Because, you know, being an auditor is not a dream job of me, but being a consultant is.

[...]

Big companies are like faceless monsters. And it is good to know that they are not. They are just [normal] people working hard, they are not gods, they are people as well.

In his illustration, it becomes apparent that how life at PwC is portrayed in Multipoly changed his attitude towards the company. Lasse generalized big companies as faceless as they come across as lacking distinctive character that distinguishes them from other companies in the same industry. Based on that, we can argue that it appears that there is no clear picture of what they do that would give them a face. As there was no particular face, Lasse perceived them as the imaginary creature that people fear because they do not know what they are dealing with: a monster. PwC Hungary disqualified this misconception as it gives job applicants the impression of an open culture and, because features are specified, a face. This is through showing in the game that they provide career support. This seems to give PwC a compassionate face – that of a company that cares about their employees.

When we looked at Multipoly, we perceived that PwC Hungary uses it similar to a snapshot, providing players (that is, prospective job applicants) with an idea of a realistic impression of everyday life at PwC Hungary. Through this snapshot, players get a view of what life at PwC Hungary is all about, such as their possible work tasks, who their co-workers will be, and career paths. At the same time, it exposes them to important elements of the company's culture. Despite getting the idea that PwC Hungary is attempting to give a realistic preview of the company, we are questioning whether this preview is really realistic and to what extent? Nils (talent manager) mentions that they do not intend to only give a “*shiny, happy description, or idealistic description of the company operation*” through Multipoly. However, when interpreting the views of the young talent, it seems like they have an overall positive view of PwC Hungary and only saw the bright side of working there. Therefore, we asked ourselves whether this “realistic view” is really realistic or just a form of image regulation.

4.3 Multipoly as backstage pass

When we asked our interviewees questions around how they experience Multipoly, common terms that arose were “fun”, “interesting” and “engaging”. It intrigued us why **young talent** framed their answers in similar ways:

And I could really learn a lot about different economic topics, about finance and about the company. So that was really fun I would say. (Olle)

I really enjoyed it. I was playing it a lot. I think I know PwC Hungary more.

[...]

I found it fun. I really like it, I enjoyed it. It was very interesting because I could solve facts and I met people that are really working here [...] so it was very interesting and very very cool.”

[...]

I spoke to some of the other players and they said they also enjoyed it. (Britta)

Ida also shared the sentiment that playing Multipoly is “fun”, adding that she did not find the interaction with the game as “stressful”. Although she did not directly say that she found it fun because she learned something, it was implied through her referring to the questions that are asked during the game:

It was fun. And maybe a little bit challenging, but rather fun. Because it wasn't about if you don't know this questions you can't play and can't reach the next level.

[...]

It wasn't stressful, it wasn't like an HR interview or online test or anything like that.

It was a lot of fun.

From the above, we can therefore see that the young talent perceive the use of Multipoly in the talent acquisition process as “fun”. A common reason given by them for perceiving it in this way is that they learn something in the process. However, what does this exactly mean? Why do they perceive Multipoly as fun? Because it is a way for them to learn? In our view, the reason they see Multipoly as fun is because they are getting a backstage pass into PwC Hungary. As ideas and reality are two different concepts, the actual ‘look behind the scenes’ can help the social reality construction for them. Thus, the backstage view shapes the idea from how it could be working for PwC Hungary into a clearer image of how it is, how applicants picture themselves working there in the future, and how it would feel like: fun. We argue that this reinforces PwC Hungary’s image work as employer of choice. Through playing the game, young talent are also exposed to different aspects of the firm and are involved in tasks, like solving business problems, making them feel like they are already part of the firm. We can also relate it to feeling part of an exclusive community, which provides them identity status in society – contributing to them viewing Multipoly as fun.

Upon closer inspection of the responses by **talent managers**, it seems they are mostly sharing their perceptions of how it is perceived by young talent, as it is a matter of fact rather than a possibility – and not sharing their actual view of the game.

For example, when we interviewed the talent managers, we received the following responses:

I think they are interested because it is a fun game and also because they get a lot of information about the business that we are doing. (Alma)

[The gamified content] makes it more appealing, and entertaining [while] at the same time providing very serious content. (Nils)

[...] everybody likes games: it's engaging, it's fun, there are no risks. You feel more comfortable getting information through this channel. (Annika)

As you can see, there seems to be a lot of similarities between the different responses, which we find striking. Nevertheless, most young talent went further in their elaboration and linked why they perceive the use of Multipoly in that 'fun and interesting' way (either directly or indirectly) to learning about PwC Hungary through playing the game.

One talent manager, Annika, states that "everybody likes games" and that there are no risks in playing. This made us look deeper and we discovered that she does not literally mean that everybody likes games, but that the audience that they are targeting with Multipoly likes games. This refers back to the sentiment shared above by Nils in the *Multipoly as image work* section where he states that this generation likes playing games. However, as this is a generalization, it leads us to questioning why this generation likes playing games.

Annika is also of the opinion that young talent like these game interventions (which relates back to our interpretation of *Multipoly as Botox* to appeal to a younger audience). She also highlights the no risk factor when playing the Multipoly game; a player can only lose points. Then, what are risks in playing Multipoly? As she specified the risk factor as not real, this might point to a high performance culture at PwC Hungary that allows mistakes as part of personal growth and opportunity for improvement.

Considering the experience of young talent and talent manager intentions, we came to the conclusion that Multipoly is used as a backstage pass similar to a concert, where the bearer is allowed access to certain areas. This lets the holder get an exclusive glimpse of what is happening behind-the-scenes, as well as the opportunity to experience what life as an entertainer, in this case PwC Hungary, is all about. It gives potential applicants the chance to look at the company from a different perspective. Then again, it gives PwC Hungary the opportunity to stage what is seen, because access is only given to particular areas – not a 360 degree view. Apart from getting to know the company, the feeling of fun comes from the whole backstage experience, as it is exciting to meet the "celebrities" (i.e. employees) working at the company, it is thrilling to see the work environment and to get a clearer understanding of the job description and, consequently, expectations.

4.4 Summary

The aforementioned experiences of young talent show that Multipoly was capable of changing their attitudes towards PwC Hungary as employer of choice. Throughout our interviews it became evident as intentions aligned with perceptions that the gamified invention was capable of giving the company a new face that pulled graduates in. PwC Hungary's employer branding was thus refreshed and, because as it made the company stand out amongst its competitors, this contributed to the increase in applicants. This was emphasized by talent managers when they pointed at numbers in order to support their arguments of its success. This mostly supported the view in the popular literature that gamification can be used as an employer branding tool to attract talent to organizations. However, we saw a second level to Multipoly. On this level we went further and saw how Multipoly is in effect being used as a way to transfer knowledge and give prospective employees an insider's view of the company. Through this experience, it seems like the young talent learned about the company, their prospective career paths and about the company culture, making them keen to fit in even before they are employed.

We therefore argue that employees involved in the talent acquisition process perceive the use of Multipoly as a pre-onboarding and socialization tool. However, as the theme 'different' stood out in both groups, we also identified image work as crucial in making it this tool work effectively. With the research question in mind, we come to the conclusion that talent managers perceive the use of Multipoly as a valuable part of their employer branding, and that through this employer branding initiative, identity regulation occurs.

4.5 Discussion

From the findings presented above, we argue that Multipoly is used by PwC Hungary as a way to socialize with prospective employees before they join the organization. Multipoly can therefore not only be seen as an attraction tool to attract top talent to the organization, but also as a tool through which employees' identity is shaped according to the company's culture. This function of Multipoly's role makes the onboarding process easier. In the following sections, we will discuss the various ways we feel that Multipoly is used by the company based on talent managers and young talent's perspectives.

4.5.1 Employer branding through Multipoly as Botox

Alvesson (2004) holds the view that all PSFs are essentially the same and attributes this to the “relative homogeneity of the profession” (p.20), arguing that this reduces the uniqueness and variation between organizations. Looking at our findings, we view Multipoly as an image work initiative used as a sort of Botox to give PwC Hungary a fresher face to attract the best young talent. As all PSFs are essentially identical, as exemplified by Nils’ statement that “*We offer the same money, we offer the same career, we offer the same job, we offer the same office [...], so it’s quite identical*”, the need for differentiation between PSFs is amplified. According to Nils’ elaboration, talent attraction can be achieved through differentiation, which we saw PwC Hungary attempt to achieve through giving the company an innovative and young image with Multipoly.

This new, attractive face Multipoly gives PwC Hungary fascinates the audience, and makes them interested in knowing more about what lies behind this new face and, therefore, the company’s image. Boorstin (1961) explains this behavior as “the more we know about [...] [how the image comes about] and effort that have gone into a particular image, the more satisfaction we have from the image itself. The elaborate contrivance proves to us that we are really justified in being taken in” (p.194). Building upon this, a good reputation and positive image eases the company’s effort in recruiting and acquisition costs. Especially within the context of PSFs, where tangible qualities are absent, it is important to nourish a good brand image (Alvesson, 2001). Alvesson (2004) further highlights the significance of it on an individual level as working for a prestige company “may boost the [individual] self-esteem or may be thought to increase their value on the labor market at a later stage” (Alvesson, 2004, p.73).

Relating this to the target audience of graduates, PwC Hungary’s Botox-injected face signals a shift from traditional ways to position themselves as graduate magnets through an improved appearance. Kalinauskas (2014) went further by stating that “Millennials [are] the main target group for gamification applications” (p.63). This reinforces PwC Hungary’s target group of Multipoly: young graduates. Younger crowds are looking for bustling vibes, a stimulating work environment and unique experiences and, thus, are more susceptible to Multipoly. Alma generalized this view by saying that “*for the Millennials it is important to work in an environment where there [are] growth opportunities*”. This is

in line with what proponents of generational theory argue for. Taking, for example, Donnison's (2004) elaboration on Millennials, they are described as "technosavvy, image driven [...] [with] a strong sense of immediacy, a desire for instant gratification, and a low boredom threshold" (p.23).

Palfrey and Gasser (2008) continue this line of thinking by attributing "the amount of time they spend using digital technologies, [...] their patterns of using the technologies to access and use information and create new knowledge and art forms" (p.4) to Millennials. This is particularly relevant to our area of investigation, namely talent acquisition, as it is suggested by Ng, Schweitzer and Lyons (2010) that Millennials are more demanding as they 'want it all' and they want it 'now', when it comes to payment and benefits, advancement and challenging, but interesting work tasks. As a result, more information about the job and employer has to be offered to prospective job applicants when recruiting, because they want to know the ins and outs before applying.

By using Multipoly as a way to enhance their image, PwC Hungary has the opportunity to display a virtual reality different from their competitors using technology graduates can relate to. Wallace et al. (2014) emphasize the influential role of branding activities and consumer experiences in image building. Linking this to the bigger picture of employer branding, it seems like PwC Hungary is selling the company through an innovative face that is engaging young graduates and consequently impacts their corporate image.

We are aware that Botox has a negative connotation as to being perceived as fake. This is not what gamification should aim for in the context of employer branding. Putting gamification into perspective with the mentioned concept, it becomes even more important to align all measures with the different types of brand identity: how it presented, communicated, perceived, and desired (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Hence, we see it as important that gamification portrays the face of the company in a real way as it defines who and what the company is. Employer branding can thus be seen as a way to assist prospective job candidates to differentiate between companies (Wallace et al., 2014).

To summarize: we found that PwC Hungary attempts to stand out in the market and appeal to young talent through Multipoly, using it as a kind of Botox to build attraction towards the company, cosmetically enhanced to appear young, fresh and innovative. However, we

also saw a hidden agenda behind Multipoly through which PwC Hungary tries to achieve identity regulation.

4.5.2 Identity regulation

In the previous section, we viewed Multipoly as an employer branding tool through which PwC Hungary is trying to differentiate themselves from their competitors and build a fantastic image in the eyes of prospective employees. Hence, we asked ourselves the question “Why does Multipoly work so well?” In our analysis we found that Multipoly worked, because the young talent interviewed all felt that the Multipoly experience is fun and that they got a very positive view about the company. The Botox used by PwC Multipoly therefore worked in a sense as it made people want to identify with the company because it is so fresh and young (making the company different and unique compared to the rest) – they *want* to be part of it. As the identified target group of PwC Hungary appears to be young graduates, it seems that from the young talent’s perspective they are eager to fit in, learn, and aspire for a good position at the firm. In our view, PwC Hungary approaches them through Multipoly when they are in their most vulnerable position when they are easy to shape, because they are eager to fit in the company as it may serve as some type of boost to their self-esteem.

This is where we feel that identity regulation plays a role. According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), “Identity regulation encompasses the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction” (p.625). In our study on how Multipoly is perceived by young talent and talent managers, it became evident that Multipoly has a similar effect on shaping employees’ identity at PwC Hungary, and that through playing the game, the company’s image (employer branding) efforts inform prospective employees’ (self-)identity. This is because prospective employees are concerned with building situational awareness (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) and with understanding their future role within PwC Hungary.

The main reason for Multipoly’s success as shaper of prospective employees’ identity is because it manages to give a realistic view of the company – or as Nils put it, “*nothing is happening in the game that is not happening in real life. And nothing is more idealistic than in real life in the office.*” Through the use of Multipoly, PwC Hungary is thus giving a realistic job preview to prospective employees, which is described by Phillips (1999) as

“the presentation by an organization of both favorable and unfavorable job-related information to job candidates” (p.673).

Apart from Multipoly providing a platform through which players can learn general facts about the company (e.g. number of employees), players are also being shown a part of PwC Hungary’s culture. According to Cable et al. (2000), although the “research literature has revealed much about how newcomers learn about a culture after they enter an organization, newcomers clearly do not arrive as "blank slates" with no prior conceptions or expectations about organizational culture” (p.1073). They go on to explain that all “the messages that organizations send to applicants during recruitment may serve to pre-socialize newcomers before they even accept positions” (p.1073). Through this process, prospective employees already form their own beliefs about the company’s culture (Cable et al., 2000), which in turns has an impact on individuals’ identities as all social interactions form part of identity work, according to Sveningsson and Larsson (2006).

Through our research, we came to the conclusion that Multipoly can be seen as a way to give a realistic job preview to prospective employees, prospective employees’ preconceptions about the company are managed, and PwC Hungary engages in identity regulation. As indicated in our findings, we found that young talent enjoyed the Multipoly experience because it gave them a glimpse of what is going on “behind the scenes” at PwC, making them feel part of company without them even having set foot there. By giving prospective employees the chance to become part of PwC Hungary in the virtual world, we found that Multipoly serves as a source of receiver identity.

According to Alvesson and Willmot (2002), organizations can have a significant impact on individuals’ (self-)identity work though serving as a source of identification. Constructing identity is a dynamic, continuous process, with Sveningsson and Larsson (2006) proposing “that identities are temporary and processual constructions that are regularly constituted, negotiated and reproduced in various social interactions” (p.206). In line with this, we view Multipoly as one of these “social interactions” Sveningsson and Larsson refer to, as players are giving the opportunity to experience what it is like to work at PwC Hungary and they get exposure to the company’s culture – shaping the players’ (prospective employees) identities into that of PwC Hungary workers. In this regards, we also see Multipoly as a way through which prospective employees can virtually interact with the

company and start to construct their identities by using the information they receive through the game to come up with a framework for appropriate ways of behaving when they join PwC Hungary in real life.

Multipoly serves as a device through which PwC Hungary can shape prospective employees' identities in line with that of the organization, as identity construction takes place in the game through giving players assignments, promotions and feedback similar to that in real life. A central aspect highlighted by the young talent was that they got to learn about the different career paths in PwC Hungary through playing Multipoly, with the challenges within the game increasing in difficulty as they advanced through the different stages (e.g. consultant, senior consultant, and manager) of the game. In our opinion this serves to give candidates the sense that through working hard, they will be rewarded by climbing the corporate ladder. The corporate ladder can therefore be seen as simulated by Multipoly in a way.

Multipoly can therefore be seen as a way for individuals to get a glimpse of their future selves, which can also build their identity. We found that when the young talent played Multipoly they got a glimpse of the job description, they felt more prepared when they entered the firm and they knew what will be expected of them. By focussing on the career paths in the game, we also see Multipoly as regulating prospective employees' identities through hierarchical location (Alvesson & Willmot, 2002). By giving players an overview of the company's hierarchical levels and the different relative values of each of these levels, prospective employees can get a view of their own social positioning within the firm when they join. Alvesson and Willmot (2002) state that "Superiority/subordination in relation to significant others is central in answering the question 'who am I?'" (p.631). Prospective employees can thus answer the "Who am I?" question before joining the firm, which will make the transition to their new working environment easier.

As noted earlier, the young talent found Multipoly fun because they got the opportunity to feel part of the company. An important element of this experience was getting to "meet" real people who work at PwC Hungary. We see this experience of being part of the company in the virtual world and meeting future colleagues as another way through which PwC Hungary regulates their future employees' identities. This is because, through playing

Multipoly, prospective employees develop a personal affiliation to the company and feel part of the team, or as Ida stated:

When I joined the firm, after playing Multipoly, in the meetings rooms and in the whole company I was like 'Oh, he was in the game, oh she was in the game'. I think that was the best thing about Multipoly as I made a personal connection with the company.

Through this, we see Multipoly as a way to create a sense of community and connection amongst employees through facilitating feelings of belonging to PwC Hungary before they even set foot in the organization. We see the sense of belonging arising from the need to understand how the company works, in particular their future role and how to behave once employed. Through learning about PwC Hungary's hierarchy and role expectations it makes them feel secure, and they have something to aspire to in the company. They are therefore keen to adapt to the company's values and culture, as they may view it as a way to go up the corporate hierarchy.

Casey (1996) further argues "the devices of workplace family and team manifest a corporate effort to provide emotional gratifications at work to counter the attractions of rampant individualism and consumption" (p.331). Based on this, Alvesson and Willmot (2002) postulate that, by becoming a member of a team or an organization, this will serve as a major source of how you see yourself and how you present yourself to others. This is illustrated by Ida when she pointed out that "*I feel comfortable on my first day as I knew what to expect and how to dress, because I saw the people in the game*". In a way, the same phenomenon occurred at PwC Hungary as the candidates adjusted their behavior and how they present themselves (e.g. how they dressed) when they joined the firm during the onboarding stage. Since they are eager to fit in when they join the firm – and they are in an almost vulnerable position before they join the firm – they aspire towards the image of an PwC Hungary employee that is portrayed in Multipoly.

All of this comes together and we see Multipoly as a vehicle to align prospective employees' identities to that of PwC Hungary. This identity-alignment through Multipoly forms part of the pre-socialization process, which ultimately prepares employees for life at the company as they learn about the company and also gets to know the company culture.

Therefore, Multipoly serves as some kind of pre-onboarding tool, a view that was reinforced by one of the talent managers Annika when she stated that:

The onboarding is now easy, because they are more pre-educated [...]. Because when you are asking 'what do you know about PwC' sometimes they have more information about PwC as I have. Because they had to go through the game, find the information because it was something as a requirement to move forward. So they are much more aware of what we are doing, what our culture is like, and who we are.

According to Bauer and Erdogan (2011), onboarding commonly refers to “a process through which new employees move from being organizational outsiders to becoming organizational insiders” (p.51). In the case of PwC Hungary, Multipoly serves as a kind of pre-onboarding tool, because new employees are already shaped into PwC Hungary employees through a process of identity-regulation before they join the company. We see Multipoly as a way through which employees go through a process of pre-socialization before they enter the organization.

To conclude, we wish to end this discussion by arguing that, through the process of investigating how the use of Multipoly is perceived by talent managers and young talent in the talent acquisition process, we gained valuable insights as to how it is used and how it works in practice at PwC Hungary. We saw that, through PwC Hungary’s employer branding attempt through introducing Multipoly to the market, the game actually serves as a kind of identity regulator that manages the company’s identity as well as that of prospective employees. Through this identity regulation, prospective PwC Hungary employees are socialized to the company’s inner workings and culture, which ultimately serves as a way to make the onboarding process easier. We therefore see employer branding as a part of Multipoly, but it only serves as the means to the end that entails pre-socializing prospective employees through a process of identity regulation.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we will conclude the discussion of this thesis by providing some closing remarks and summarizing our main findings. In addition, we will also reflect on some limitations of this research, as well as point to areas for future research.

5.1 Closing remarks

This research examined the use of gamification in talent acquisition, taking a more critical perspective by looking at it through the lens of identity theory. In order for us to understand its use, we studied the perceptions of individuals involved in the talent acquisition process at PwC Hungary using their gamified intervention, Multipoly. The study did not aim to generalize how gamification is used, but to provide an interesting way of how it can potentially be understood in practice. Using the abductive approach that was inductively orientated, we used qualitative research methods to find answers to our research questions.

Our findings confirmed the mostly popular literature view that gamification interventions such as Multipoly can be seen as a good tool to enhance the company's image in terms of employer branding. Multipoly was perceived as successful in selling PwC Hungary, standing out among competitors and attracting young talent. It seemed to confirm that the young talent were almost seduced by the image portrayed by PwC Hungary through Multipoly, which led to young talent wanting to apply at the company because they wanted to be part of it and feel that they belong to the company. We questioned how realistic this image that they portray through Multipoly is, as we felt it to be rather idealistic.

However, after lifting up the carpet to look into what is hidden beneath it, we are of the view that, through playing the game, prospective employees' identities are shaped by the organization. We viewed this shaping attempt by the firm as a way for prospective employees to identify with the firm and feel part of it before they were even there in person. We argue that, through Multipoly, PwC Hungary is aligning prospective employees' identities to that of the company, which then forms part of the pre-socialization process. This prepares them for life at the company, which then may make the onboarding process easier.

Lastly, we would like to add that we view the employer branding attempt by PwC Hungary through Multipoly as interlinked with identity regulation, as we feel that the identity regulation process would not be able to work if prospective employees do not perceive the company in a positive light. Furthermore, we also view the processes of identity regulation and pre-socialization as intertwined, since the two processes complement and reinforce each other.

5.2 Theoretical and practical implications

This thesis provides new theoretical insights with regards to how gamification can be used in the talent acquisition process and how it can be viewed as a vehicle to align prospective employees' identities to that of the company. This identity alignment serves as a way to pre-socialize employees. As mentioned earlier, the literature on the use of gamification in talent acquisition is very scarce and we hope that, through this study, we expanded on the knowledge of the intersection between these two fields. We use identity as a lens to provide a more critical perspective on this intersection. Thus, our research also highlights that the application of gamification in talent acquisition may not always be as positive as it seems.

Furthermore, we would also like to provide some tentative practical contributions for organizations, talent managers and other interested parties. With regards to employer branding, practitioners and talent managers can see gamification as potentially beneficial to enhance the company's image in the eyes of their target audience. We found that it is important that the image portrayed is aligned with corporate values and culture, as it may serve as an identity regulation tool. Also, because employer branding through gamification may differentiate the company from competitors, we view it of importance that the gamified intervention is continuously updated to stay ahead of competitors.

Lastly, we hope that, through this paper, prospective employees who go through a gamified talent acquisition process become more cautious about the potential identity regulating effects that these gamified talent acquisition interventions may have on them. It is also relevant to organizations, as they now have a better understanding of gamified intervention effects on prospective employees' identities and can potentially make onboarding easier through pre-socialization.

5.3 Limitations and future research

Considering the time frame of this thesis, Bryman and Bell (2011) advocate working “with a smaller number of groups in most instances” (p.507) especially when the investigated topic is “related to a more emotionally involved construct” (Saunders et al., 2009, p.347), such as this study of experiences in order to construct how the use of Multipoly is perceived. However, a research limitation of this study was the amount of participants provided to us by PwC Hungary. Even though we got valuable contributions from our interviewees, we believe that the level of rigor and understanding of the phenomenon would increase with a bigger sample group. Future researchers can therefore conduct a similar study using more research participants over a longer time frame, as we are of the opinion that this will potentially enrich the quality of research data and bring other phenomena to light.

Another research limitation was the language barrier. Especially when interviewing, language is crucial in finding meaning and patterns. To highlight this, Atieno (2009) pointed to “ambiguities, which are inherent in human language [that] can be recognized in the analysis” (p.17). As the mother tongue of our research participants is Hungarian, richness and details in our data might have been reduced or distorted when conducting the interviews in English due to the vocabulary used. Consequently, language influenced how we interpreted meaning. Original words, phrases and concepts in Hungarian might have given us a more in-depth insight and the loss of participants’ intended meaning would have been minimized. This would in turn have led to a less stressful situation for the interviewees. Future research in the area of gamification and talent acquisition can thereby benefit from being conducted in research participants’ native language as it would make them more comfortable to share information such as their personal experiences.

Lastly, since this research only managed to focus on attraction and onboarding in the talent acquisition process, we are of the opinion that future researchers can broaden the scope and also focus on other aspects of the talent acquisition process such as recruitment and selection. The research context was also confined to one company, namely PwC Hungary, and their gamified intervention, Multipoly. Future research can thus be done in a different research setting using a different gamified intervention.

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Appendix

A. Interview guide: Young talent

1. Can you please tell us how you applied at PwC?

Probing questions:

- How did you decide to apply at PwC?
- What did you expect when you applied to PwC?
- How did you experience the recruitment process?
- Please take us through the steps of the application process?
- Were you surprised at any moment of the application process?
- Did you apply at another Professional Service Firm that uses a traditional recruitment process? (Yes / No) Could you please highlight the main differences in your experience?

2. What went through your mind when you played Multipoly?

Probing questions:

- What did you expect when you started playing Multipoly?
- How did you experience it?
- What do you think they (PwC) were looking for?
- What stood out for you?
- Did you have fun? Was it engaging?
- Did you find it challenging?

B. Interview guide: Talent managers

1. Background and context

- How do you perceive the talent acquisition process (based on your experience)? Tell us more about it?
- Who is involved in the process?
- Can you describe how gamification is used?

2. Strategy and intended outcomes

- What was your thinking behind Multipoly?
- In what ways do you use Multipoly?
- How come did you introduce gamification (Multipoly) in the talent acquisition process?
- Did you aim to achieve anything in specific with it?

3. Design

- Who was involved in “gamifying” the talent acquisition process?
- What was your thinking behind the design?

4. Implementation and interaction

- In what ways do you use Multipoly?

5. Reception and interpretation

- How was Multipoly received by business and prospective candidates?
- Did it turn out as you expected?
- Do you talk about Multipoly a lot?

6. Results and outcomes

- Do you work on improving it? Making adjustments?
- In what way are you developing this program?