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Behind the Scenes of an Attractive Employer Brand
**A Qualitative Study of Employer Branding as a Co-Created Process Between
the Employer and the Employees**

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Since When Did Personality Mean More than Competency?

Today's organisations do not only compete about goods, but also about human capital. At work-places today there is no guarantee for a long-lasting relationship with a company, and employees must come to the insight that no employee owns their place in a company. There is only one way to survive in this competitive environment, by showing the company that you have an unusual and unique trait of personality.

A study on the organisation Nudie Jeans exemplifies this phenomenon. They have a history of emphasising employees' social ability and personality as this is an important factor to fit into the organisational culture. Based on this, a company of friends and family has been created, where employees' role as ambassadors has become the company's primary source of communicating the employer brand.

Nudie Jeans is a company that outward ways have been perceived as both successful and attractive. Job applications keep coming in and the image of the company seems to stay intact, this is a place that you want to get access to. The question is if the company's success is dependent on their talent for recruiting the right employees or due to some other underlying factors?

Results of the study show possible implications with building an employer brand in this way. The positive aspects are that in this climate, employees are given the opportunity to flourish and show their knowledge based on other factors than competency. The drawback is that this might create a homogenous workplace based on strong aspirations and norms, where it is hard to fit in.

The study of Nudie Jeans is an important contribution to the field of employer branding, since more research of employee's co-creating role is requested.

Abstract

Behind the Scenes of an Attractive Employer Brand

The aim with this research is to contribute to a holistic understanding of employer branding as a co-created process between the employer and the employees. This is done via capturing employees' stories about an attractive employer. Theories of culture, sensemaking and storytelling are used as a theoretical starting point. A qualitative approach is chosen for gathering empirical data from interviews and a narrative analysis is used as a basis for constructing three typical stories about the employer brand. The result of this research gives an example of an employer that emphasise recruitment based on personality before competency, which seem to become more important in employer branding strategies. This research also gains insight into an employer brand built on family and friends and what possible implications that might come with this.

Keywords: organisational culture, sensemaking, storytelling, employer branding

Bakom kulisserna på ett attraktivt arbetsgivarvarumärke

Studiens övergripande syfte är att bidra till en helhetssyn och förståelse av employer branding som forskningsfält, där arbetsgivaren och de anställda har en samskapande roll i processen. Detta görs genom att fånga anställdas berättelser om en attraktiv arbetsgivare. Organisationskultur, sensemaking och storytelling används som teoretisk utgångspunkt i studien. En kvalitativ approach används för insamling av empirisk data baserat på djupgående intervjuer, där en narrativ analysmetod används för att konstruera tre typiska berättelser om arbetsgivarvarumärket. Resultatet av denna studie visar ett exempel på en arbetsgivare, där rätt personlighet före kompetens betyder mer, något som visar sig blir allt viktigare som rekryteringsstrategi. Studien bidrar även till en förståelse av ett arbetsgivarvarumärke som är uppbyggt av kompisar och familj, samt vilka möjliga konsekvenser det kan finnas med en sådan struktur.

Nyckelord: organisationskultur, meningsskapande, storytelling, employer branding

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Introduction

Behind the Scenes of a Denim Brand

In the course of time society has refined the technology of searching for unusual talent. In prospecting for the potential to grow rather than for past achievement, the search for talent well suits the peculiar conditions of flexible organizations. These organizations use the same instruments for a larger purpose: to eliminate as well as promote individuals. The invidious comparisons between people become deeply personal. In this talent cull, those judged without inner resources are left in limbo. They can be judged no longer useful or valuable, despite what they have accomplished (Sennet, 2006, p.125).

Today's society is characterised by unstable and fractional social circumstances and there is a fact that no employee owns their place in a company. The only way to surrender in this environment is to have an unusual trait of personality (Sennet, 2006). In this thesis, I will examine a company that is an example of this phenomenon, that has put more emphasis on personality than competency to recruit suitable employees.

Nudie Jeans is considered as a successful company in their business because of their sustainability awareness and ecological production and have also won many prizes in regard to this (Appendix 3). The company is outwards ways perceived as an attractive employer and the question remains why so many people want to work there.

The company has a recruitment policy, that goes back in time, of hiring friends and family who can serve as strong ambassadors which has led to a homogenous group of people forming Nudie Jeans. The company has a history of not putting effort on employer branding activities, neither have they invested considerable resources on marketing themselves externally through mass communication such as; advertising in magazines and bill-boards.

Due to this, Nudie Jeans is a relevant example to study from an employer branding perspective, because they hold the key for an understanding of why the recruitment of right personalities becomes more important in employer branding

strategies, where companies rely on their employees to serve as important ambassadors, and what implications there might come with engaging employees as contributors of the employer brand.

Employer Branding

Research on employer branding has a history of being closely connected to corporate branding and communication as well as marketing (e.g. Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Mosley, 1996). Current conceptualisations of employer branding contribute to and focus on how organisations can communicate a positive image of the brand to external stakeholders, such as customers but also to attract and recruit potential employees. Aggerholm, Andersen and Thomsen (2011) argue that this view of employer branding is quite static and needs to be revised. Previous research on employer branding has amongst other focused on how organisations work with employer branding with the final goal to create an enduring brand-customer relationship. This focus puts less emphasis on creating lasting employer-employee relationships. Wilden (2010) confirms this by stating that this is quite problematic since the word-of-mouth process seems to be the far most credible source of spreading the employer brand. There also exist limitations in the field of employer branding because many organisations assume that employees can relate to and identify with the organisations pre-determined values, and then automatically translate them into employer brand values (Aggerholm et al. 2011), something that is easier said than done.

Aggerholm et al. (2011) list four reasons for why employer branding needs to be rethought:

First, employer branding needs be considered as a co-created, communicative process between the organisation and its potential and current employees, to create a lasting relationship. *Second*, employees should be key stakeholders and not channels to communicate the brand to external stakeholders. More research is needed on sustainable relationships in employer branding, that is at the moment ignored. *Third*, employer branding should be considered a process rather than as an end result. This is further strengthened by (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), that argue for a focus on developing organisational values and identity, to be able to define this to the employees. If a consistency with other branding activities exist,

based on organisational culture and the image of the employer, a strong employer brand will be created. *Fourth*, with a basis in organisational culture, potential absence of bias in brand signals communicated externally respectively internally might be avoided and thereby lead to a credible position on the labour market (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Employer branding seems to be divided in two separate traditions, one with its roots in corporate communication, branding and marketing and another tradition that relates to the call by Aggerholm et al. (2011) describe above. The latter tradition focuses on human resource management (HRM), where organisational communication and creating a lasting relationship with the company's employees is considered important and where employees are viewed as co-creators of the employer brand. With this lays the challenge to engage employees in a dialogue on corporate values. The tradition has close connection to organisational culture, where the understanding of the brand is primarily based on employees' way of making sense of the organisation, as a key for communicating a cohesive brand both internally and externally. Here the focus lays on enacting the brand in the everyday work life and make employees' definition of their culture constitute the employer brand. After that, it can be communicated with consistency externally.

Employer branding is further interesting to examine, since contemporary organisations do not only compete about goods, but also about human capital and therefore, HRM becomes more important (Wright & McMahan, 1992).

With a starting point in employer branding and its close connection to HRM, this thesis will exemplify how employees' stories about their organisation work as a way of defining and making sense their employer brand.

Research Aims and Objectives

The purpose of this master thesis is to examine the internal and external communication in the employer branding process, which is done via employee's stories about an attractive employer. The thesis contributes to a holistic understanding of employer branding as a co-created process between the employer and the employees. To achieve the purpose, this thesis will answer the following research questions:

- How do employees make sense of Nudie Jeans as an employer?
- What role do the stories discerned from employees' sensemaking have in the employer branding process?
- What are the implications of employee co-creation in employer branding?

In order to examine these questions, Nudie Jeans will be studied as an example of a company that relies on recruiting the right people who can serve as ambassadors. This is a way of understanding how the recruitment of right personalities becomes an important employer branding strategy.

Delimitations

The case Nudie Jeans is used as an example to study employer branding from a holistic perspective. With this comes the understanding that, how employer branding is presented in this thesis, is also due to its context. Nudie Jeans is a small Swedish denim brand in the fashion industry, and it is also one of few head offices in Gothenburg. At these work-places employees might share similar ways to make sense of a strong employer brand. This must be kept in mind when evaluating the findings of this thesis and the contribution to the field of employer branding.

Disposition of the Thesis

To begin with, a review of previous research on employer branding relevant for this thesis will be presented. In this section, the connection to corporate branding and communication as well as marketing is exemplified. This section is followed by a theoretical review where theories of organisational culture, sensemaking and storytelling are presented. Thereafter, a methodology section is presented where chosen approach to find empirical data is shown, followed by a presentation of the case. After that, the analysis of the thesis is presented where three stories are exemplified as a way of making sense of a strong employer brand, that relates to previous research and theories that has been used. The thesis is summarised by a discussion and a conclusion that explain the contribution to previous research together with proposals for future research.

Previous Research on Employer Branding

Previous research on employer branding reside on the same principles as used by research fields such as corporate communication, corporate branding and marketing and has previously been closely connected to these research fields. The understanding of employer branding is presented as an instrumental tool in the recruitment process to for instance; communicate a positive image of the brand and to enhance customer experience and performance. Following section will now give a brief review of previous areas of application.

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) provide the first contribution to the review of employer branding. Their point of view is contributing to a rather linear understanding of the employer branding tradition, where a static sender and receiver role is present. The researchers explain that their article presents a basis for conducting academic studies on employer branding. In the study, testable suggestions for practicing managers are developed, where organisational career is the final goal with employer branding strategies. The findings in this study are mainly based on management and marketing principles and exemplifies what role marketing should take in employer branding. If a company choose to put time and energy on employer branding, it should be clear how the company can measure the possible impact on the company's overall performance. This understanding indicates that managers can use employer branding as a channel for managing employee recruitment and retention.

Ambler and Barrow (1996) provide another view of employer branding where the enhancement of organisational performance is emphasised. The researchers conducted a qualitative pilot study, where top executives of 27 UK companies reflected on their HR-practices, and the importance of working with employer branding. The researchers describe three concepts that are similar to employer branding; culture, internal marketing and corporate reputation and then discuss if the employer brand concept might add anything extra of value to these already ex-

isting perspectives. The conclusion drawn from the study is that these three concepts have a lot in common. They overlap but can also be differentiated, and this is where the employer branding concept integrates them into a separate term called employer brand equity. In this study, organisational culture is discussed as the primary source for success, which means that if employee motivation is enhanced through creating an understanding of the culture, it can possibly lead to an improvement in performance, that in turn can generate in a strengthened customer relationship and brand equity. The importance of culture is raised in this study, however, the researchers lack an understanding for how organisational culture can be managed proactively (Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

Another contribution to previous research is introduced by Mosley (1996) where employer branding is described to enhance customer experience, and where brand management is discussed as a potential contributor to cultural change. The researcher discusses that service companies tend to put more focus on operational and functional factors, than on the interaction and relationship between the company and its customers. A more holistic view is requested, which can be achieved by identifying the culture and making it present in everyday-management decisions. In doing so, culture becomes aligned with the brand values. By bringing together employee- and desired customer experience, as well as integrating disciplines such as; marketing and HR, effective employer brand management can be achieved. Even though many service companies try to control and influence employee behaviour, there is little understanding for how employees understand and communicate the brand. Culture from this perspective, as a channel for enhancing customer satisfaction and image, is closely connected to brand management. This view deviates from the focus on culture that this thesis takes, namely as the foundation of creating lasting relationships with current employees to build a strong employer brand.

Theoretical Framework

This chapter begins with an introduction to organisational culture, followed by theories of identification and the section ends with a presentation of hyper culture and its connection to organisational culture. A brief introduction to sensemaking is then presented, then stories and narratives are presented as a key to make sense and grasp the organisational culture.

Organisational Culture

To create an effective organisational culture Alvesson & Sveningsson (2012) argue that following elements are of importance: the community of people with a certain education and role, specific occurrences in history such as crisis and organisational changes, founders and leaders of character, the business area where the company operates as well as the society that the company associates with. Even religious beliefs can be an important feature in the creation of an organisational culture. Finally, size and structure can also have a certain influence.

Schein (2010) goes on arguing that superficial models of culture must be left for deeper and more complex models that stems from the anthropological field, where rules and games, shared meaning, formal rituals and celebrations are studied. These are, however, only manifestations of culture. The true essence of culture can only be found when combining these manifestations with a deeper understanding of culture.

A Model of Organisational Culture

According to Schein (2010) organisational culture needs to be divided into different levels of expression, to create an understanding of culture in organisations. In short, these three different levels range from *artifacts*, at the surface followed by *espoused beliefs and values* and at the bottom, *basic underlying assumptions* exist.

Artifacts- are noticeable expressions that one can see, hear and feel, such as; architecture and language, creativity, style (how people dress), myths and stories, as well as visible rituals and ceremonies and enounced values. The climate of the group is also presented as an artifact, since climate is considered as a manifestation and an outcome of deeper underlying assumptions. Moreover, observed behaviour and organisational processes also fits into the first level of culture. Since these symbols are mere manifestations of deeper assumptions, further insight and interpretation is needed and a prerequisite for this is that the employees have experienced culture at a deeper level (Schein, 2010).

Rites and rituals are symbolic ways to reinforce specific assumptions present in the culture. Cultural rituals often contribute to a certain climate where correct values and ways of behaviour are displayed. Characteristic elements for rituals are for instance; continuity and specific hierarchical constellations that give rise to ritual impressions (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

Espoused beliefs and values- consist of beliefs, values, norms and rules of behaviour. They are the basis for how members construct culture and represent it to themselves and others. Here social validation can be found, that explains a phenomenon where members of a group support and confirm shared values and experiences to a degree that they are almost taken for granted. If you fail to abide by the rules there is a risk of being excommunicated – to get excluded from the group.

Beliefs and values formed by founders and leaders, are rarely questioned, and if they give meaning and guide the group, they turn into non-debatable norms. Sometimes these are not even connected to the actual performance of the group. But these espoused values and beliefs cannot explain behaviour to its full extent. To gain deeper insight into culture, basic underlying assumptions need to be further investigated (Schein, 2010).

In organisations, rules concerning how to act and behave can be numerous. These can cover areas such as how to speak to each other, to what extent you share your personal life, how emotional you can be, how the tone and jargon is expressed and if sexual relationships are accepted (Schein, 2010).

Rules in organisations can be tricky, since some can perceive them as a guiding force, however, still possible to deviate from but there are also rules that are

inviolable. Different perceptions regarding rules can create clashes in groups, which can lead to confusion and conflicts (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

As a new employee, it directly becomes clear with whom to joke, be serious with, discuss personal matters with, hang out with outside of work and how the level of hierarchy is formed in the organisation. In some organisations, nepotism prevails and even welcomed. This means that the organisations view family members as those that can be trusted primarily. Some organisations prohibit any family connections at all since it might interfere with decisions being made, and even result in that less competent employees are recruited or offered positions in the company that they do not qualify for (Schein, 2010).

Basic underlying assumptions- is the essence of culture, constructed by deeply embedded and unconscious norms. Culture is at this level aimed to define to its members who they are and how to act, but also provide them with a sense of identity. Culture gains strength through shared assumptions and continues to grow strong by time.

Culture is always based on history, and to be able to understand an organisation, there is a need to look back and see the progress throughout time. Different ideas and perceptions about organisational values, based on the incorporated old culture, can sometimes be transferred fast from old employees to new employees. If new employees do not agree with these values and ideas, they often tend to quit after a short period of time (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

However, Schein (2010) gives a different understanding when arguing that what is really at the heart of a culture, will not easily be revealed to new employees through rules of how to behave. These rules will only show themselves to members that have earned permanent status, and thereby have been let into the inner circle. This whole socialisation process is interesting, since it can give insight to different interpretations of how to get access to a community. By studying how employees behave it can unravel deeper assumptions of how the organisational culture is constituted.

Identification with the Organisational Culture

It is of interest for the organisation to make sure to be perceived in a positive manner. If the organisation succeeds in creating a distinct identity, a strong bond

constituted by a unified supreme we, might take form. If the identity is somewhat less strong, it might lead to that employees feel more connected to a certain department, project, role or assignments. Identity of an organisations has therefore close connection to the culture (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008).

Moreover, if the organisation gives light of representing something extraordinary, even special, this enhances the likelihood for members to give in to common ideas and perceptions, hold by the organisation in general. A unified culture can also be comprehended as the important force that gives an organisation its specific and distinct identity (Alvesson, 2001).

NIKE is given as an example of a company where employees strongly identify with the company's values and culture, where one of the employees even had made a tattoo of the company's classic logo. This example shows how the organisational culture can absorb and capture employees to an extent, that it almost takes over. When this happens employees sometimes stop being critical (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

For a characteristic and unique organisational culture to flourish the members should strongly identify with the culture. For them it is essential that the organisation communicates something unique when it comes to style, direction, history and other relevant factors that can affect their commitment and identification with the organisation. Following aspects can affect to what extent members identify with the organisation: clear and distinctive values amongst communities- the more distinct the greater chance to generate in a unique organisational identity, status of a specific group- high status generates in greater attractiveness, comparison to other groups- if "they" are more visible it gets easier to construct a "we" (Ashforth & Mael 1989, cited in Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008).

The Role of the Founders

Founders have the authority to make decisions of whom to let into the organisation. When founders decide to create a group they already seem to have predetermined theories about how things should work out, and therefore a natural part of this is to recruit employees that they believe will like them (Schein, 2010).

Founders and leaders often play an important role in private companies, and have an even better chance to impact and influence the organisational culture,

than in public organisations. However, this is not said to be an easy task for neither private nor public companies. Even though private companies strive for defining and finding their niche, the business culture that in a way brings companies together, tend to have a certain rectifying effect. To find a niche and develop a unique company culture is sometimes viewed as the key to success (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

Hyper and Aspirational Culture

Leaders and managers seem to fabricate organisations as unique and extraordinary, even special, but when they do, they use standardised words and a language that is recurrent in many companies. An explanation for this might be due to the actual difficulty to understand the culture, which then results in superficial words describing the culture (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008).

A concept related to what has just been described is hyper culture. According to Alvesson & Sveningsson (2008) a hyper culture is characterised as a group of positive values and statements, that often fail to show a connection to the everyday practice in an organisation, which creates a gap between what is real and what is made up.

Alvesson & Sveningsson (2008) argue that it is rather a question of constructing culture in a different way, as both strong, homogenous and persuasive. The management thus seem to increase the legitimacy of culture by using hyper cultural concepts, rather than trying to create something that is perceived as "unreal".

Sensemaking

Organisations represent an open system where sensemaking exists within. Because of organisations excessive degree of openness and constitution of inputs from the environment, there are various information to extract from here (Weick, 1995).

Sensemaking is according to (Starbuck & Miliken, 1988 cited in Weick, 1995) the process of positioning stimuli into a framework. When this process is active, it then facilitates for people to; understand, realise, explain, attribute and predict certain situations. Sensemaking is not equal to interpretation which can be explained by stating that sensemaking is a practice of making sense of one's experiences

(putting bits and pieces together) – interpretation is a more passive practice of interpreting an already existing text (Weick, 1995).

Weick (1995) describes that when members of an organisation experience turbulence, there is a greater need to get engaged in a sensemaking process, to sort out information and understand what is going on. Moreover, when members experience feelings of ambiguity sensemaking is also present. Significant for these states is its shocking aspect, as organisations get interrupted in their continuous flow. When ambiguity takes form, people engage in sensemaking because they get overwhelmed and confused by too many interpretations. There exist a lack of clarity and inconsistency in their understanding.

Properties of Sensemaking

Weick (1995) describes seven characteristics that distinguish sensemaking from other concepts such as understanding, interpretation and attribution. In following chapter, four of them will be accounted for as important contributors to this thesis.

Grounded identity construction- in the process of interaction, identities are created and for people to really understand their identities, they project them into a surrounding and then observe what happens next. People can be part of many interactions and shift among these, this is almost like shifting between different definitions of self. Sensemaking is born out of the effort to maintain a consistent and positive notion of the self (Weick, 1995).

Personal identities and the perceptions of the self is, to a certain degree, shaped around and adjusted to how a person believes that others view their workplace. There is a close connection to be found between the individual character of an employee and the image of the organisation. This signifies the willingness for individuals to preserve a positive image of the organisation, but also the ability to restore a negative image, through continuous associations and disassociations with organisational activities and issues (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991 cited in Weick, 1995).

Retrospective- the concept of sense is explained to be constructed in an attentional process, meaning that it is a process that pays attention to what has already occurred. Weick (1995) explain that retrospective stems from Schutz's (1967)

analysis of what he calls meaningful lived experience. Here the focus lays on the word lived, as referring to the past, to explain the fact that people can only know what they are doing after they have done it. This is also strengthened by Mead (1956 cited in Weick, 1995) that says that we are always conscious of what we have done and never of doing it.

Ongoing - there is a saying that sensemaking never starts and the explanation for this is that sensemaking is signified by continuity. In other words, people are constantly in the middle of things, and it is only when the same people focus on what happened in the past, glancing backwards from a point ahead in time, that things become things (Weick, 1995).

Enactive of sensible environments- Pondy & Mitroff (1979 cited in Weick, 1995) explain that in organisations, people are part of the environment that they generate. There is no such thing as a separate, solid or static environment that exists out there, detached from people. Every now and then, people become victims to the mere sound of the phrase environment, which sends out signals that the environment is singular and fixed and separated from the individual.

Stories and Narratives

Stories and narratives is in this section presented as a key to make sense and grasp the organisational culture. Further on, the concepts story and narrative are used interchangeable in accordance with Polkinghorn's (1988) understanding, as any narrative production in general.

There are plenty of ways to study and capture the culture or meaning of an organisation, one way is via stories. Stories are symbolic features in organisational cultures, which in a way becomes clear when different people tell a story in the same way or even tell the same story, almost like they decided what to say in advance. Stories can reflect and give access to deeper organisational experiences, that is closely connected to the realities of its members (Gabriel 2000).

In each field of practice, no matter when, there are a series of stories in circulation accessible to new employees through, for instance, introduction- guides when getting introduced to the new work-place. But these stories are also constituted and repeated by its very performers, such as old employees, who participat-

ed in these events long time ago and now associates this feeling of community by manifestations of its history. Several of these circulating stories can be said to have quasi-mythical features (Czarniawska, 2004).

Stories about employees, that for example have achieved something big or affected the organisation in an extraordinary way, can also be of interest. These stories circulate and indirectly affect what the employees might think about the organisation. It is common that founders and other people use stories and expressions to stimulate and influence the culture (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2012).

Stories play an important role when new employees are introduced. Regardless if it has the form of a legend, myth or a story it will teach one thing or another about the organisation to the new employee (Schein, 2010).

A story can at the same time define very private and personal desires of an individual, such as feelings of revenge, justice and identification, as well as a group's mutual fantasies of liberation or domination of another group. Culture can also express deeply rooted structural and political truths, such as a groups' feeling of injustice or insecurity. Neither an organisational culture, nor any other culture can be viewed as objective of existing social and political structures. Culture, including that part of culture that is constituted through stories, does not exist in an isolated relation to social and political structures. Stories rather express them, resist them and support them (Gabriel, 2000).

Methodology

This master thesis provides an interpretive study of Nudie Jeans, where employee's stories about the organisational culture and Nudie Jeans are used to gain insight to how they make sense of a strong employer brand. Therefore, a narrative approach is the best option when interpreting and analysing the empirical data, drawn from qualitative interviews.

Social Constructivism and Sensemaking

The thesis has a starting point in postmodernism and social constructivism, that holds the view that there does not exist already made up stories "out there" waiting to be collected. This is rather something that lays in the hands of the researcher, to identify stories being told and reproduced by the employees'. It is then up to the researcher to construct stories (Gabriel, 2000).

This thesis has used abduction as a starting point, which means that empirical data as well as a theoretical understanding has been used interchangeably when constructing the stories (Bryman, 2008).

Social constructivism researchers use narratives to identify and describe, for instance; values, attitudes, perceptions and ideas in the society. Researchers hold the view that people make sense of the world through interacting with one another (Hall, Evans & Nixon, 2013). At Nudie Jeans employees' stories are constructed based on combined answers from the interviews, and in this way the employees interact in the process of defining their employer brand.

Weick (1995) also puts emphasis on the social interaction between people and discusses how different identities are created in organisations. The author belongs to a group of researchers that argue that stories can generate in both knowledge, sense and insight to organisations. This starting point deviates from the one-way vision of communication, or as Säljö (2010) describes it, the *conduit metaphor*, where communication is understood to be transferred from the mind of one person (sender) to another person (receiver) via language. If returning to Weick's way of

looking at communication again, the author advocates a form of communication called ritual communication described as a sacred ceremony with the unifying effect to create community.

In this thesis, this view of communication can explain how employees make sense of Nudie Jeans through telling stories. Following section will now present the case Nudie Jeans.

The Case Nudie Jeans

Nudie Jeans is a Swedish Gothenburg based, denim brand established in 2001 and today it is represented in 49 countries around the world. Since autumn 2012 the entire denim collection has been made with 100% organic cotton where sustainability is the essence of Nudie Jeans. The study is based on employees working at the head office in central Gothenburg, that at the moment employs around 60 people (NudieJeans, 2017a).

At NudieJeans.com, information about their products made with 100 % organic cotton denim, social responsibility and transparent production is visible everywhere. The company also communicates that they strive for sustainable consumption patterns, this by for example offering free repairs for all their products, as well as accepting worn-out jeans for later distribution as second-hand product in their stores. Nudie Jeans can more or less be summarised as “a high-quality product made in a fair way” (NudieJeans, 2017b). The brands uniqueness lays in their effort to make a difference and be sustainable.

The choice to conduct a study of Nudie Jeans can be understood by Haugh and Talwar (2010), arguing that there are many positive benefits for organisations, that communicate their work and engagement in areas such as sustainability. These benefits are exemplified as; enhanced image and goodwill as well as success in the process of recruiting and retaining employees. Moreover, the interest also stems from their low employee turnover (Personal conversation HR-manager, 15th March 2017) and their continuous actions generating in several different awards (Appendix 3). Nudie Jeans has not yet won any award for being an attractive employer brand, still Nudie Jeans seem to be considered as an attractive employer brand in their business.

Method

This section presents different methods used in the approach to gather empirical data, followed by some ethical implications that has been present in the selection and implementation of qualitative interviews.

Inspired by Autoethnography

At the specific moment when gathering the empirical data, I was employed at Nudie Jeans and thereby a part of the organisation being studied. This means that the qualitative interviews, which will be accounted for soon, were conducted on my colleagues and not entirely unproblematic. In a way, the role as a researcher can be affected since it might be difficult for me to separate what I can include in my thesis and what might be considered as confidential information. This is something that can affect the conclusions drawn in the analysis and should be kept in mind.

However, the aim with this study is to capture the stories being told by the employees. These stories are highly subjective with no right and wrong answers, and my role as a researcher will focus on reproducing and constructing the employer brand based on employees' way of making sense of their stories. My role can also be seen from a positive angle since my colleagues might feel more familiar and comfortable telling their stories, to someone that they already know from before. The access to interviews, is also considered to be positive factors since this was never a problem in the process of gathering empirical data.

Just like ethnographers, autoethnographers treat the empirical data with critical, analytical and interpretive eyes, to reveal patterns of what is observed and told. Ethnographic data is often text-based, and a common way to gather empirical data is by field notes, journals and interview transcripts. However, what differs this method from ethnography is that the self is more present (hence why it is called auto), meaning that the autoethnographers hope to gain a cultural understanding of the self and others, directly as indirectly, connected to the self (Chang, 2008).

The focus on the self in autoethnographic studies can be more or less present depending on what direction that the researcher takes. The researcher might not even study their own lives directly, but the cultural analysis still sheds a light on

their own lives as being a part of the group being studied. This is also the case of this thesis, where the employees of Nudie Jeans are in focus (Chang, 2008).

In this thesis, the primary source for empirical data has been interview transcripts from current employees at Nudie Jeans head office, which will now be accounted for.

Qualitative Interviews

When conducting qualitative research, it is rather a question of depth than breadth since the study is normally conducted on a small group of individuals with certain similar and shared characteristics, in a specific context. With this said, Lincon and Guba (1985, cited in Bryman, 2008) describe that qualitative research should instead strive for creating so called thick descriptions, defined as broad descriptions and details of a culture. By that, qualitative research can contribute to and be generalised to other similar studies. Further on, according to May (2001) interviews constitute empirical data based on the interviewees' experiences, opinions, values attitudes and feelings. By conduction interviews, an extensive insight into the interviewees self-perceived experiences can be achieved (May, 2001).

A semi-structured approach has been used in the thesis. Bryman (2008) explains that semi-structured interviews are recommended when the researcher begins the study with a clear focus. Moreover, semi-structured interviews are characterised by specific topics covered in a so-called interview-guide. However, the questions can deviate from the predetermined schedule and new questions and topics can, throughout the conversation, appear to be interesting to elaborate on (Bryman, 2008). The positive aspects using semi-structured interviews is that the answers may get more personal, as the interviewees are given the opportunity to answer on their own terms (May, 2001).

Selection of Interviewees

A purposive sampling in qualitative research is a recommended sampling method. This method is described as a strategic way to choose interviewees that can provide valuable information for the study (Bryman, 2008). The criteria for participating in the interviews at Nudie Jeans were based on following conditions:

- Employees working for more than one year at Nudie Jeans, to be able to create an understanding of the organisation,
- one employee (or more) from each department participating,
- a mixture between sexes, (though based on the original percentage of employees that show 65 % men and 35 % women),
- interviewees participating that both worked at Södra Larmgatan (the old office) and recent additions of employees at Västra Hamngatan (the current office),
- characteristics of the interviewees, such as; will these people be able to tell and make sense of stories valuable for the analysis.

An email was sent out to the selected people, with information about the master thesis. Employees were then asked to participate. The employees were also informed that the interviews were going to be recorded and then transcribed and other factors due to anonymity, see section of ethical considerations further down. Information, that the interviews were about to last for 50-60 minutes, were given and that the HR-manager had given approval of participation during working hours, something that might have facilitated the participation. Different dates were then suggested for when to conduct the interviews. 11 employees were asked and everyone decided to participate.

Except from the 11 employees that participated, three additional interviews were made with two of the founders and one with the HR-manager. They were given the same information as described above. An opportunity also opened up for doing participant observations of two exit-interviews, with employees who decided to leave their job position for various reasons. During these interviews, the participants specifically asked not to be recorded, so field notes were taken instead. For more information about the selection and participation, see (Appendix 1).

Conducting and Transcribing the Interviews

Every interview was recorded and careful attention and responsiveness to how the conversation elaborated, to body language and emotions being expressed was also of importance. According to Bryman (2008), this can say a lot about how the interviewee experiences the situation and responds to the questions being asked.

Significant for semi-structured interviews is that the questions being asked normally are specified, with the exception that the interviewer can deviate from the predetermined questions in the interview-guide. This brings more flexibility into the conversation, since it opens up for a dialogue (May, 2001). This turned out to be true, as all of the interviews turned into unique conversations with focus on different topics.

All interviews were conducted and then transcribed into Swedish. However, when later using the material as basis for the analysis, discussion and conclusion, the empirical data was translated into English. With this there is a possibility for some words and expressions to lose their original meaning. However, this has been considered necessary since the rest of the thesis is written in English, and that Swedish quotes might lose context if being used. Some quotes have also been changed, where names of employees have been mentioned. This was done due to promised anonymity to participate in this study.

Kvale (1996) presents typical forms of interview questions that can be used in qualitative interviews. Following list exemplifies some of these questions that were used as a guideline when constructing the interview-guide:

- *Introduction question*: these questions can be referred to as - why did you go to... please tell me about when your interest in ... first began,
- *Follow-up questions*: were used with the aim to get the interviewee to elaborate on their answers - why do you say that, yeess, and?
- *Indirect questions*: what do most people round here think of the way... is that the way you feel to?

A list from (Gabriel, 2000) was also used with exemplified questions of how to stimulate and elicit stories when creating an interview-guide and conducting an interview.

Three different interview-guides were constructed, one for the employees at Nudie Jeans, a separate guide for the founders and one for the HR-manager. Different interview-guides were created since the questions for the employees had a more open character and for the others, the questions focused on their specific roles, and required another design (Appendix 2).

Ethical Considerations

When conducting the interviews information was given to the participants in accordance with Vetenskapsrådets (2002) research ethics regarding; information, confidentiality, informed consent and use requirements. The interviewees were also informed that their answers were only to be used with the purpose of contributing to this master thesis. The participation in the interviews was voluntary and information that they, at any time, could withdraw their participation was communicated.

Before conducting the interviews, they were guaranteed anonymity regarding name, job position/role and any other information that can be connected to and help to distinguish who participated in the study at Nudie Jeans. However, if the employees chose to discuss their participation in the study with other employees afterwards, this is a factor that is left out as an ethical issue in this study.

If having a closer look to some ethical issues that might appear when using an autoethnographic method, Morse (2003) argues that researchers need to remember that other people are also present in self-narratives. This can be either as an active participant or as being part of another person's story. Even though the thesis is inspired by a autoethnographic method, with less focus on the researcher's self and more focus on the employees, this is good to keep in mind. The researcher has a multi-faceted role – researcher- informant- author, and needs the insight that a story is never made in a vacuum, other people will always be present and participate (Chang, 2008).

Narrative Analysis

Gabriel (2000) explains that any part of a text, sign, or other things that might capture the researcher's attention, can tell a story. Boje and Dennehy (1993, cited in Gabriel, 2000) describe that stories also give life to different characters within them and contribute to a new sense of organisational community.

Narratives can be separated into two different categories depending on the purpose of the research. This thesis belongs to the category, where the purpose is to describe and reveal already existing narratives and used to order and make sense of different events (Polkinghorne, 1988).

When it comes to the theme or the key part of a story, this is something that can not be read out of the text directly, since it demands the researcher's active interpretation and conclusion, which can be difficult. Empirical data in a narrative analysis equals text from different interviews, but also the organisation's common cultural beliefs, that contribute to an overall picture for interpreting the interviews (Polkinghorne, 1988).

Collecting Stories and Types of Plots

Stories always exist in a given context, and what works out in one situation might not be the best alternative for another. Therefore (Czarniawska, 2004) explains that there are no specific tools for collecting stories.

Three typical stories were constructed and identified of how employees make sense of Nudie Jeans as an employer brand. These stories took form out of general themes that could be discerned from the interviews. Patterns of common stories were then discerned which generated in three final stories.

For each story, a method called categorisation was used, which is according to Spiggle (1994) a process of classifying or labelling different units of data. For qualitative research, this is done during the process of coding. In a narrative analysis, this coding was due to different plots (quotes and excerpts), discerned from the interviews, and then put under matching stories. Moreover, Polkinghorne (1988) explains that there is no specific way, or system of categories for explaining plots. How plots are presented and created depend on what the researcher pays attention to and finds interesting.

Analysis

The following three stories (plots) are constructed by me as a researcher based on how employees make sense of Nudie Jeans as an employer brand. These stories will not focus on typical stories of for instance, villains and heroes that are common in narrative analysis. These stories rather aim to find possible changes, conflicts and intrigues that can contribute to an understanding of Nudie Jeans employer brand. The aim is to emphasise where Nudie Jeans strengths and weaknesses lays in building an organisation supported on family and friends. Moreover, these stories aim to explain what implications that might come with employee co-creation in the employer branding process.

It has been difficult to identify separate stories that stand for themselves, since they are all dependent on each other. However, the common thread that can be discerned from the stories is that Nudie Jeans organisational culture is a bit like a cult, where fundamental values that springs from the early years have shaped the employees into becoming devoted followers that abide by the rules of Nudie Jeans.

The stories follow the structure of first starting wide, presenting the idea behind the brand based on fundamental values that springs from early years followed by the view of Nudie Jeans as an attractive employer. As the story goes on, it will reveal a special way of recruiting friends and family and how this has led to a homogenous work-place of people and a strong community based on social competency. The internal core is reached in the last story where the protagonist of the story is explained, namely the Nudie Jeans person and how it is behind the scenes of a strong employer brand.

I Want to Break Free

This story is a way of making sense of Nudie Jeans as an independent company and social actor in the fashion industry, that has a responsibility to make a change and statement in this business. These values stem from three radical and independent founders and will be captured by telling typical plots about the story of Nudie Jeans, a company that was born out of the feeling of wanting to break free.

Can We Change the World?

Everything began with an idea to change the world and do something different. Out of this a company was born that today is considered as a successful denim brand and the story about the foundation of the company is without doubt unique. According to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2012) founders often fabricate their organisations as unique and extraordinary, however they tend to use standardised and superficial words that prevails in the business. This might be due to difficulties in understanding the existing culture. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2008) describe this as *hyper culture*, where homogenous and persuasive values often fail to integrate with the everyday practice.

Following three stories in the analysis, starting with *I want to break free*, will explore the uniqueness with Nudie Jeans employer brand and if the external and internal communication of the branding is cohesive, since this is argued for as fundamental for creating a holistic understanding of Nudie Jeans employer brand.

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2012) explain that it is important that private companies find their niche and deviates from prevailing business culture, this by developing a unique company culture.

For Nudie Jeans, the essence lays in strong fundamental values such as change the world and do something different. The company wanted to leave the corporate world behind. It was crystal clear what the brand should not represent, however the founders had no idea how to build an organisation and brand. Today this is showed in an organisation that cherishes around a social community, where the idea and how things are done, is Nudie Jeans. Schein (2010) confirms this and goes on explaining that beliefs and values that stems from the founders can turn

into non-discussable norms, sometimes not even connected to the actual performance of the group. This can also be said for Nudie Jeans:

“The idea behind the brand is a bit like a Bible, it turns into sects and religious-like behaviour. You are more passionate about the idea than the actual product.”

Personal conversation- founder

“There existed pretty big words about what we wanted to achieve and do, but there were no structured ideas of how to get there.”

Personal conversation- founder

The personalities of the founders are reflected due to the brands difficulty to define itself in all branding activities. Nudie Jeans stems from the founders' previous experiences and interest, which explains how a close connection to the music scene in Gothenburg became part of how Nudie Jeans before marketed the brand. But before telling this plot, an understanding of the founders' individual contribution to Nudie Jeans will follow.

Our Duty to Make a Statement

Now when the storm is over, one can say that we took on the challenge from two different angles, but we wanted to do the same thing, for me it was more like starting another band, but this time you produce jeans instead, are you with me, and the other idea was a more distinct idea about the product.

Personal conversation- founder

At Nudie Jeans, a wave of left political values permeates the organisation. One of the founders has roots in the punk music, where these values can be found and where the idea to deviate from the norm is a fact. This is also values that Nudie Jeans has assumed as being an independent company with a responsibility to make a change in this world. This can be exemplified from a situation when one of the founders decided to send an e-mail to, at that time, the chairman of the Municipal Council in Gothenburg, Anneli Hultén (GP, 2013). In this e-mail, he expressed his concerns regarding various things happening in Gothenburg. The e-mail became an official document, and even though the letter was not signed

Nudie Jeans, his way of acting outside the company can be connected to the idea of being an independent company and social actor.

This is described in an e-mail sent to me - I wish I could do the same thing as you, but I sell screws and nuts to Liseberg, and if I say something like that, it will be the end of my business - and with this I am saying, it is our obligation as an independent actor and part of the jeans industry to speak up.

Personal conversation- founder

Ashforth and Mael (1989, cited in Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008) describe that clear and distinctive values and directions (e.g. political) of a community enhances the likelihood for employees to identify and feel committed to ideas and perceptions that prevails in the culture. This is exemplified in following quote from one of the employees at Nudie Jeans:

I feel proud when he writes to the Municipal Council and express that he feels let down, in that moment I feel proud to be part of Nudie Jeans [...] I feel proud to be part of an organisation that makes a statement, there was no need for him to do that [...] There is something else behind this.

Personal conversation- employee 5

Culture, as expressed through stories can reveal deeply rooted structural and political truths in an organisation (Gabriel, 2000). At Nudie Jeans, there exist an unwritten rule, namely left political values. To share this political stance has almost become a fact in the company and something that many employees do, however to deviate from this is almost considered as inappropriate. However, it is accepted to support another view, but if you do, you might not want to express that out loud:

From a political perspective it feels okay to express where you stand, but some political orientations feel less accepted than others. This is probably an unspoken fact, or just a feeling I have, but from what I understand it is more okay to wear a left political pin, than coming here with a MUF-pin [...] There is also this drinking song, that it is the fault of the centrist. It is a little special since it adds a certain value to this song.

Personal conversation employee- 11

Employees at Nudie Jeans has a tradition to sing a song at parties and kick-offs that manifests these left political values. This has become a ritual and some-

thing that employees rely on to happen during these occasions. According to Schein (2010) rituals are symbolic ways of reinforcing assumptions shared by the organisational culture. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2012) further explain that significant for rituals are its continuity, where acceptable values and behaviours contribute to a special climate:

A political vein runs through the company that stems from the old foundation. There is this tradition to sing a song that centrist drink like old ladies, this is a statement since the whole company joins in and sing this song

Personal conversation employee- 4

The Importance of Staying Authentic

Nudie Jeans has a history of not using mass communication to communicate their brand. Neither has the company participated in any employer branding enhancing activities to reach out to suitable employees, the company has rather let people come to them. However, Nudie Jeans has used other communication strategies such as putting high trust in their employees to act as ambassadors, but also sponsoring different rock bands, who wore their clothes. This became an alternative way of communicating their brand:

Absolutely, friends came up to the old office, Ebbot for instance. He came up and had his caftans made here, I am not sure if we still do it. But we did it continuously, he needed new fittings since he has not become smaller over the years. This is something that we have taken a stand from, the close connection to the music scene in Gothenburg... we did that kind of marketing a lot.

Personal conversation – employee 5

The thesis contributes to a holistic understanding of employer branding as a co-created process, by examining the internal and external communication in the employer branding process. How employees make sense of their employer brand is thereby dependent on both external and internal factors.

According to Pondy and Mitroff (1979, cited in Weick, 1995) people are part of the environment that they generate, it does not exist a separate and static environment “out there” separated from individuals. How Nudie Jeans then chose to communicate and market their brand, will also affect how employees view the

brand. Since employees have an important role as ambassadors, it will become highly relevant for the way that Nudie Jeans is viewed from both an employer branding and marketing perspective. It lays in the interest of the company to make sure that employees consider the company's way of doing things as the best alternative.

Alvesson & Sveningsson (2008) argue that if an organisation succeeds with creating a distinct identity, a strong bond expressed as a supreme "we", might take form. At Nudie Jeans, there seem to exist a shared understanding that not using mass communication during the early years was a good alternative and that this generated in authenticity:

It was a choice to stay authentic and genuine, to not put ads in magazines such as Slitz and Café, we chose the word-of-mouth method that turned into rumors, and this obviously was a successful way. Nudie Jeans put trust in the employees to put in good words about Nudie Jeans, but also sponsoring of rock bands and such, this generated in a turnover of almost half a billion.

Personal conversation- employee 6

The Glorified Image of the Employer Brand

When asking employees at Nudie Jeans what they think have contributed to the success of the brand, there did not seem to exist a common understanding of why and how. However, the majority describe Nudie Jeans as an attractive employer brand and out of these conversations, following features can be discerned:

1. Part of an interesting business
2. Good reputation regarding values such as CSR and sustainability
3. Good working conditions and interesting design process
4. A young fun company that likes to party
5. A flat organisational structure
6. The exclusion method- there does not exist that many head offices in Gothenburg in the textile business.
7. Word-of-mouth effect
8. Right in time- a sustainable alternative product was requested on the market

Personal conversation employee - 3, 5-11

These features show how both internal and external factors have contributed to a common understanding of the employer brand. These external factors are mentioned as; context, business, timing and demand for a new product as well as image and reputation. The internal factors that might have contributed to this view are connected to Nudie Jeans culture; parties, structure, word-of-mouth effect and good working conditions.

When people try to maintain a consistent and positive notion of the self, they engage in a sensemaking process, and this notion is often affected by how the person believe that others view their work-place (Weick, 1995). During many years, employees at Nudie Jeans did everything together, which communicated a picture externally of a company as a unified community. This seem to have enhanced employees feeling of commitment, since many express that they are proud of the foundation that Nudie Jeans is built on. These stories did however not only affect how they employees viewed the brand, but also how the perception held by external people:

I know for sure that our kick-offs, or as we choose to call them, the launces of our collections, mean a lot to our external employees, those that does not work at the office. I know or I have heard that many of our sellers pick up on these stories and in their turn, tell them in a casual way in the showroom, when they sell in our collections, like; do you know what, I have never been ice skating before but at the last kick-off everyone participated and played hockey [...] That person broke an arm and this person got hit by a puck and that kind of stuff [...] They use these stories as a tool.

Personal conversation- employee 8

The Narrating Organisation

When asking employees at Nudie Jeans if they have heard of any story, of how it all began, the majority retold similar stories about kick-offs, parties and stories that are relates to the first years. Gabriel (2000) explains that some stories are told in the same way, almost like people have decided what to tell in advance, and from these stories symbolic features of the organisational culture can be exposed.

According to Alvesson and Sveningsson (2012), founders commonly use stories and expressions as a way of influencing the organisational culture. Moreover, Schein (2010) explains that stories are connected to and start to develop around

the founding of the company, and that these stories for instance are connected to certain events and times of fast growth. At Nudie Jeans, there seem to exist an inherent narrative culture, that was born from the first years of success, and when you had something to tell, you gathered everyone and people listened with idle ear:

We used to tell stories before, often when she came back from Italy on her product development trips, and afterwards everyone gathered and listened to her stories [...] But today we are more like an office, and with this comes the challenge to keep telling these stories, we are, or people spend a lot of time at the office, before we were part of this and today this can only be shared by telling stories.

Personal conversation- founder

From this quote comes the insight that, for Nudie Jeans to preserve the feeling of community and their unique organisational culture, that stems from stories from their first years of success, people should keep telling them. According to Schein (2010), stories are important for new employees since they can show how the organisation functions. At Nudie Jeans today, storytelling seems to be less prioritised. The company has been through organisational growth and the internal communication has suffered from this. But if Nudie Jeans stops telling stories, there is a risk of losing part of their organisational culture. This insight is further strengthened by one of the founders, that during an interview asked me if I could explain how Nudie Jeans can continue to spread their stories:

The challenge is to make sure that everyone around the world tells our story, because they are in close connection to the market [...] But in their own way, we will not give them a script. What is amazing with people is that they tell their own versions of one and the same story [...] There are so many good stories that I want people to hear, so that they can feel proud of what they are a part of.

Personal conversation- founder

At Nudie Jeans there still exist a curiosity amongst employees of wanting to know how it used to be. This might be explained by the fact that the company's way of doing things are connected to the first years of success, and that employees might want to know what they are a part of. The question is then whose responsibility it is to keep spreading these stories? According to Czarniawska (2004), sto-

ries constituted and retold by employees, that for instance have been in the company for a long time, manifest history and these employees are important for preserving this feeling of community today. For Nudie Jeans to preserve their core culture, that stems from the early years, these stories thereby should be told by both employees but especially by the founders, that seem to have a certain responsibility in preserving the culture.

Final Reflection

Following plots in this story have been exemplified as typical plots of the story; I want to break free. They are connected to strong fundamental values that springs from the founders' desire to do something different and break free. Out of this, an alternative way of communicating the brand developed, where Nudie Jeans sponsored bands and where the word-of-mouth communication generated in a glorified image of the employer brand that seem to still exist out there. Finally, Nudie Jeans needs to keep telling this story to preserve their core culture of wanting to break free.

The Nudie Jeans Family

The first story works as a gateway for the second story- that is the main thesis of the analysis. Following story will show how a unique way of recruiting people, created a “family” of close friends where the line between private and work was non-existent. The understanding of the “family” is however not coherent, but the most significant version divides the old employees from the new employees. This story will go on showing how kick-offs and parties developed as a natural activity from the constellation of friends and family.

Recruit a Friend and the Social Triumph

Nudie Jeans almost reached success from day one. They sold out their first collection and after that, the demand for Nudie Jeans grew strong. With success comes growth and to manage this, the company needed to expand their workforce quickly and this was done by recruiting friends and family. This decision has set the tone for how Nudie Jeans turned out as a company and work-place. Back then, a criterion for getting employed at the company was to know someone, which is exemplified in following quote:

I can see a major change in how we do things today, that we now recruit people from outside our circle of acquaintances or people that we have not shared 1000 beers with, or that we have kids at the same kindergarten. This was a criterion for getting recruited before, to know someone at the company [...] We are a nice group of people and we choose to stay this way, like do you know some cool guy or girl that can do this or this? Yes, check with this person, he/she might want to join us...

Personal conversation - employee 5

At Nudie Jeans, an overall positive attitude towards the company’s constellation of family and friends seem to prevail. This mutual understanding can according to Schein (2010) be explained by a concept named *social validation*. This condition can appear when members in a group share values, and consider them as the only truth and way to abide by, and if the members fail to adapt, they risk being *excommunicated*- excluded from the community. At Nudie Jeans, a shared view amongst employees is that the ability to learn someone social skills, is almost considered as impossible:

“There is no way that you can teach someone to be social, that is to big of a deal [...] It does not really matter if you are over-qualified since this wont say anything about you as a person.”

Personal conversation - 7

However, most of the interviews were conducted with employees that have been part of Nudie Jeans for many years, and their way of making sense of might be quite homogenous and explained by social validation.

Another understanding though exists amongst employees that have been employed for a shorter period. They emphasised recruiting people from outside. This view is further strengthened by the HR-manager (Personal Conversation HR-manager 9th March) that explains that the priority when recruiting employees goes as follows; first there is competency, then there is interest and understanding of the company and last, personality. Some old employees also joined this understanding, however a clear pattern of the old view and the new view connected to years spent in the company can be discerned.

Schein (2010) explains that there exist mixed views on whether family connections in a company is accepted or not and that loyalty to your closest might interfere with important decisions. A risk with this is that less competent employees advance in the company due the family connections.

An understanding of these potential problems was also discussed with the employees. Some expressed that they, during the first years, felt a little sceptical, but that they now can see that this has turned into something good, since the whole essence of Nudie Jeans is built on the first 10-15 “family and friends” employed. Following memory from one employee shows this insight:

I remember that we recruited the sales manager’s little brother (disappointed voice) he came directly from high school and I remember feeling, oh shit, why not just put out an ad? Was it up to me to teach this fucking youth? I had nothing to spare for him, I know this was a bad attitude [...] Then when we were out taking photos, he asked me something and I snapped. He then took me aside and said- what have I done to you really? You have to step up and get your shit together. Of course, he was right, and I felt like shit, because in the end I was so impressed of this young guy that had the courage to step up.

Personal conversation – employee 6

Schein (2010) explains that during the first years, the decision of who enters the group is decided by the founder. As time passes by, the way of doing things implemented by the founder, either lasts over time or disappears which is affected by the employees.

At Nudie Jeans, a “person before function” reality took form, where the personality and the social ability mattered more than experiences from your CV. There existed, and still exist to a certain degree, an understanding in the company that work-assignments can be taught to almost everyone if the willingness to learn exists. Following quote from one of the founders demonstrates what has just been described:

I am not that interested in that you know things in your profession [...] I value that the person can play with our team, and that he or she likes the rules because it's obvious, it is not due to competency that people have chosen to leave, it is because those people, they did not play the same game.

Personal conversation - founder

Everything is Personal

Huber and Daft (1987, cited in Weick, 1995) explain that there exists a state that all members of an organisation will experience if it takes form, namely *turbulence*, and when this happens people engage in a sensemaking process.

The explanation of why some employees still emphasise recruitment of friends, might be due to a counter-reaction to the organisational change that Nudie Jeans is in the middle of. The company has become more corporate and the latest addition of employees has not mainly been employed due to social skills and personality. Some employees try to make sense of the situation, where personality and social ability today is considered almost as important. This will be more difficult for some employees, since Nudie Jeans has become more than just a job to them, it has become their whole world. However, this understanding is not shared by all employees as following quote shows:

When I started my job here I was surprised to see that the goals that some employees had were to get a height-adjustable desk. I remember thinking that this was so dopey. Everything was so so personal and this can probably be explained by the lack of clarity of what was really expected of you in your role[...] Sometimes you need to understand that you

are here for the business and maybe not for your own sake. This understanding goes back to the old days when you as a person were very important for the company, and the feeling of; without me, things will not work. It will always do!

Personal conversation – employee 10

One of the founders explains that organisational change is needed. It is an intentional decision to stir the pot and give room for something else to grow. Alvesson & Sveningsson (2012) explain that ideas and perceptions about incorporated values can, in some situations, be transferred easily from old employees to new employees. If they disagree with the organisation's fundamental values, they often tend to quit after a short period. At Nudie Jeans, this can be said for both new employees and old employees that have been part of the re-organisation:

It has been a deliberate choice to get rid of some things, because if something else is about to grow, there must exist a vacuum, a lack of something to be able to fill it with something new. In this situation, some will panic and think of the situation as boring [...] When doing this we will see which employees that really want to be part of the company.

Personal conversation – founder

The Flourishing Employees

One thing can be said about putting much emphasis on employees' personality, it has led to a climate where people have been able to blossom. Some employees even say that they have a degree in Nudie Jeans. If looking at the first crowd of employees that were recruited, few of them had any academic education and if they had, they do not use the knowledge in their profession today:

Even though we are getting closer to represent a traditional corporate organisation, I use to say that we come from something different. Some of us do not have an education for the job that we perform, take me as an example, I am a chef but today I am working with something else. Some of the founders have not even finished upper secondary school, just to give an example. This is absolutely not negative in that sense, rather the opposite, this has turned into something positive and what makes us different [...] I think this is pretty rare, to hire nice people instead of hiring someone based on a damn good CV. This is Nudie Jeans legacy.

Personal conversation employee - 5

None of the founders that participated in the interviews have a university degree or similar. However, they have created a denim imperium based on other kind of experiences and this, together with their energy and personalities, has led to an organisation with a quite interesting structure. Schein (2010) explains that when founders decide to create a group, they have a predetermined image of how thing should work out. As a matter of this, they control and decide which colleagues and employees they will be surrounded by, a decision that is often based on whom they believe will like them. Something that also can be said about Nudie Jeans, where some employees find the lack of education as a source of inspiration:

Well, this added something to my understanding of everyone's ability to achieve things. Take one of the founders as an example, he has no fancy education and neither does the other founder [...] This is awesome.

Personal conversation - employee 4

The Nudie Jeans Family

When I started to work at Nudie Jeans, the word family was mentioned in different contexts. A certain curiosity awoke to find out what this “family” is all about, and therefore the next story will be about different understanding of the Nudie Jeans family.

The Inner Circle

When talking to both founders about the family, it became clear that there exist two versions of the family, one that stems from the inner circle of employees constituted by friends and family, and another one constituted by the new addition of employees:

In a way, I believe that many thinks of Nudie Jeans as a very internal company, and I would guess that people would say that there exist tow groups, those who has been in the company forever and know each other well and those who does not belong to this group. It is almost impossible to get access to this old group of people.

Personal conversation – founder

This view of the “family” presents a picture of a company that is divided into two groups, oldies and newcomers. In the interviews with the employees, Nudie Jeans is described as open-minded work-place constituted by a group of friendly and fun employees. However, this seems to be a general explanation or an explanation coming from those employees that are part of the inner circle. There is no difficulty for new employees to feel welcome and become part of the organisation in general, there exist routines and introduction programs for this. Even though Nudie Jeans is described as an open-minded organisation, there is something else needed to get into the inner circle. According to Schein (2010), rules how to behave to get access to the real culture, will not easily be revealed to new employees. These rules will only show themselves to members that have earned permanent status and thereby been let into the inner circle. This seems to be the case at Nudie Jeans, which is exemplified in following quote:

A new employee can get access to the inner circle, but this will be a challenge since this group is not at all inclusive [...] I think this group consider themselves as being open-minded, but they are not and because of this fraction is created in the company.

Personal conversation – employee 6

Moreover, Schein (2010) states that this socialisation process can give insight of how to get into the community, and by studying this process it can unravel deeper assumptions of how the organisational culture is constituted.

To get access into the inner circle at Nudie Jeans seem to be dependent on following factors; if you know someone in the inner circle from before, share similar interest such as music, play in a band, are a person of rank or employed on a position where you are in close contact with the inner circle:

If a young guy starts working at the sales department, he will have 100 % access into a world of parties, laughter, into the community and the cool part of the company. This could not be said for a middle-aged woman; these two people are on each side of the fringe.

Personal Conversation – employee 6

There are many stories circulating about the first years, with a plot that illustrates how it was back then at the old office at Södra Larmgatan- the place where the old family was born. Södra Larmgatan was Nudie Jeans first office with small

locales and where the employees worked as generalists, they did everything that needed to be done. At that time, the workforce consisted of people in the same age and everyone knew each other well, which created a feeling of familiarity. The old office is important for Nudie Jeans organisational culture, since it signifies fundamental values such as; family, community, helpfulness and openness. Following quote shows the feeling of community back then:

There existed this rule before, that every Friday everyone had a beer together at "7ans beer house". I used to go to our summer house over the weekend and I had this little understanding with my wife back then that on Friday afternoon, she could work out at the gym and then she drove the car later that afternoon, since everyone from the office hung out together. We gathered at the office to enjoy the first beer around 15-ish [...] This was a routine that started somewhere around the time when we moved into our first office space.

Personal conversation employee- 9

Those employees that came into the organisation later, after the move to the new office, also seem to know how it was back then. This is manifested through circulating stories that have been retold to newcomers by "oldies". However, even if these new employees at Nudie Jeans "know" and can retell how it was back then, there is no way that they can really share this culture with those that was there, because according to Schein (2010) some underlying assumptions are constructed by deeply embedded unconscious norms, and that part of the culture might never show itself to those that did not experience it.

Do You Know a Short-Cut to the Office?

Another aspect of the family appeared from having conversations with some employees that used to work in the stores, before starting at the office. Here another version of the "Nudie Jeans" family came up- the office as a supreme group. The final goal for many shop assistants is to get access to the office and there exist an understanding that if you start in a store and perform well, you might get access to the office. This opportunity was described a short-cut for becoming part of the "real" Nudie Jeans community. According to Ashforth and Mael (1989, cited in Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2008) status of a specific group can generate in attractiveness and affect how members identify with the organisation. The employ-

ees in the shops might identify with their work-place (the shops), however, an aspiration to identify with the office also seem to exist, a feeling that is represented in following quote:

Okay, I had participated in some kick-offs before but I remember that It was so cool to come to the office. Everyone was so cool and I thought for myself: oh lord, what is this place. So, I definitely believe that this feeling of the office, as a cool place, is created when people come here.

Personal Conversation employee - 2

The “we against them” view, can be seen in both a positive and negative light. The positive aspect is that it creates a drive and motivation for employees to stay in the company, to do their best to become part of something supreme. When a job positions is announced, it first goes out internally (principally to the shops). The negative aspect is however that even so, there is no guarantee that all employees will get the opportunity to come to the office (HR-manager, personal conversation, April 12th, 2017). Nudie Jeans wants to be considered as an attractive employer, but sometimes additional contribution is needed and this might create confusion in the workforce.

Lack of Familiarity

All employees did not however identify with or recognise this feeling of familiarity. Another version of the family, where the closest group of people and the department played a more important role, was present in some of the employees’ stories:

I feel comfortable with my colleagues and for me this is equal to familiarity [...] But I would not say, if answering to your question, that Nudie Jeans is like a family, I think it sounds a bit repelling. The idea behind how we produce our product is more important for me, because this is why I work at Nudie Jeans.

Personal conversation employee - 3

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2008) explain that it lays in the organisation’s interest to be perceived in a positive manner, since this can lead to that employees feel connected to the organisation. If the organisation fails, employees tend to find

substitutions of identification in, for instance; departments, roles, projects and assignments. Previous quote exemplifies this, where the feeling of community is rather based on strong values and ideological convictions. However, if this should be considered a failure or just another entry gate for some employees, is difficult to say. Some employees applied for a job position at Nudie Jeans due to matching personal and company values. If it is enough for some employees to feel a strong connection to Nudie Jeans fundamental values, it is then rather a question of feeling a connection to the product and way of doing things, than a connection to the social community.

The Amazing Kick-Offs

Schein (2010) explains that culture is an abstraction, and for it to become understandable it must be observed and function as a way for increasing the insight of events, that for most of the time are difficult to understand. At Nudie Jeans, some of these events are the renowned kick-offs. When asking employees to retell a memory or a story that meant a lot to them, most of their stories kept coming back to their kick-offs. These stories are filled with extraordinary activities such as; playing football at Ullevi, where all the employees got jerseys and then the game was displayed on large screens. Another kick-off was spent on Lilla Brattön, a kick-off that the majority mentioned as a magical event. Here material was shipped out to an island and then everything was built up from scratch. Another memory is from the time when Nudie Jeans hired the main hall at Röda Sten and turned it into a showroom, with angels hanging in the roof wearing Nudie Jeans. These stories are many, and all of them are told in a captivating way where the feeling of community is noticeable. Following quote is an example of this:

A couple of magical summer days with a crayfish party at the sea shore, standing there and waving as tankers pass by and horn, watch the sunset, take a swim and everything that comes with that. When I meet people that were out guests on this occasion, they say that they still talk about these magical days.

Personal conversation – employee 9

Why the kick-offs are mentioned in this story is due to their manifestation of the familiar feeling. Nudie Jeans is a company built on family and friends, where

activates, parties and having fun together has been important to hold this group together. During the first years of success, Nudie Jeans required that their employees engaged in the company, and if you spend all your private time at your work-place, there also should exist activities that makes it worth this sacrifice. These activities required a lot of engagement from employees, and back then it existed and unwritten rule to do the little extra.

Another explanation of why the kick-offs plays an important role for the culture is because when you hang out with your friends, you also tend to do fun things together.

But things are different today, there is no way for everyone at the office to participate in the kick-offs in the same way as before, and with this comes the challenge to find out where these community raising activities can be found today. This is a concern that is expressed by one of the employees in following quote:

Kick-offs still exist, there is one every year that everyone get invited to, but it is nothing like before. Back then it was more like a camp, we went away for three days, something that is almost impossible to do today. The question is how we manage to create this feeling of community today, is it important to create this feeling today and in that case how do you do that? I have no fucking idea.

Personal conversation – employee 6

Final Reflection

The second story about the Nudie Jeans family exemplifies an organisation that for many years was equal to a family. This stems from their ways of recruiting friends and family, and where social ability became more important than competency that led to a climate where everything became personal. However, this is a view that is challenged today when the company is becoming more corporate. The story also tells plots of different versions of the family; one of the inner circle as hard to get access to, one that exemplifies the wish to get access to the office and another one showing the lack of familiarity. Kick-offs summarises this story as being an important activity to bring this group together.

The Protagonists of Nudie Jeans

The two former stories are integrated with the last story in this thesis, that presents the protagonists of Nudie Jeans. This story is based on what Schein (2010) explains can reveal interesting things about an organisation's culture, namely; rules of how personal you can be, if you show emotions or not, the tone and jargon in the communication.

The Typical Nudie Jeans Person

One of the questions asked during the interviews was if the employees could describe a typical Nudie Jeans person. Many of their answers and descriptions of this person were connected to personality, how you dress and express yourself. Before getting into possible factors behind why this person has been formed, an explanation will be presented of how employees make sense of this person.

A Nudie Jeans person is a mix of old and new ideas, where the old ideas have survived from early years and still lives on in the organisation. Some descriptions were based on how you dress and express yourself:

Take one of the "oldies" in the company as an example, he irradiates Nudie Jeans in many ways. He always wears our clothes, and he does it with style, a bit rock'n'roll and punk. His personality is energetic and he likes music. He hangs out with the right crowd, where cool stuff happens. With this said, he is a good ambassador for Nudie Jeans, he may be the best one that this brand will ever have.

Personal conversation - employee 7

Other descriptions were connected to personality, where employees choose to describe the Nudie Jeans person as someone with charisma, a social genius, easy-going and someone who makes people feel good. One of the employees means that almost everyone can become a Nudie Jeans person (Personal conversation 8, 3rd of March) and if you are not from the start you will become it later. Following quote shows a description of a Nudie Jeans person:

A Nudie Jeans person in my terms is someone that, and this is visually, since he might as well be suitable for the role as a Nudie Jeans model, but also due to personality since he is humble but also bright. This is significant for a Nudie Jeans person [...] I remember looking up to this person and feeling that it is so cool that someone can be so much Nudie Jeans. However, everyone is a bit Nudie Jeans in their own way, but there are without doubt some people that fits better into the role as ambassadors than others.

Personal conversation – employee 1

In this quote, the ambassador is mentioned again, something that employees keep coming back to. A Nudie Jeans ambassadors is however not only connected to how employees talk about the company (as discussed before) but also how they dress, act and behave. Schein (2010) mentions that the artifact style, can be expressed through employees dressing code and observed behaviour. Part of how the Nudie Jeans person dress might stem from an unwritten rule of how to dress at the office. Nudie Jeans is a denim brand and thereby, employees are expected to wear jeans and nothing else at work. There exists a generous clothing benefit that enables employees to buy Nudie Jeans clothes. Girls are excused to wear other clothes during summertime, however it is not acceptable to wear another brand when it comes to jeans. Some employees even considered this to be a written rule, which emphasises the symbolic value of jeans. This is exemplified in following quote:

“The thing is, the easiest way to create a good atmosphere is to wear worn-in jeans and a t-shirt, by doing this you show everyone that you are part of the community. This is ingrained in the walls.”

Personal conversation – employee 10

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2012) exemplify NIKE as a company consisting of employees that strongly identify with the company, where one of the employees had made a tattoo of the classic logo. This shows how the company culture affects their employees to a great extent. When this happens, it can lead to strong devotion and lack of criticism towards the company. At Nudie Jeans, this behaviour can be read out from following quote:

I live and breathe the sect Nudie Jeans, and if you use another brand I ask people: do you not believe in God? Well, I do not believe in God but I believe in Nudie Jeans, so: do you not believe in Nudie Jeans is my question?

Personal conversation – founder

Another thing that came up was that some employees thought that you should always wear Nudie Jeans clothes outside of work, since all employees are ambassadors of the brand. Here again the ambassador is mentioned. This is interesting since there is no way that this can be understandable, especially not for new employees, unless it is not communicated as a written rule during the introduction period. However, for some employees it seems like living the brand has become a fact, and this might explain why this dress code is not communicated to everyone. But even if some take this for granted, others might not.

Weick (1995) describes that when people make sense and construct their identities, they project them into a surrounding and then observe what will happen. People can be part of many different interactions and to shift among these, is like shifting between different definitions of the self. However, at Nudie Jeans the self is consistent in these different interactions, as you are always expected to be an ambassador of the brand. This understanding however is also existent internally at Nudie Jeans. The company culture is repeatedly described as open-minded, but this open-mindedness seems to only show itself to those that fit into this culture. An understanding of this is expressed in following quote from one employee:

It is probably more a question of being able to be yourself, but in an accepted way. This, I noticed last Friday, when I came to the office wearing a suit. I had been to a funeral and then I heard comments. I understand that it becomes a thing, since we are a denim brand and communicate a certain style through our brand. With this comes an understanding that you always wear jeans, you become a jeans person.

Personal conversation – employee 11

Nudie Jeans, to some degree, has shaped their employees into becoming part of the organisation. However, many new employees have started during recent years, and Nudie Jeans should work with creating a feeling of belongingness for these employees in a different way now. The mixture between; different personalities, friends and not friends, work and private have changed, and with this comes a changed culture and a changed Nudie Jeans, something that the company must adjust to. Because only then, employees will continue to stay connected to the brand and their work-place.

The Male Office Jargon

The jargon and ways of acting at Nudie Jeans is another characteristic thing that captures the organisational culture, based on strong norms and values. At Nudie Jeans, 65 % of the employees working there are men. This is a rare percent distribution in relation to an otherwise female dominated business (Personal conversation HR-manager 2nd March). Since most of the employees are male, this has also brought with a “male atmosphere”, something that many employees seem to agree on. This atmosphere permeates the whole organisation and is a relic from the first years where the majority of the group “the oldies” consisted of male friends. However, there still seem to exist an understanding at the company that it is easier for a man to fit into the organisation. The male jargon is for instance constituted by how some employees joke, but also in the way that they dress and express themselves. Following quote shows an example of how one employee defines the male jargon:

I know for a fact that here at the office, we like” boys”. We are boys that like boys and we have so much fun together and we make jokes about this (disguised voice) [...] We like to travel, party and work together and I think it is incredibly easy to co-operate with other guys because, as soon as a female enters the group it unfortunately gets stereotypically boring. We have nourished this culture throughout the years, it stems from the old structure in the company. Men are simple and prestigeless whereas women are whiny, you know...

Personal conversation – employee 6

Organisational processes are further described by Schein (2010) as an artifact and an important symbol for deeper assumptions of the culture. Nudie Jeans organisational structure lacks female influences, something that the company is aware of. There is a need for recruiting more female employees into the organisation but also to make sure that they end up on leading positions, to equalise the work climate. However, the journey towards creating a work-place with an equal atmosphere, and less features of the male jargon might be a separate question. Nudie Jeans can work with these tools to create a different organisational structure, however the male jargon that is ingrained in the walls will take time to change, if this is even something that Nudie Jeans wants to change. What I am trying to say here is that even though females are recruited and ends up in leading

positions in the company, this might not change the atmosphere at the work-place. Because, if this male jargon is encouraged and nurtured, there will still exist a male jargon at Nudie Jeans. This problem is exemplified in following quote:

I would say that at the office there exist a male atmosphere, and everyone knows that this might happen when a lot of men gather at the same place, they have each other's back. I believe that Nudie Jeans want to see more girls in leading position, but they have a problem of knowing how to do this. It is a problem that comes with the basic structure [...] The atmosphere is in no way unpleasant I would like to point out, everyone can talk to one another and express whatever they like.

Personal conversation – employee 10

This male jargon is expressed through employees' stories in both positive and negative ways. Many employees raised problematic aspects, but then landed in the understanding that this atmosphere also generates in a lot of good things such as, a fun and open-minded work-place. What can be said however is that female employees need to have a sharp tongue to be able to fit in. It is not a question of feeling left out if you do not adapt to this atmosphere, but it will become easier to fit in if you do.

Can you Cross the Line?

Another jargon that is present at the work-place is boundlessness, and this atmosphere stems from employees being boundless in their use of language. If this is due to many friends working at Nudie Jeans, that three brothers and a previous married couple are part of the workforce or that employees have boundless personalities, that is hard to tell. Schein (2010) describes that when new employees become part of the organisation it becomes clear whom to, for instance, joke with, be serious with, hang out with outside of work as well as the hierarchal structure.

At Nudie Jeans, this boundless jargon seems to stem from the founders and their personalities. This has set the tone, since there are no limits for what you can and cannot say. It is more important how you express things than what you say:

“You must have relatively high social skills, how you say things are almost more important than what you say. You should not believe that you are someone, it is the law of Jante that exists here.”

Personal conversation – founder

Just look at the jargon here at the office, that is, for most of the time, extremely boundless. To a large extent it can be explained by many boundless people working here, but then there is this person that is more boundless than others, one of the founders. His importance for how the company culture has turned out is really hard to express, as much as I admire him I also believe he is totally silly.

Personal conversation – employee 9

Even though this jargon contributes to a relaxed and fun atmosphere, the line between how personal you can be sometimes gets crossed. The understanding that comes from talking to some employees is that sometimes, people hide behind this jargon. There is always someone that has a joke close to hand, something that might affect the feeling of professionalism in the company. Employees are very familiar and sometimes they make jokes to ease up the tension (Personal conversation 6, 16th March 2017).

”Lunching”

The lunch room is described as a place where employees hang out and get to know each other. This was a topic of conversation present in most of the interviews. At Nudie Jeans, this place is a symbol for how community is created at the work-place. Lunch hour is certainly an important gathering-point in many companies, however at Nudie Jean it lays something deeper in the understanding of having lunch together, it is the main gathering place for creating strong bonds with one another. It became clear that the employees had different opinions regarding this time of the day. There was a group that some employees kept coming back to and described as the deviant one. This group ate lunch before the rest of the employees and did not participate.

Alvesson and Sveningsson (2012) describe that rules can be difficult to understand, since some employees might consider them as a guiding force, possible to deviate from whereas others see them as inviolable rules. The lack of consistency can lead to clashes and conflicts between groups. Those employees at Nudie Jeans that did not participate were depicted as the “outsiders” and alienated from the rest. Some employees even described this a boring behaviour.

A different view though was presented, from the “deviant-groups” point of view, where their way of acting was due to different working hours that required

earlier lunch, and the view that lunch hour is your own personal time. Even so, a tension between those who eat lunch and not exist and people seem to get judged by this.

It becomes problematic when you never participate, you miss out on the small talk. There is this group that choose to eat earlier than the rest, they make this choice to eat when no one else is there, okay this is fine by me but those that eat together gets more united, and with this alienation becomes a fact. This is something that I think you should have in mind.

Personal conversation - employee 7

Final Reflection

The last story is about the protagonist of this thesis, namely the employee at Nudie Jeans. The typical Nudie Jeans person is explained as someone that represent Nudie Jeans through personality, way of dressing and someone that acts as a good brand ambassador.

Plots about fitting into a homogenous group are also presented and the jargon at the office exemplifies a work climate, which has evolved from a company built on strong values, where friends and family constitute the essence of the employer brand.

Discussion

The purpose of this master thesis is to examine the internal and external communication in the employer branding process, which is done via employee's stories about an attractive employer. The thesis contributes to a holistic understanding of employer branding as a co-created process between the employer and the employees. Previous research on employer branding has close connection to research areas such as; corporate communication and branding and has also been connected to the research field marketing. Employer branding is here presented as a tool in the recruitment process and a channel for communicating a positive image of the brand.

This thesis resides in the tradition of HRM that views employer branding as a process of creating lasting relationships with employees through continuous communication, and an understanding of employees as important co-creators of the brand. This tradition argues for an understanding of culture, to be able to communicate an internal and external cohesive image of the brand.

Nudie Jeans is an example of how the recruitment of right personalities become more important in employer branding strategies, where companies rely on their employees to serve as important ambassadors. Nudie Jeans is an example of an employer that has put great trust in their employees to communicate the brand to their friends and families and thereby, a strong brand ambassadorship has been created.

This ambassadorship is also connected to employees' personalities and how they dress and express themselves. This has generated in the Nudie Jeans person, a social and charismatic person that wears the company's clothes in an exceptionally good way and identifies strongly with the brand. There also seem to exist a view that the ambassadorships extend beyond working-hours, since you are always on duty. Nudie Jeans employees are thereby contributors to how the company is perceived by both potential employees as well as customers, and in this way, they are important co-creators of the employer brand.

Nudie Jeans has engaged in other branding activities, such as, sponsoring of bands and today a marketing department has been developed, but even so the word-of-mouth effect seem to be Nudie Jeans primary source of communication. The ambassadorship was born from the early years when employees constituted friends and family that did not separate work life from private life. Back then they were engaged in the process of co-creating the meaning and identity of the brand. However, today the company has become more corporate and has recruited employees with a more professional connection to the company. If Nudie Jeans still expects all employees to enact the brand based on old fundamental values is is however unclear. There seem to exist a tension between what is expected by new employees' contra old employees, and the ambassadorship here becomes a question of mystique.

Up until now, Nudie Jeans has been an organisation that put emphasis on recruiting people with a personality that matches the company's values and a high social competency. Why it became like this goes back to the foundation of the company. Three friends started Nudie Jeans and had a clear idea of what they wanted to achieve and according to (Schein, 2010) founders make sure to surround themselves with people that sympathise with their values and ways of doing things. Nudie Jeans has from the start assumed strong fundamental values such as; change the "denim" world and practice what you preach, this has also generated in a Nudie Jeans jargon.

Nudie Jeans is thereby an example of an employer brand that is built on family and friends and with this comes both positive and negative aspect. What are the consequences and possibilities of an organisation controlled by friends for an employer brand? Well first, there comes a challenge with different relationships in the organisation. Some employees might hang out outside of work, or hang out with the founders. The problem does not lay in the actual friendship, but in how other employees think of this at the office. Suspicion can arise if these employees are treated differently, if they get other benefits or job opportunities due to their relationship.

Another problem that might arise is the ability to stay neutral when making final decisions, since friends probably are aware of each others good and bad sides. Here the mix between work life and private life can become problematic, but it can also be to some peoples' advantage. Nudie Jeans is a company that emphasises-

es social skills and a work-place that has an open and permissive culture. The company has trusted their employees to recruit suitable employees and many have also been able to flourish in this environment, since it seems like some employees are willing to do the little extra and have each others back. This has led to a climate where rivalry and competitive behaviour is absent.

Nudie Jeans is an example of an employer brand that has turned into becoming a good work-place, due to challenges that comes with hiring friends and family. It is a work-place where the employees want to stay. Nudie Jeans is described as an open-minded and fun place to work at and here many colleagues are your best friends. Employees tend to stay for many years (Personal conversation HR-manager, 15th March 2017) that can indicate that this is a strong employer brand.

However, with this comes challenges such as stagnation and a diversity. If you fit into the organisation and manage to become a Nudie Jeans person, it is the best work-place that you probably can find, this due to a strong feeling of community that exists. But with this comes challenges such as capacity building and to make sure that those employees that work at Nudie Jeans, are the best suitable employees for their positions.

When it comes to diversity, Nudie Jeans is a homogenous work-place and people that have quit their job has not quit due to lack of competency but due to the fact that they did not fit into the team (Personal conversation founder, 13th March 2017). Nudie Jeans is thereby also an example of an employer brand constituted by a group of homogenous employees, where a jargon of masculinity and boundlessness is present and where strong norms and aspirations set a tone of how to preferably act and behave. As previously discussed, this master thesis emphasises the role of employees as co-creators of the employer brand. From a diversity perspective, it is therefore important that everyone participates in this process, new as old employees, employees working in the shops etc. Because there does not exist one truth of Nudie Jeans as an employer brand, it is rather based on a mutual understanding of how employees make sense of their employer.

Even if things have changed at Nudie Jeans today, and the recruiting process is more focused on recruitment based on competency, recruiting friends and family and the ambassadorship is still part of Nudie Jeans “old” employer brand. This is a view that still seem to prevail outside and inside the work-place. From a hyper-culture perspective, Nudie Jeans should make sure that what is communicated

externally respectively externally is cohesive. The view that exist “out there”, of a company that is built on a strong community and how things are done (crazy deadline parties, kick-offs, fun at work) must leave room for a more professional understanding of the employer. Another understanding of Nudie Jeans as an employer brand should be communicated externally, where the company now can be depicted as a structured work-place that takes care of their employees. Due to fast growth, the organisations do not look the same as before. It has become more corporate and this is something that Nudie Jeans needs to start communicating, because there is a need for diversity and to bring in new eyes into the organisation and make it less dependent on personalities and more dependent on professionalism. This view also should be communicated for the sakes of the current employees. Because employees’ identities and the perception of the self is to a certain degree adjusted to and shaped around how a person believe that others view the organisation where they work (Weick, 1995). Nudie Jeans is both fun and professional, and for Nudie Jeans the challenge lays in the ambivalence, a challenge present in all of the company’s branding activities.

Conclusion

The purpose of this master thesis is to examine the internal and external communication in the employer branding process, which is done via employee's stories about an attractive employer. The thesis contributes to a holistic understanding of employer branding as a co-created process between the employer and the employees.

The first research question is answered by describing an employer brand that puts emphasis on recruiting right personalities that can serve as important ambassadors of the brand. The second research question gives the implication that when building an employer brand based on recruiting right personalities, this also requires engagement from the employer to look after the needs of their employees. Because people with great personalities are attractive on the employer market, and with this comes the challenge of retaining employees. The third question shows a risk with building the employer brand based on a shared identity, community, and strong organisational culture. This can generate in a homogenous work-place where lack of diversity and stagnation might be problematic.

This thesis contributes to the previous research on employer branding by demonstrating: 1. An understanding of culture is needed to create a holistic understanding of employer branding where cohesion of external and internal communication is important, 2. Employer branding as an ongoing process, where employees have an important role as co-creators of the employer brand, 3. The increased importance of recruiting right personalities for creating a strong employer brand.

Future research should focus on alternative ways of examining employer branding, such as via employees' stories based on organisational culture. Moreover, research on employer branding should continue to merge areas, such as: HRM, organisational psychology etc. to create a more holistic understanding of the employer branding process. Further on, more emphasis needs to be put on research on employer branding with the focus to create lasting employer-employee relationships, where the employee is considered as important co-creators' in this

process. This thesis has focused on how employees at the head office make sense of their employer brand through telling stories about their company. Another interesting aspect for further research, is to also include the voices of employees working in the shops. How they make sense of the employer brand might differ from employees at the head office, since they have their own work-place in the shops, and probably a different view of the employer.

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Appendix 1- The Interviewees

Due to anonymity no names, role in the company, sex or other information about the interviewees will be described. However, information about how long the employees has been in the company and where they come from, will be included since this can explain how the employees answered the interview questions.

However, the interviewees that were chosen to represent the whole company, since one person from almost every department contributed in the study. At Nudie Jeans following departments:

- Human resource management
- Finance
- Online/Customer Support
- IT
- Retail
- Wholesale
- Supply Chain
- Product Development (Section A, B, C)

Following list shows how long employees, that participated in the interviews, has worked at Nudie Jeans and how they got access to the company:

- 1- Worked at Nudie Jeans for 4 years, got in contact with the company through his/her other job.
- 2- Been in the company in a total of 4 years, started in one of Nudie Jeans shops.
- 3- Has worked at Nudie Jeans for 4 years, applied for this job position only and got it.
- 4- Been in the company in a total of around 7 years, started in one of Nudie Jeans shops.
- 5- Had contact with Nudie Jeans through his/her previous job, started to work at the company around 2008.
- 6- Has been in the company from start, knew people at the company from before and got access this way.
- 7- Celebrates 10 years at Nudie Jeans, had friends working at Nudie Jeans and got access this way.

- 8- Has been in the company from start, knew people at the company from before and got access this way.
- 9- Has been in the company from start, knew people at the company from before and got access this way.
- 10- Has worked at Nudie Jeans for 4 years, had no connection to the company before applying for the job.
- 11- Has worked at Nudie Jeans for less than 4 years, knew people tat worked here and applied for the job.

Appendix 2 – Interview Guide

The interviews were conducted in Swedish so following interview guides that have been used will also be submitted in its original, namely in Swedish.

Interview Questions- Current Employees

- Vad står Nudie Jeans som företag för dig?
- Hur skulle du beskriva att det är att jobba på Nudie Jeans för någon som aldrig varit här?
- Kan du berätta för mig om en karaktäristisk/utmärkande person som jobbar/har jobbat på Nudie Jeans och hur du kom i kontakt med den här personen? Vad minns du från det här mötet?
- Finns det några historier om ägarna och hur Nudie Jeans kom till som du känner till?
- Finns det någon officiell/verksamhetsrelaterad historia om Nudie Jeans som återberättas år efter år här på företaget?
- Finns det något särskilt tillfälle eller minne som du kan dela med mig som sticker ut under din tid här på Nudie Jeans?
- Berätta om en händelse där du kände dig stolt/mindre stolt över att arbeta på Nudie Jeans?
- Kan du komma på en händelse som på något vis står för/summerar vad det betyder att vara en del av företaget?
- Kan du berätta om någon händelse från någon av era Kick-offer som har blivit en ”snackis” här på Nudie Jeans?
- Det pratas ofta om den familjära känslan här på företaget, är det något du känner igen och om ja, skulle du vilja förklara den för mig?

- Skulle du beskriva Nudie Jeans som samma företag idag som när du började arbeta här? Om inte, vad är det som har förändrats, är det till det bättre eller sämre?
- Vilka anser du är Nudie Jeans viktigaste värderingar?
- Växte det under de första åren fram särskilda arbetssätt/värderingar som överlevt och finns kvar än idag, i så fall vilka?
- Har dessa värderingar kommit att påverka dig även utanför ditt arbete?
- Kan du nämna några oskrivna regler för ”seder och bruk” här i huset? Två som börjar med DU BÖR... och två som börjar med DU BÖR INTE...
- Kan du beskriva jargongen i organisationen? Förekommer skämt, hur är umgängestonen, hur privat kan man vara i sina samtal?
- Finns det grupper inom organisationen som på något sätt ”sticker ut” t.ex. avdelningar, yrkesgrupper? På vilket sätt? I så fall är detta positivt eller negativt?
- Upplever du att Nudie Jeans är ett attraktivt företag att arbeta på? Vad tror du ligger till grund för den här uppfattningen?
- Hur pratar du själv om Nudie Jeans med exempelvis dina vänner och bekanta? Finns det något specifikt som du brukar nämna i dessa samtal?
- Finns det något mer mer du vill berätta för mig som jag har missat att fråga om?

Interview Questions- Founders

- Berätta, hur växte idén till att starta Nudie Jeans fram? Har du haft drömmen sedan barnsben?
- Finns det något särskilt tillfälle eller minne som du kan dela med mig som sticker ut?
- Vad är hjärtat i Nudie Jeans anser du, som gör att ni skiljer er åt från andra företag i samma bransch?
- Hur ser du på rollen som Nudie Jeans respektive din egen roll som samhällsaktör? Skulle du vilja hålla med om den här definition och i så fall, vad är det som gör er till det?
- Kan du berätta om någon händelse från en av era kick-offer som har blivit en ”snackis” här på Nudie Jeans?

- Finns det någon officiell/verksamhetsrelaterad historia om Nudie Jeans som återberättas år efter år?
- Berätta, vad är du mest stolt över i allting som ni åstadkommit och skapat?
- Vad inspirerar dig?
- Berätta om en utmaning som ni stött på och sedan tagit er förbi?
- -Vad anser du var ditt viktigaste bidrag till att den här situationen löstes och vad har du lärt dig från det här?
- Hur upplever du organisationskulturen är på Nudie Jeans och hur skulle du beskriva att det är att jobba på Nudie Jeans för någon som aldrig varit här?
- Kan du nämna några oskrivna regler för ”seder och bruk” här i huset? - som börjar med DU BÖR.... som börjar med DU BÖR INTE...
- Tror du att det finns en koppling till sättet som ni (ägarna) är på och hur organisationen sedan har formats?
- Det pratas ofta om den familjära känslan här på företaget, är det något du känner igen?
- Skulle du beskriva Nudie Jeans som samma företag idag som när ni startade upp allting? Om inte, vad är det som har förändrats?
- Växte det under de första åren fram särskilda arbetssätt/värderingar som överlevt och finns kvar än idag, i så fall vilka?
- Tror du att den finns en bild av Nudie Jeans som ett attraktivt företag att arbeta på? Hur tror du tror du att personer utanför företaget uppfattar Nudie?
- Sist men inte minst, vad har Nudie betytt för dig/påverkat dig som person, har det ändrat dig på något vis?

Interview Question- HR Manager

- Vad står Nudie Jeans för som företag, hur skulle du beskriva att det är att jobba på Nudie för någon som aldrig varit här?
- Upplever du att det en viss typ av person som söker sig till Nudie Jeans? I hur stor grad påverkar intervjupersonens erfarenhet kontra personlighet om han/hon får anställning på Nudie Jeans? Vad är viktigt?

- Kan du berätta om ett tillfälle under en intervju (historia) då du kände direkt att det här är Nudie Jeans anställd som vi ska anställa? Ge gärna ett exempel på ett tillfälle då du kände att personen inte skulle fungera på Nudie Jeans.
- Vilka värderingar är viktiga att potentiella och befintliga anställda har för att bli en del av Nudie Jeans och på vilket sätt väger detta in i rekryteringsprocessen?
- Vad upplever du är de största utmaningarna när det gäller att behålla era anställda och få dem att trivas här på Nudie?
- Berätta som en situation/händelse på Nudie Jeans som representerar det ledarskap som finns här på företaget?
- Tror du att den finns en bild av Nudie Jeans som ett attraktivt företag att arbeta på, både baserat på bild som jobbsökande har, men även hur uppfattning ser ut hos de anställda på företaget?
- Vad ligger till grund för den här bilden tror du?
- Till hur stor del tror du att anställda på Nudie Jeans påverkar hur företaget uppfattas som arbetsgivare?
- Skulle du säga att Nudie Jeans jobbar aktivt med att etablera/skapa en bild av företaget som ett starkt arbetsgivarvarumärke (employer brand)? På vilket sätt kommer detta till uttryck för både potentiella och nuvarande anställda?

Additional Questions to get all Interviews to “Roll On”

- Mer specifikt, vad betydde den här händelsen för dig?
- Uppfattade någon annan personen situationen annorlunda tror du?
- Hur kände du när den här händelsen ägde rum? Hur känner du inför det idag?
- Säger den här händelsen något om sättet som Nudie behandlar sina anställda?
- Skulle du hanterat situationen annorlunda om du var i hans/hennes skor?
- Vilket budskap kan utläsas av den här händelsen, vilken lärdom kan du dra från den här situationen?

Appendix 3 – List of Awards

Nudie Jeans has won several awards connected to their brand and their sustainable production. The company has also received awards connected to good entrepreneurship and being an inspirational company in their business. Following list shows a selection of these awards:

- Winner of sustainable store/chain store of the year. Nominated on the grounds of being at the forefront with their sound sustainability work:
<http://www.retailawards.se/tidigare-vinnare/tidigare-vinnare-2014/>
- Awarded the price as founder of the year. Nominated on the grounds that the founders have built, in an excellent manner, a successful business based following criteria: sales, profitability, number of employees and community involvement:
<http://www.foundersalliance.com/entreprenorsgalan/founders-awards/arets-grundare/>
- Palle Stenberg - winner of Väst Sveriges prime entrepreneur:
<http://www.ey.com/se/sv/newsroom/news-releases/pressmeddelande-2014-11-10-palle-stenberg-fran-nudie-jeans-ar-arets-framsta-entreprenor-i-vastsverige>
- Winner of the Sustainable Style Award sponsored by Eco Age, on the lasting appeal of denim:
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2015/jul/02/observer-ethical-awards-2015-winners-nudie-jeans>
- Winner of sustainability award of the year:
https://www.habit.se/article/view/348597/de_vinner_arets_hallbarhetspris