LUND UNIVERSITY
School of Economics and Management

Sensemaking of Employer Branding Activities Tailored for University Graduates

A Case Study

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Master's Programme in Managing People, Knowledge and Change

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Abstract

Title	Sensemaking of Employer Branding Activities Tailored for University Graduates – A Case Study
University	Lund University School of Economics and Management
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Keywords	Employer Branding, Corporate Branding, Internal Branding, External Branding, Graduate Attraction, Sensemaking
Thesis Purpose	The purpose of this thesis is to examine how employees make sense of employer branding activities tailored for university graduates.
Methodology	To collect high-quality data for this study, a mixed-method approach for gaining material was chosen. Here, semi-structured interviews as well as observations were conducted within the case company. Furthermore, organizational documents, such as the website and social media platforms, were studied as an additional source of information.
Theoretical Framework	The starting point in literature is the orientation in the spheres of employer branding, corporate branding, internal branding as well as graduate attraction. Furthermore, the concept of sensemaking is providing theoretical background.
Empirical Data	Empirical data consist of ten semi-structured interviews and

non-participant observations during a career fair. Employees working in HR and employer branding related departments such as marketing and communication within the case company were interviewed. In addition, alumni from Lund University School of Economics and Management (LUSEM) were asked, too. Next to these primary sources, company documents were studied, such as reports and social media channels.

Conclusion A tension between the brand images presented externally to the target groups of clients and university graduates was, resulted from the company's adaptation in order to meet the expectations of the respective target audiences. This is done through individual sensemaking of the company's employees, and through the collective effort different images of the same brand were created. The findings are in line with Weick's concept of sensemaking and show the nature of tailored employer branding activities the company pursues in order to attract the target community of university graduates, which are addressed in an informal and relaxed way.

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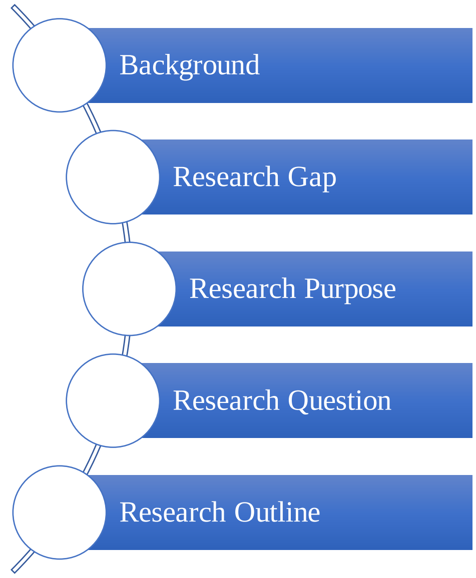
Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

1 Introduction

The first chapter of this thesis present with the purpose of giving the reader a general introduction to this study. Through the study's background, the reader should be familiarized with the overarching concept of employer branding. Afterwards, the research gap is given as well as the statement of the overall thesis purpose. Thereafter, the research question is presented which should be answered at the end of the thesis. This chapter is rounded off by the outline of this study. Here, the reader is provided with an overview what can be expected from the upcoming chapters.



1.1 Background

This section should briefly present the study's theoretical background and place it in a broader context to serve as an orientation. An in-depth explanation of the concept of employer branding and its linkage to the theory of sensemaking is given in the upcoming section.

In several areas of a company, success is less and less related to technical circumstance, but is decisively influenced by talented and competent employees (Berthon, et al., 2005; Mathis, et al., 2016). Therefore, in today's economy, human capital is often seen as the vital cornerstone for gaining competitive advantages (Berthon, et al., 2005; Foster, et al., 2010). Accordingly, there is a growing competition for highly qualified workers and their knowledge in the labor market, especially in western societies with a large economic development (Bauman, 1998; Mosley, 2014). Demographic change, influencing Michaels et al. (2001) introduced *War for Talents*, also intensifies this competition as "talent is seen as a scarce resource" (Silzer & Dowell, 2009, p. 26), so that fewer and fewer young people enter the labor market, resulting in a shortage of young talents. In view of the importance of qualified employees, it can be assumed that the competition for well-trained individuals will become increasingly important and intensive in the upcoming years. Here, one of the main activities of companies is to meet the respective operational demand of appropriate employees, which is affected by various external and internal factors by developing and implementing company-specific innovative strategies and measures (Bauman, 1998). This applies not only to the area of personnel management, but also to other operational competencies such as communication and marketing know-how (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Moroko & Uncles, 2009). As a result, one of the common core tasks of corresponding organizational units is the recruitment, promotion and retention of high performers (Sullivan, 2004; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), which is to be seen as an indispensable component of a comprehensive corporate strategy. According to Foster et al. (2010), a positive corporate and employer image as well as an attractive corporate culture have a decisive effect on efficient recruitment and retention management. Therefore, the design and management of a corresponding employer brand is of central importance and should be seen as an essential element of an employer branding strategy.

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) state that more and more organizations are successfully applying the concept of employer branding in order to strengthen their own attractiveness as an employer and to position themselves favorably in the competition for the best workforce. Approaches from marketing and human resource management are integrated to communicate the unique characteristics of companies to existing as well as potential employees more effectively (Lloyd, 2002; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). When it comes to presenting the company to the world outside, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) are sure that it is necessary to affirm that all employees make sense of its image to embody the brand as realistic as possible. Here, it is noticed that different target groups demand and expect an individual treatment how to attract them. Especially the younger workforce, including university graduates within Millennials (Rigoni & Adkins, 2016), who grew up around the turn of the 21st century, has high expectations on their future employer (Caballero & Walker, 2010; Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). Interesting and challenging projects, fast career advancement, a balanced work-life relation as well as communication on eye level are only a few criteria (Caballero & Walker, 2010). Recruiting, attracting with the help of face-to-face and social media activities (Kaur, et al., 2015) and hiring graduates is therefore on the one hand an opportunity for companies to revitalize their aging workforce, on the other hand firms are confronted with major challenges due to the target audience's high demands towards their future employer.

1.2 Research Gap

Employer Branding as its implementation strategy has been extensively studied, in literature as well as in practice when it comes to marketing and recruitment (Knox & Freeman, 2006; Foster, et al., 2010; Mosley, 2014). In concrete terms, recent studies confirm that university graduates consciously choose their employer based on a comparison with their own needs and expectations of the individual as well as organizational values, which in turn affect a potential employee's decision (Franklin & Pell, 2001; Rampl, 2014).

It is striking that existing organizational as well as marketing studies largely concentrate on the necessity to have employer branding in regards to graduate recruitment (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Mosley & Schmidt, 2017). Nonetheless, it is mostly questioned what graduates are looking for when they are seeking a job at an attractive employer. Intensive research on how employers proceed when they are aiming for targeting today's graduates is less pronounced. Furthermore, few studies within the literature in organizational research address the concept of employer branding in connection with Weick's (1995) thought of *sensemaking* in the context of tailored employer branding activities. As a consequence, the thesis' research team sees a research gap here, which should be explored during this thesis to give a holistic overview of the study field. All research is conducted in respect of a case company which will be introduced in-depth later on.

1.3 Research Purpose

The overall purpose of this study is to open up new perspectives on employer branding – i.e. activities and practices to attract potential employees, especially among graduates – for the academic but also practitioners' literature. In other words, this thesis should sensitize the reader to see the importance of the topic, no matter why one is concerned with the concept of employer branding. Here, the researchers' aim is to provide an in-depth understanding and therefore a holistic picture of the area studied. Therefore, the research team explores and gives interpretations on how employees within the case company make sense of their work, communicating and representing the employer brand to the outside world, focusing on the selected target group of university graduates. With this empirical study and conceptualization of employer branding, the present master thesis also intends to make a further contribution to existing research on employer branding in this context, which up to now usually only concentrated on other audiences. This is done, as said before, through linking the concept of employer branding with Weick's sensemaking approach functioning as a theoretical framework for this thesis. In this way, existing literature is supported but also extended.

1.4 Research Question

A research question should guide the study to find some logical argumentation for the explored gap. In this thesis, the research question is formulated as follows:

How do employees make sense of employer branding activities tailored for university graduates?

1.5 Research Outline

In general, the present study is divided into six chapters. This **first chapter** introduced and familiarized the reader with the research topic by giving first background information. Furthermore, the research gap, the arising research question as well as the associated purpose were explained here.

The **second chapter** reveals an overview of relevant literature, where the concept of *employer branding* is defined in-depth and linked to *corporate branding* and *internal branding.* Here, the reader gains an understanding for today's importance of employer branding as well as knowledge that is needed to make sense out of the study and its authority. Afterwards, Weick's theory of *sensemaking* is outlined and contextualized when it comes to employer branding.

These descriptions are followed by the **third chapter** where the study's researchers present the applied methodology. First of all, the setting in which the research was studied is introduced, followed by the research philosophy. Afterwards, the research approach is explained. To provide insights how data were gained, the next section within the chapter is presenting the strategy to collect the empirical data. In the last part, the process of the data analysis is described.

The **fourth chapter** can be seen as one of the main parts of the entire thesis, because here the findings of the empirical investigations are presented. An elaborated storyline should make it easier for the reader to develop an understanding for the findings within the context of employer branding in order to make sense out of them.

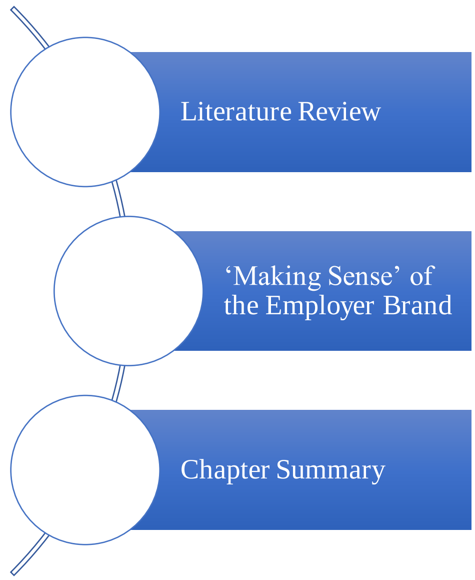
This is then followed by the **fifth chapter** which thoroughly discusses and analyses the findings by means of the existing literature on employer branding and the concept of sensemaking. It aims at answering the formulated research question, which was introduced before.

Lastly, in the **sixth chapter** the whole thesis is summarized within a conclusion to reflect on the study and its findings. In addition, the limitations of the research design are depicted as well as the scope for further study. The given recommendations should provide the reader with first impulses to investigate additional research on this highly relevant topic.

Moreover, a reference list as well as an appendix are provided containing the interview guideline as well as the sheet the observations based on. This makes it possible for the reader to get an understanding which questions were asked and what aspects were taken into consideration during the observations to win a holistic picture how the empirical data were gained.

2 Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The purpose of the upcoming chapter is to familiarize the reader with the study's literature as well as relevant theory. After defining the terms corporate branding and internal branding, the focus is set on employer branding as a concept. In order to understand these terms, their correlation is presented, too, followed by an illustration of the three steps of employer branding to give an overview of the topic's nature. Furthermore, the theory of sensemaking by the organizational psychologist Weick as well as its functioning in employer branding is introduced. Lastly, a chapter summary is given.



2.1 Literature Review

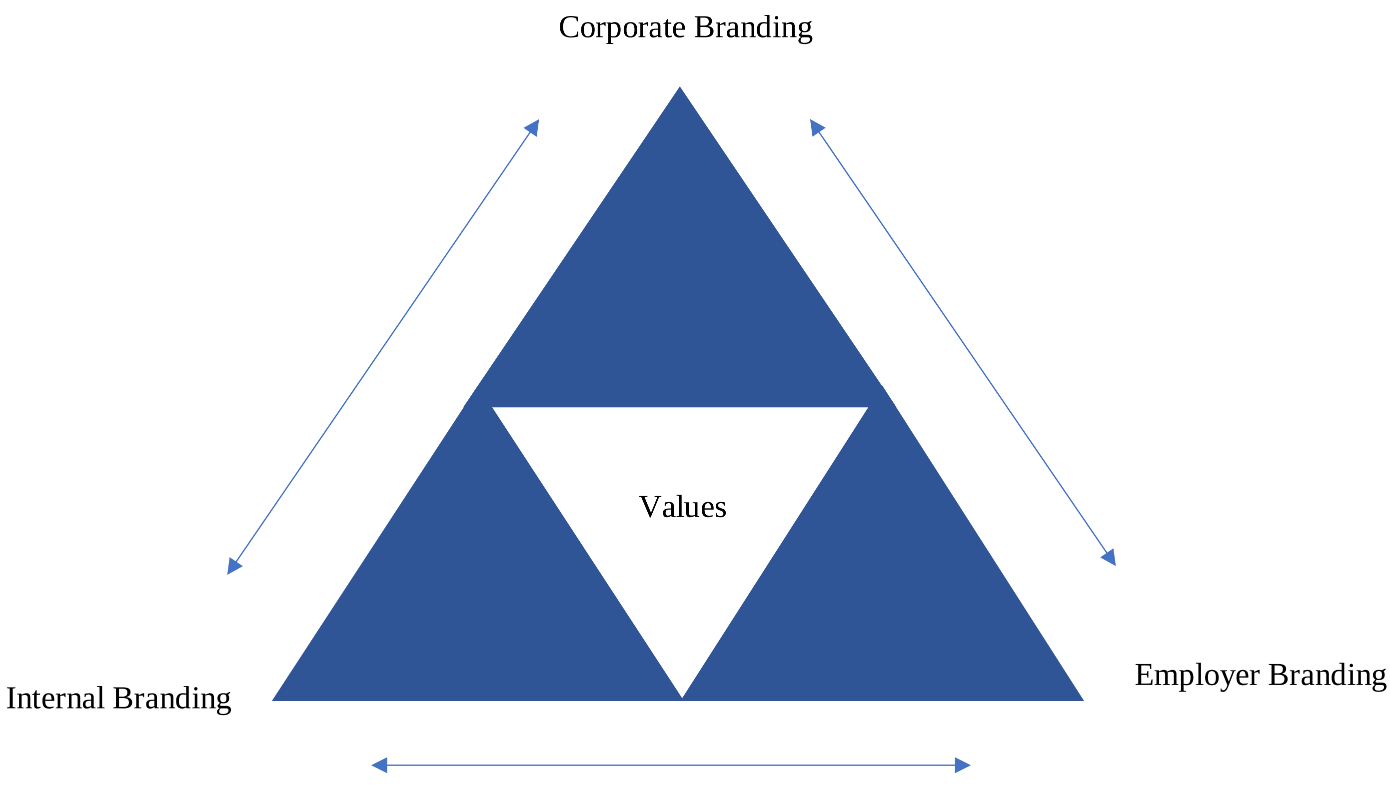
In this part, relevant literature provides the reader with insights into the relevance of targeted employer branding when it comes to attracting university graduates. In order to get an idea of the concept of employer branding, in addition, corporate branding, internal branding, external branding as well as their interrelations are introduced here.

"[Our company's] most important asset is its employees and it is crucial to our success that the best talent chooses to stay with us" (Case Company, 2016, p. 17). These or similar statements anchor a large number of companies in their mission statements and corporate principles these days. In an increasingly complex environment marked by multitudinous trends, numerous companies are facing great challenges. Industry 4.0, globalization of markets, increasing demands of consumers, investors as well as employees are only a few of many keywords that are controversially discussed in theory and practice in this context. In addition, the pressure of the existing shortage of skilled workers is growing due to increasing demographic changes (Atwater & Jones, 2004). In the same sentence, the aforementioned term *War for Talents* in 1998 by Ed Michaels, the director of the management consultancy McKinsey, is often used nowadays to describe the dimensions of this lack of skilled workers. Therefore, the study's chosen topic of employer branding – the idea to present the company as an attractive employer (Maheshwari, et al., 2017) – is highly relevant.

To deliver the employer brand and its promise to the outside world so that others can make sense out of it, employer branding advocates claim that the two factors *brand* and *people* are becoming more and more important (Foster, et al., 2010). When the concept of employer branding is introduced, it is also often referred to internal branding and corporate branding (Foster, et al., 2010). According to Foster, et al. (2010), "corporate branding concerns 'promise management'." (p. 404), which are needed in both, internal as well as external branding. Therefore, these two can be evaluated as its sub-concepts with different target audiences. Its interrelations are illustrated as well as explained in-depth later on in this chapter.

The holistic concept "how an organization externally communicates its brand to potential recruits" (Foster, et al., 2010, p. 404) is called *employer branding*. In terms of its meaning, it involves the design as well as the management of the employer brand and was already mentioned in 1996 by Ambler and Barrow. Here, the authors emphasized a transfer of analogue management of product brands to the employer brand defined as "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company" (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 187). Next to the external focus of attracting prospective employees and building relationships with them, some literature is also referring to employer branding in the context of retaining current staff (Lloyd, 2002; Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). However, not only the study's researchers see the necessity to differentiate between these two target groups, but also Foster, et al. (2010) as well as Müller (2017) who clearly divide *internal branding*, *employer branding* and *corporate branding*. Additionally, this text material is strengthening their interrelation, which is often underestimated or even doubted (Mosley, 2007). As shown in Figure 1 *The Triangle of Branding*, branding advocates see the middle of the three terms as organizational values. which can in this respect be interpreted as the essence of branding. That can refer for example to the commitment of the employees, shared beliefs, but also to the language within an organization. This overlap may indicate that the presented concepts communicate or are even based on common values within the organization, which in turn illustrate the often-questioned linkage and therefore dissolves the uncertainty raised in several socio-economic texts. As already mentioned, Foster, et al. (2010) even go so far by describing internal branding and employer branding as sub-concepts of corporate branding.

Figure 1: The Triangle of Branding



Source: Own representation, based on (Foster, et al., 2010, p. 405)

In order to give the reader more details on corporate branding as the broader concept and *internal branding* and *employer branding* as sub-concepts, these terms are introduced in the following.

2.1.1 Corporate Branding

In marketing literature, the concept of corporate branding goes beyond the product dimension, although it is closely related to product marketing (Foster, et al., 2010). In corporate branding, however, the management tries to anchor the entire organization as a brand in the minds of all employees, shareholders, customers as well as the public (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Barrow & Mosley, 2011). In other words, it should establish a "noticeable, relevant and resonant, and unique [corporate brand]" (Foster, et al., 2010, p. 403), in order to create a sense of belonging. Here, the overall aim is to communicate a consistent image of the company to each of these audiences. Moreover, corporate branding can be conceived as a component of an overarching belief system that tries to affect the way in which members of an organization stage a reality that is socially constructed (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Therefore, Foster et al. (2010) as advocates of employer branding, see a corporate brand as a "navigational tool" (p. 401). Its foundation is often described as the company's identity, which indicates the strong linkage between corporate branding and corporate identity (Foster, et al., 2010).

However, Willmott (2010), from a critical management perspective, observes that brands have turned into "intangible assets with a monetizable value" (p. 523). This is acknowledged by Gorz (2003 cited in Arvidsson, 2005) who expresses that brands are symbolic values with a monetizable character. Also, Kärreman and Rylander (2008) critically see branding as "a vehicle for management of meaning" (p. 107), that forms a promise between the different parties of the company, especially the organization's stakeholders.

2.1.2 Internal Branding

Internal branding itself "focuses largely on the adoption of the branding concept inside an organisation to ensure that employees deliver the brand promise to the external stakeholders" (Foster, et al., 2010, p. 401). In order to communicate the brand and its values to the world outside, the necessity of identity in the existence of branding is emphasized. Companies invest in internal branding to increase the identification of employees with a brand and to bind employees permanently, but also to promote brand-oriented employee behavior. Since employees in general serve as the gateway between an organization and its customers (King, 1991), identification can be seen as the main carrier when it comes to communicating values.

In marketing and branding literature, internal branding is often seen as 'employee branding' (Miles & Mangold, 2004; Bach, 2009), since the role of the employees can be understood as 'brand ambassadors' (Grams, 2011), who are delivering the brand promise to attract people outside the organization. So, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) regard that a constant as well as credible perception of the brand and its image has the potential to generate commitment and loyalty of current employees whereby those can be retained in the long term. Next to the fact that internal branding starts with the behavior of employees, but also with the development of necessary structures and processes to make the brand relevant in the day-to-day work of employees (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007), it can be understood as an internal extension of employer branding.

However, Edwards (2009) critically emphasizes the differences between these terms by stating that "employer branding uses the organization as a branded entity to target prospective employees, whereas internal branding uses employees as the branded entity to target consumers who interact with branded employees" (p. 44). When it comes to literature within the field of branding, Kundu and Vora (2004) criticize that it is often only concentrated on influencing current staff to ensure that the brand promise is kept, but it is not considered how companies can recruit people who personally share values that fit with the company's ones.

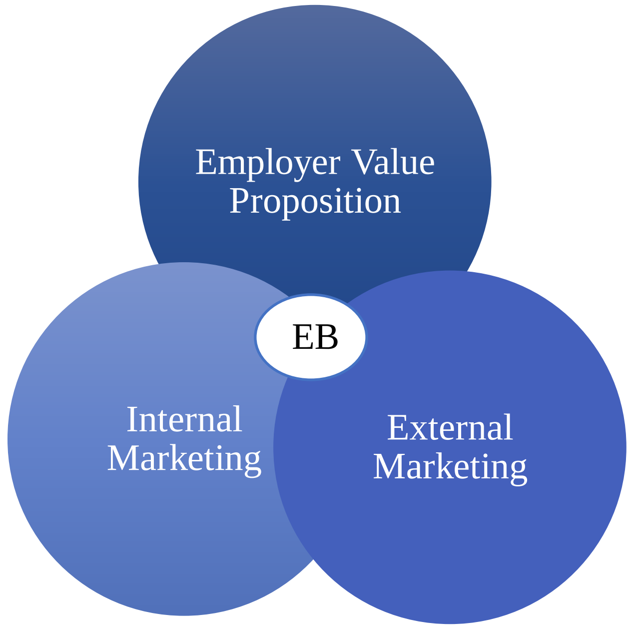
2.1.3 Employer Branding

Employer branding, which is the focus of this thesis, is not a new practice per se, but the strategic concept behind it is relatively new in regards to employee-oriented brand management (Vatsa, 2016; Aldousari, et al., 2017). While Lloyd (2002) simply sees employer branding as the "sum of a company's efforts to communicate to existing and prospective staff that it is a desirable place to work." (p. 64), Edwards (2009) characterize the fusion of brand and people as "an activity where principles of marketing, in particular the 'science of branding', are applied to human resources activities in relation to current and potential employees." (p. 6). Thus, Edwards (2009) sees a clear linkage between human resource management and employer branding. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) as advocates of employer branding specify it as "the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity" (p. 502), which again mirrors the importance of identity in the sphere of branding. In addition, employer branding as a concept should be of assistance to companies to personally attract potential employees in an honest and authentic way while retaining current ones as well (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Wilden, et al., 2010). Therefore, it needs to "start with a clear understanding of [the] corporate purpose and values, because these core elements of the corporate ethos should be reflected throughout everything the organization says and does" (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017, p. 26).

However, organizational studies indicate that employer branding is more than just attracting and retaining staff, it goes beyond these borders (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The strategy at hand which can be situated in marketing in the concept of corporate branding (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014), has also the potential to increase performance within the organization, to strengthen the corporate brand and its culture (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In general, employer branding has a broad utilization and can be located within the fields of human resources, marketing, but also communication (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2009; Barrow & Mosley, 2011). At best, all functions go hand in hand by working together. Barrow and Mosley (2011) actually communicate the necessity of a close collaboration since specialists often work in these areas having a consolidated knowledge about corporate branding as a whole. While people's knowledge is often seen as the company's intellectual capital building a parameter for competitive advantage (Narasimha, 2000; Tucker, et al., 2005), Foster et al. (2010) as advocates of employer branding even refer to human capital as the most valuable asset for a company.

When it comes to employer branding, human resource practitioner studies often present its concept based on three components (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), which are illustrated in the figure below.

Figure 2: Employer Branding (EB) and its Components



Source: Own representation based on (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004)

The first component includes the development of a so-called *employer value proposition (EVP)*, which the organization can actively define on its own (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The term itself can be seen as the promise of the brand that is communicated outwards. From a marketing perspective, it is primarily understood as an accumulation of different offerings that a firm provides to potential employees so that they are interested in working for this single company (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017). Here, the aim is to convey to the candidates that their potential future employer is unique in its actions and behavior, in the best way characterized by openness, honesty and transparency (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). It should be associated that there are numerous advantages that makes an employment even more attractive, such as the organization's culture, a prevailing working climate and strategic goals (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017). In organizational studies, it is stated that the employer wishes that employees associate certain corporate values (Foster, et al., 2010). This is not the first time that organizational values have become important in the field of branding. If one remembers in the graphic that showed *The Triangle of Branding* (Figure 1), values were an essential part, too. In order to spread these values both within and outside the company, marketing measures are required, which are explained in-depth below.

Nonetheless, in marketing studies, it is argued that EVP is not only intrinsically linked to employer branding, but often even seen as its basis as “EVP ingredients are the key qualities that make your organization an attractive place to work” (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017, p. 71).

The second component in the context of employer branding – the idea of presenting the organization as an attractive employer to the outside world (Maheshwari, et al., 2017) – is *internal marketing*. Here, it is important not to mix up the term with the abovementioned internal branding, as Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) did, even if these are overlapping. To remember, Lloyd (2002) mentions that internal branding is “the sum of a company's efforts to communicate to existing and prospective staff that it is a desirable place to work" (p. 65), while internal marketing defines its own employees as the target audience whereby marketing principles should be transferred to the company itself (Kaplan, 2017). So, internal marketing follows the insight that only employees who are convinced of the company, its behavior and values can credibly communicate the company's achievements to the outside world in an authentic way. Or, as Berthon et al. (2005) say, “the more attractive an employer is perceived to be by potential employees, the stronger that particular organization’s employer brand.” (p. 156). Thus, in an organizational context, employer branding has to reflect on the internal actions to project the culture with its values showing that a company is unique in its actions, externally (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Foster, et al., 2010). In other words, employees of a company have a social responsibility in a way, since employer brands represent a bundle of expectations in the end (Bach, 2009).

Nevertheless, there are some critical voices when it comes to internal marketing in the context of human resource management. Here, it is often claimed that the concept of internal marketing is simply a novel synonym for a well-managed system of managing human resources (Hales, 1994; Sanchez-Hernandez & Grayson, 2012).

The third and last element of employer branding is to attract potential staff through *external marketing* and its activities. In marketing literature, Chhabra and Sharma (2014) clearly differentiate between internal and external marketing by stating that the “[p]romotion of brand within the organization [internal marketing] will lead to an increase in employee loyalty, while the promotion of brand outside the organization [external marketing] will make it attractive to the potential employees.” (p. 49). In the context of delivering the brand’s promise to the outside world, meaning clients, customers and also potential employees, Moroko and Uncles (2008) recommend to consider employer brands as “psychological contracts – namely, the ‘individual beliefs in reciprocal obligations between employees and employers’” (pp. 165-166). These are more or less implicit expectations and offers that go beyond the standardized written employment contract whereby relationships between the company and its prospective employees should be built and maintained.

As shown in Figure 2, employer branding is presented as the intersection of EVP, internal branding and external branding. However, it is indispensable not to view the concept of employer branding too restrictively – in particular, as an external marketing measure. Here, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) assume from an organizational perspective that a company’s image as an attractive and favored employer is largely based on the values it shares with potential employees. It is even guessed that the external perception of a company’s attractiveness is mainly affected by the organization’s internal one (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Therefore, a need exists that employer brands grow authentic from the inside out (Lloyd, 2002), so that employer branding can be seen as the development of internal branding (Foster, et al., 2010). Important for effective employer branding are above all the measures that are directed internally to the employees, since they can potentially increase employee satisfaction and make the company an attractive employer (Parry & Tyson, 2013). According to Moroko and Uncles (2008), the strategy of employer branding should follow all employees belonging to an organization throughout the entire employment cycle. Summed up in a nutshell, advocates of employer branding claim that employees that are proud and satisfied often serve as the aforementioned organization’s ‘brand ambassadors’ (Grams, 2011) in order to encourage others to look for jobs within this company. In turn that means if “you recruit brand ambassadors, you extend the internal core of the brand.” (Grams, 2011, p. 182).

Like all other things, the concept of employer branding has its downsides. In organizational studies within the field of human resource management, it is often stated that employer branding primarily strives “to attract recruits and assure that current employees are engaged in the culture and the strategy of the firm” (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p. 501). In this respect, Mosley (2007) raises doubts from a marketing perspective whether this is sufficient. It is expressed as important that “the role of employer branding does not end at identifying what prospective employees can expect from the organisation in terms of rational and emotional benefits” (Mosley, 2007 cited in Foster et al., 2010,

p. 404). This is precisely the crux, from both an organizational as well as a marketing view, that employer branding activities guarantee to reduce costs, an increased performance within the organization as well as the strengthening of the corporate brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Barrow & Mosley, 2011).

In the end, due to the bundle of different explanations of employer branding the research team found in marketing literature as well as in organizational studies, an own definition was formulated:

Employer branding aims to create a distinctive, authentic, credible, consistent and attractive employer brand in the perceptions of a potential employer.

2.2 Theoretical Framework: 'Making Sense' of the Employer Brand

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The following section provides the reader with Weick's (1995) concept of 'sensemaking' as a theoretical basis for this study. Later on, sensemaking is put into context with the above-mentioned concept of employer branding.

The organizational psychologist Karl E. Weick (1995) investigated sensemaking as a central element of organizing. There is numerous literature that attempts to define sensemaking in an organizational framework to classify it in a socio-economic environment. Some researchers claim that sensemaking pays caution to how humans understand and interpret what is happening (Sveningsson & Sörgärde, 2013; Huzzard, et al., 2014). Traditionally, sense is often portrayed metaphorically as an image that is brought to the observer from an outside perspective. Within Weick's (1995) cognitively oriented sensemaking philosophy, however, the concept of sense can literally be understood as the foundation of meaning creation, the essence of someone's thoughts and actions. Therefore, sense is the basic category of human existence and thus, represents the cause and effect of all human actions and behavior.

In general, Weick's (1995) approach is a mentally constructed environment that people create and maintain in dialogue. Following this idea, there are conceptions and opinions on an individual level which are as seldom questioned as having an inner monologue. All determinations made are so much part of one’s own self and thought patterns that they are rather difficult to question. Since many ideas result from social interactions, sensemaking depicts the process by which such ideas are formed and changed (Palmer, et al., 2017). In case that the outer world can no longer be reconciled with the inner one, then it has to be find another, a new way to rationalize the world (Weick, 1995) – this is sensemaking.

According to Weick (1995), people within an organization relate a current situation to an already experienced moment in the past. Therefore, human action as well as thinking require the permanent existence of references in present situations in order to create sense. In turn, this content can then be influenced by ideologies, paradigms or traditions, since individuals often assign meaning to new situations through this familiar frame of reference. Generally, sensemaking can appear at an organizational as well as an individual level (Stensaker, et al., 2008).

Sensemaking, thus, is basically part of any organizational activity or practice in which employees make sense of their social reality, of their organizational context, practices, their roles, etc. In this regard, employees who represent their employer to prospective new colleagues, have to make sense of the image they aim to convey to these prospective employees (Weick, 1995).
As mentioned before, employees are one of the main sources to present the company and its brand to the outside world, to inspire and even convince others. Especially when it comes to employer branding, an individual sensemaking amongst all employees is needed to provide a consistent image to those that are not involved in the organization (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Since humans are in general constantly searching for meaning to make sense out of something, a company only becomes an attractive employer, when the external appearance of a company is flawless, stringent and credible. When Edwards (2009) and Wilden et al. (2010) mention the fusion of brand and people when defining employer branding, it can be said that “all that is needed is that people can make sense for themselves of what they are doing” (Stensaker, et al., 2008, p. 167). This is the foundation of communicating the brand to the world outside, as “communication [is] closely linked to sensemaking as [it] can contribute to developing an understanding” (Stensaker, et al., 2008, pp. 163-164), which in turn is needed to create meaning.

2.3 Chapter Summary

The previous sections revolved around the terms *employer branding*, its related concepts of *corporate branding* and *internal branding*, and the theory of *sensemaking*. Corporate branding was seen as the basis for creating a "noticeable, relevant and resonant, and unique [corporate brand]" (Foster, et al., 2010, p. 403), while internal branding could serve as an instrument to increase employees' identification with the company. Additionally, employer branding has been described as "an activity where principles of marketing, in particular the 'science of branding', are applied to human resources activities in relation to current and potential employees." (Edwards, 2009, p. 6). When talking about branding itself, organizational values always played a significant role (Foster, et al., 2010). In general, people and brand were seen as the key drivers to transport the employer brand to the outside world so that others can make sense out of it and create a meaning. Both Grams (2011) and Devin (2016) characterized the employees as 'brand ambassadors', which play a bigger role in internal branding and nowadays also in terms of recruiting people. Moreover, employer branding was connected to the Weick's (1995) concept of sensemaking. Sensemaking has been elaborated as a central element of organizing, which observes how people understand and interpret what is going on. Furthermore, sensemaking was embedded into the sphere of employer branding by figuring out that "all that is needed is that people can make sense for themselves of what they are doing" (Stensaker, et al., 2008, p. 167). Here, verbal interaction was considered as an important factor since employees have to communicate the organization and its brand to the outside world to develop an understanding and to make sense out of it (Stensaker, et al., 2008).

After familiarizing the reader with applicable literature and a theoretical framework, the methodology used is presented in the following to provide insights about the research and its process.

3 Methodology

The following chapter is about introducing the applied methodology of this thesis. To enter the world of the phenomenon, to get an idea in which environment and how it was studied, the research setting is presented. Here, the case company is introduced to familiarize the reader with relevant characteristics. Furthermore, the research philosophy is given in which context *ontology* and *epistemology* are figured out. Afterwards, the research approach is examined, followed by the study's strategy and the process of data collection. Lastly, an idea is given in which way the empirical data are analyzed.

3.1 Research Setting

Since the idea of this study was not to generate greater knowledge in respect of quantity, but rather to place value on high-quality material, it was taken one single firm to do a qualitative case study with. The researchers saw this firm as an appropriate research object since it is one of the world's largest companies within the consultancy industry that is actively developing its employer brand and continuously seeking new employees among highly qualified students. The case company's employees supported the researchers in all matters throughout the entire process.

In Sweden, the case company employs 1700 people in 50 offices, where the main one is located in Stockholm. Overall, the company operates in 152 countries around the world and typically hires university students at the time of their graduation. The study at hand, which was conducted in Sweden, thus focuses on the target group of university graduates. This target group appears to be high in demand as "[r]ecent research has highlighted that employers [in general] are placing increasing value on graduates" (Caballero & Walker, 2010, p. 13). Graduates are those students who are close to their final degree or who have already obtained a Bachelor's or Postgraduate degree (Caballero & Walker, 2010; Alex & Nicky, 2013). Due to the fact that they often have limited professional job experience, organizations have the chance to teach and form them according to their practices (Caballero & Walker, 2010) and thus, gain from their potential. Even if on the one hand, “graduates [are] a key source of new recruits for organisations … [as they] represent a valuable and plentiful resource of quantifiable ability and achievement” (Caballero & Walker, 2010, p. 14), it is also the group of people whose demands are steadily growing and thus increasingly individuality is desired when it comes to recruitment (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). So, overall employer branding activities for university graduates have now become a central element of the strategy in HR, which results in a growing challenge for every company, and here in the context of the chosen case company, too.

3.2 Research Philosophy

Research philosophy itself is described as an “over-arching term [which] relates to the development of knowledge and the nature of that knowledge.” (Saunders, et al., 2009, p. 107). The hypotheses provided by a research philosophy justify the implementation of the research (Flick, 2011). Here, literature often writes about ontology and epistemology (Saunders, et al., 2009). Before introducing in which way data were gained, it is essential to describe that “epistemological and ontological commitments may be associated with certain research methods” (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 626). But what is meant by ontology and epistemology?

3.2.1 Ontology and Social Constructivism

Saunders et al. (2009) state that *ontology* explores the essence of reality, which questions the researchers' assumptions about the functioning of the world and their commitment to certain views. In research, the two major paths of ontology are subjectivism and objectivism that “portrays the position that social entities exist in reality external to social actors concerned with their existence” (Saunders, et al., 2009, p. 114). In contrast to the ontological perspective of objectivism, subjectivism is adopted by the study’s researchers, meaning that in general, social phenomena are a result of the awareness and all upcoming verbal as well as nonverbal behaviors of the social actors (Saunders, et al., 2009). Here, the phenomena’s instability and constant revisions are pointed out, so that it can be claimed that they undergo a permanent state of change. In turn, this definition already refers to the concept to which the above-mentioned subjectivism is closely linked, namely the so-called *social constructionism* (Saunders, et al., 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2015).

Social constructionism itself "holds that reality is constructed by the observer … stat[ing] that reality is a collective construction" (Kishore & Ramesh, 2007, p. 120). It examines how people create and institutionalize social phenomena, but is less concerned with its causes and effects. Therefore, it is mostly affected by the mindsets, knowledge and also beliefs of groups or even single individuals (Kishore & Ramesh, 2007; Saunders, et al., 2009). Flowers (2009) even goes so far by seeing the meaningfulness of situations as very fragmented, which leads to a multitude of various interpretations, in turn representing the social reality people interact in. In line with that, from a social constructionist's perspective, knowledge is therefore always considered as a construction of a social group of several individuals (Saunders, et al., 2009; Bryman & Bell, 2015). Knowledge is located within a dynamic environment and therefore, constantly produced and reproduced through the actions of people and their related interpretations. According to Bryman and Bell (2015), in the end, organizations are also perceived as socially constructed and can only be seen and understood from the individual's perspective.

From a social constructionist's point of view, the interview partners can be defined as social actors. All interviewees gave various interpretations of the situations in which they operate. This leads to the result that their reality portrayed as social actors of the organization is seen as constructed and, thus, restricted to the philosophical stance undertaken by the study's researchers (Arbib & Hesse, 1986). Moreover, and due to the fact that the researchers can also be seen as social actors, the study is influenced by their knowledge, mindsets and understandings of the reality, too (Saunders, et al., 2009). So, all interviewees as well as the researchers "'construct' reality through interaction with the social and physical world around them" (Arbib & Hesse, 1986, p. Book Description). Nevertheless, the researchers reduced the distortion and potential biases by critically reflecting on the work from various perspectives (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). In addition, theoretical background on which the research is based, contributes to this, as various angles and points of views have already been integrated using existing theory.

3.2.2 Epistemology and Interpretivism

Bryman and Bell (2015) define the term epistemology quite general as referring to the question of how knowledge is defined in a subject area of the study and what is to be seen as acceptable knowledge. Interpretivism indicates that the social world of management and business is "far too complex to lend itself theorizing by definite 'laws' in the same way" (Saunders, et al., 2009, pp. 115-116). The ontological view of social constructionism is very often associated with the interpretative epistemology (Saunders, et al., 2009).

In this study, an interpretative approach is applied since it concentrates on the ideas of the social actors and suggests that understanding has to be rooted in the expertise of those working in an organization (Bryman & Bell, 2015). According to Morgan (1980), the social environment is in this context conceived from the participant's perspective and not from the observer's, and thus, "[t]he interpretative paradigm is informed by a concern to understand the world as it is" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 28). This kind of paradigm is grounded in the belief that the social world enjoys a highly fragile ontological standing and that, what expires as a social reality is not existing in a tangible sense, "but is the product of the subjective and inter-subjective experience of individuals" (Morgan, 1980, p. 608). Since the data collected during the interviews differ in view, an interpretation is necessary to make this data meaningful but, thus, subjective. Referring to Malhotra (2015), the qualitative data gained from the observations must also be interpreted in such a way that they can be used for later analysis. However, the researchers were aware of the subjective nature in the analysis of the data collected.

Moreover, interpretive thinking is in a way also hermeneutical thinking as human beings take choices on the basis of comparisons and previous knowledge to understand the world and make sense out of it. Ricoeur (2016) defines hermeneutics as "the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts." (p. 1). In this context, the term 'hermeneutic circle' often occurs, too, that explains the formation of higher understanding from elementary understanding (Prasad, 2005; Paterson & Higgs, 2005). So, the hermeneutic circle, often-called 'the whole', can be seen as the sum of its parts, which is looking beyond the borders of a phenomenon (Paterson & Higgs, 2005).

3.3 Research Approach

The selection of an appropriate research design is essential as it sketches the research process and therefore forms the environment for collecting and analyzing data (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In the following, the research approach chosen for this thesis is introduced to understand how the study was conducted in order to gain empirical data.

3.3.1 Qualitative Research

Following the taken interpretive epistemological philosophy, the ontology of social constructivism and the research's exploratory character, it can be considered as most appropriate to take a qualitative design (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2015; Silverman, 2016). Since qualitative research is based on the idea that theories are rather generated than just tested (Bryman & Bell, 2015), it seems to be the most suitable approach to answer the research question. In addition, qualitative research rather focuses on words and their content than on obtaining data and generating knowledge in respect of quantity (Bryman & Bell, 2015). All words and phrases were derived from conducted interviews, observations as well as document studies and, thus, the researchers' interpretation is needed. In turn, it is in accordance with the study's ontology and epistemology, too.

Referring to Silverman (2016), the objective of qualitative research is to get a deeper understanding of the phenomenon studied and its nature. Since data in qualitative research cannot be standardized while analyzing, they can be interpreted in various ways. Therefore, the results obtained often have the character of being not coherent and generalizable, which property quantitative research has. Additionally, it can be asked to what extent the results are true for further populations (Silverman, 2016). However, a quantification of the acquired data does not lead to meaningful conclusions if the characteristics are not adequately understood (Silverman, 2016).

Qualitative research itself is a process that is characterized by its continuous reflexivity (Bryman & Bell, 2015; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). This enables the researchers to adapt and modify the theoretical environment as well as the set of collected data. The reflexive nature is also outstanding due to the fact that its structure does not necessarily be defined beforehand. Therefore, further knowledge can be generated through insights gained during the process of research and incorporated into the findings.

Lastly, qualitative research is also about combining the methods with the empirical material to provide detailed descriptions and interpretations of an educative nature of the data collected (Silverman, 2016). The researchers have therefore selected two successive methods of gathering primary data for this study, which are introduced and described in this chapter, too.

3.3.2 Exploratory and Abductive Approach

In general, three research approaches exist, naming induction, deduction, abduction (Stadler, 2004). As induction is a risky move from a set of individual facts to a common truth, deduction is “less risky” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017, p. 4), through giving an explanation by one general rule. Nevertheless, resulting from and according to the interpretive paradigm the study’s researchers investigated in the abductive approach where “an (often surprising) single case is interpreted as from a hypothetic overarching pattern, which, if it were true, explains the case in questions” (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017, p. 4). In this context, Alvesson and Sköldberg (2017) identified a close relation to hermeneutics, which was mentioned before, as abduction is also striving to bring understanding.

Attention is paid to the fact that theories are generated by the collection, analysis and interpretation of data, without discarding existing theoretical assumptions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). Moreover, it is ensured to link existing theories of the fields studied and to use them as a basis for gaining new insights, coordinating the individual fields and creating a deeper understanding (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). The abductive approach, which adapts characteristics of induction as well as deduction (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017), allows the researchers to make ongoing adjustments, to give the empirical material meaning and to relate it to existing theory (Prasad, 2005). Thereby, the subject’s nature can be explored in order to answer the formulated research question.

3.4 Research Strategy and Data Collection

The thesis’ overall design is a case study approach based on interviews and observations. Choosing a suitable research strategy is mostly reliant on the research question (Yin, 2009); (Swanborn, 2010). Since the “research questions seek to explain some present circumstance” (Yin, 2009, p. 4), the method of using a case study seems to be most relevant in this context. Hereby, it can be answered *in which way* and *how* the phenomenon is functioning, while the explicit need for the case study derives from the willingness to understand complex phenomena in society (Yin, 2009). In general, all research strategies with an exploratory character are aiming at “collecting and analyzing empirical evidence, following its own logic” (Yin, 2009, p. 6). However, the chosen interpretivist approach implies explanations in causal contexts, and thus, “case studies are far from being only an exploratory strategy” (Yin, 2009, p. 6). As already explained, for this study one company was selected, located within the consultancy industry. Generally speaking, the study’s qualitative, interpretive research character has influenced the selected research methods (Saunders, et al., 2009; Easterby-Smith, et al., 2015), which are described in-depth below. In accordance with Yin (2009), qualitative research should be embedded in the relevant literature in order to expand knowledge as well as the understanding of the given phenomenon. Therefore, the theoretical framework can be seen as a guideline for the process of collecting and analyzing all data sets. For this study, more than one research method is used to thoroughly investigate the subject studied, which is described below.

To collect high-quality data for this study, two consecutive approaches as primary sources are picked. On the one hand, semi-structured interviews were conducted within the case company. On the other hand, non-participant observations took place during a career fair. While interviews in general consist of an interaction of different people, the observations of this study take the perspective of an outsider, so that the researcher is not actively involved. Since these two complement each other, they were selected as appropriate methods to explore the given phenomenon about tailored employer branding, its activities and the linkage to Weick’s concept of sensemaking. In addition, company documents, such as social media channels and the firm’s website were reviewed and analyzed as a secondary source.

This combination of different methods is called *triangulation* (Bryman & Bell, 2015), that can also function within research strategies, such as a mixture of quantitative and qualitative research methods (Saunders, et al., 2009). When it comes to the given study, the researchers reviewed their observations’ findings with the interview questions to check whether they have misunderstood or misinterpreted what they saw during the observations (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Thus, the interviews are the main source of this research by controlling the impressions’ accuracy won during the observations which in turn underline further insights and perspectives.

3.4.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

In general, interviewing as a method of data collection help “to attend to lived experience and pursue questions from extant theory” (Galletta, 2013, p. 72). This study is of qualitative and exploratory nature, so that the researchers identified semi-structured interviews as one of the most suitable instruments for collecting empirical data to answer the research question. An interview is often described as the best tool to collect rich data, due to the fact that much information can be gathered and deeper insights can be gained (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2015). Therefore, these interviews are also often called *in-depth interviews*, since they give both the interviewer and the respondent the freedom to investigate further aspects (Saunders, et al., 2009; Yin, 2009). It helps on the one hand to create a fluent and natural conversation and on the other hand to respond spontaneously and flexibly to unexpected situations (Styhre, 2013; Easterby-Smith, et al., 2015). Thus, semi-structured interviews specify the field itself, but the reaction of the interviewees remains open (Prasad, 2005; Styhre, 2013). Here, it was aimed at exploring related topics and asking for examples so that insights can be obtained that were not targeted by any of the researchers' questions (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2015). Furthermore, it could be made sure that all interviewees could express their thoughts in their own words, which was another advantage, as the choice of words was an essential element in the evaluation and interpretation of this study's empirical data.

Moreover, Silverman (2016) underlines the importance of searching for suitable candidates when conducting rich interviews. The researchers selected the interview partners by identifying the departments that form the most relevant interface to the external representation of the employer brand. Thus, it was focused on people who worked in HR and employer branding departments such as marketing and communication. Additionally, alumni from Lund University School of Economics and Management (LUSEM) were asked, who started their careers in the company of the case study to share impressions from the applicant's perspective. In the end, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted (see Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of Interviewees

Name of Interviewee*	Position	Type of Communication	Further Information
Andreas	HR Coordinator and Recruiter	Personal Interview	Was hired in August 2017
Kristin	Manager	Personal Interview	
Ole	HR Coordinator and Recruiter	Personal Interview	Left the case company in the meanwhile

Elisa	Audit Associate	Personal Interview	LUSEM Alumnus, Student Ambassadors
Rosa	Audit Associate	Personal Interview	LUSEM Alumnus, Student Ambassadors
Martin	Talent Manager Advisory	Skype Interview	
Knut	Senior Audit Associate	Skype Interview	LUSEM Alumnus
Julian	Senior Audit Associate	Skype Interview	LUSEM Alumnus
Ludwig	Senior Audit Associate, HR Performance Manager	Skype Interview	LUSEM Alumnus
Paul	Audit Associate	Skype Interview	LUSEM Alumnus, Student Ambassadors

* fictitious names

Besides the fact of flexibility, conducting semi-structured interviews enable the researchers to take up concrete statements from the interviews and to deepen these (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2015). Ahead of the interviews, all interviewees were given an overview of the study's objective to familiarize themselves with the purpose of the research. Nevertheless, the researchers ensured that the information remained on a superficial level in order not to guide or even influence the interviewees in a particular direction (Malhotra, 2015).

According to the chosen approach, the study's interview guideline included open questions with the aim of getting descriptive answers. The interview was structured in such a way that it started with a few non-sensitive, 'warm-up' questions, for example general questions about the company's values. Hereby, the researchers wanted to make sure that the interviewees felt comfortable. In the course of the interview, the questions became more concrete and complex, and the focus was more and more set on the target audience of university graduates. In this context, the researchers especially concentrated on the questions' linkage to find answers on the formulated research question.

The content and structure of the questionnaire were discussed with the supervisor in advance in order to make changes. In doing so, attention was paid to a meaningful process, to the comprehensibility of the guiding questions and their informative value. The interview guideline can be reviewed in the appendix. All interviews were conducted either in person or via Skype, depending on the interviewee's place and time. To avoid distortion and falsification of statements, all conversations were tape-recorded and field notes were taken. This way, a rich data basis for the analysis could be guaranteed as every interview was transcribed, too. In order to ensure confidential treatment of the material, names were changed (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). By guaranteeing anonymity, the researchers strived to ensure validity as it is assumed that this behavior is increasing the likelihood of receiving open and honest answers (Kvale, 1996).

3.4.2 Non-Participant Observations

After the semi-structured interviews had been conducted and first data was analyzed, observations were carried out. An observation "refers to the use of … [the] visual sense to record and make sense of information." (Angrosino, 2016, p. n.d.) and therefore, gives a touch of reality. Malhotra (2015) added that it aims at acquiring behavioral patterns of persons, processes or events systematically over a certain time period in order to obtain information about one phenomenon. Here, observations also enabled the researchers to collect and trace data that were not mentioned in the interviews, as they might not be relevant to interviewees, or the candidates might not know or were not able to express them (Malhotra, 2015).

In this case study, the first contact between graduates and company representatives, which were partly also interviewed, during a career fair was monitored. Here, it was focused on interaction and the existence of a certain communication strategy addressing the mentioned target audience. In order to get an impression of the company's external presence as well as the conversations, the researchers briefly talked to some advised students afterwards. In advance, the company was asked for permission for doing observations. However, the researchers did not tell when these would take place to prevent that actual situations could be consciously affected in order to put the company in a different light. In this way, the observations could be executed as realistic as possible and the routine work of the observed persons were not interrupted, which could otherwise falsify the interpretative study (Flick, 2009).

Generally, observations can have different characteristics and occur in various settings. In this study, *non-participant observations* were applied where "[t]he observer … tries not to disturb the persons in the field by striving to make himself as invisible as possible." (Flick, 2009, p. 224). Thereby, it was possible to observe the person's behavior without interrupting and thus influencing the work. The researchers just monitored the ongoing actions, but did not actively participate in the environment observed (Bryman & Bell, 2015). According to Bryman and Bell (2015), this type of doing observations can be seen as simple as the observers have no impact on the scenario itself. In this way, precise impressions were gained that enriched the data won through the conducted semi-structured interviews.

Furthermore, the applied type of observations could also be described as *naturalistic*, which goes hand in hand with the non-participant character and is to a certain extent unobtrusive and unstructured (Angrosino, 2016). It generally offers a high degree of flexibility, as the semi-structured interviews did, too, since this method provides the advantage that various occurrences can be explored in diverse environments (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2015). By doing so, the researchers were able to show the behavior of the study's object instead of just reporting desired actions (Easterby-Smith, et al., 2015). This reduced the potential distortion of reporting that could arise in interviews or even completely eliminated it. For this reason and to triangulate the acquired responses, the naturalistic observations were considered as a valuable complement to answer the defined research question.

To document the observations, a semi-structured approach was chosen (Morra-Imas, et al., 2009), because "the evaluator [had] a general idea of what to observe but no specific plan" (Morra-Imas, et al., 2009, p. 310). Since any observation cannot be repeated as every situation and behavior is always unique, it was superficially defined in advance that it should be focused on words spoken, but also on facial expressions and interactions. Both researchers made separate notes based on a pre-formulated schedule sheet (see appendix) of what they were observing. If they noticed any specifics during a conversation between the company representative and a student, one of the researchers questioned afterwards the person who talked to the representative. The researchers stood as close as possible, as far as necessary so that they were able to observe verbal and non-verbal communication of the company representatives. However, care was taken to ensure that there was a certain distance to the person being observed so as not to harass them and thus distort the situation.

After all interviews and observations had been conducted, the interviews were transcribed and coded to filter the empirical data.

3.5 Data Analysis

When it comes to qualitative research data, their content mostly comprises of non-structured text material, which can lead to difficulties while analyzing (Bryman & Bell, 2015). To ensure a high data validity, all interviews were transcribed based on the recordings that enriched the field notes. Afterwards, the researchers started with the coding process, "whereby, the data [were] broken down into component parts which [were] then given labels" (Bryman & Bell, 2015, p. 13), interrelating the data gained to identified conceptualization. Using these coded texts, the analysis can be simplified in general since it is possible to search for repetitions in every interview. In turn, it can help to compare and make sense out of the empirical data and to give them meaning. All interview sequences, which were of particular interest for this study due to their content or those that gave the impression of being theoretical relevance, were filtered and categorized. If certain statements were repeated more frequently, a category was formed as there is a high likelihood that concepts often found in the transcripts are particularly useful (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In addition, quotes are used to present the way the interpretations are carried out. The interview data serve as the basis for making conclusions. Moreover, the findings are compared with those gained from the observations and the documents analyzed.

All information obtained from the non-participant observations were investigated according to the approach of the hermeneutic circle (Prasad, 2005). Here, the findings were put into context to get a holistic picture. Afterwards, observed patterns which may fit to one or more formulated categories were filtered, linked to the interview findings and brought into a relation with the phenomenon. This enables a comprehensive understanding to make sense out of all data collected. By doing so, relevant theory was used in order to harmonize the results from the various methods carried out along the data collection process and to give meaningful interpretations. Based on the formulated categories, the company's documents were also studied to look for further information which may underline the findings. As said before, the focus was set on the Swedish website and social media platforms.

4 Empirical Findings

In this chapter, the empirical findings derived from the previously introduced mixed-method approach are presented and analyzed. For this purpose, all semi-structured interviews were transcribed and coded and and the non-participant observations were reviewed. Additionally, company documents, such as the company's website, published reports and different social media channels were studied, as mentioned in chapter 3. From these primary and secondary sources arouse the most relevant sequences which are quoted and brought into context in this section.

4.1 Presenting the Key Themes

Already during the transcribing process of the semi-structured interviews, individual recurring themes emerged. Therefore, three overarching themes were identified, aiming at addressing the research question with these findings at the very end of this study. These motifs were the following:

4.1.1 Presenting the brand outside of the graduate community
4.1.2 Presenting the brand within the graduate community
4.1.3 Specific employer branding activities for graduates

All data gained were analyzed and evaluated on the basis of these mentioned categories, which form the storyline of this thesis. Here, the researchers paid attention on giving a clear guideline which information was collected from which source. As a reminder, this research is based on ten semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations of the case company during a career fair for students, the company's website and a study of several corporate documents.

4.1.1 Presenting the Brand Outside of the Graduate Community

The statements of this section are based on the interviews with employees, but also on the company's Swedish website as well as further documents, such as the transparency report. The observations could therefore not be taken into consideration since they only targeted the group of graduates. In the following, it is focused on how the company is presenting itself outside of the graduate community to be outstanding from the competitors, when it comes to attracting customers and clients.

In general, the studied reports addressed all communities which shared the interest to find out more about the company and its actions, internally and externally. Therefore, both the text material as well as the images presented provided a very formal, professional and serious picture of the company. As shown at the company's website (2018a), all male employees wear suits and ties, and the women trouser suits and blouses, which gave a quite common picture of the industry of consultancy. This impression was also supported by two interviewees. For example, Elisa as an Audit Associate mentioned that

> *"it [the company, its surrounding and work] is really quite strict, formal and professional. The company itself as well as its employees are aware of this seriousness in this consultancy business. ... We work in respect of our clients and try to do the best out of every case and situation."*.

This given statement is identical in content to what Julian stated:

> *"it is always very professional, the communication with customers and clients, all meetings and personal contacts. It has to be taken very serious, and everybody knows that and is aware of it, all the rules, the clients' expectations and so on."*.

In order to underline the identified professionalism of the company within a formal and serious environment, on the company's website it was mentioned that it aimed to *"uphold the highest professional standards in our work, providing sound good-quality advice to our clients"* (Case Company, 2018a, p. n.d.). This is nurtured with the statement from the case company's report that *"[o]ne of the key drivers ... is ensuring the assignment of professionals with the skills and experience appropriate to the client and to deliver ... high quality"* (Case Company, 2018b, p. n.d.). Both statements therefore pictured that next to a professional presence and way of working, delivering high quality services was a further striving of the company, which should be shown to the world outside of the graduate community. In addition, these findings illustrated that the case company was not only very concerned that it was perceived professionally by customers and clients at any time, but also that everybody within the company was aware of the business' seriousness. This formal image was again pictured on the company's Swedish website where one of its ambitions – *"to help clients by offering professional support"* (Case Company, 2018a, p. n.d.) – was underlined several times. However, Andreas gave an example during the interview how professionality should not look like in his opinion and expressly rejected the thought that

> *"[the company] will not … put a ping-pong table in our area because … we think it is fun and cool …, we are not that type of company."*

Moreover, during the interviews, Paul and Rosa referred to the case company's professionalism in terms of using mostly English as the language to communicate with international clients. Paul and Rosa saw this as an open gesture since it was preventing language barriers:

> *"English is most for reports and documentation and talking to the clients … they understand us, we understand them, that mirrors a professional and open-minded image."* (Paul), while Rosa added that
>
> *"[the company's] network is all around, global, so we have to be open-minded … when we communicate professionally with other[s] … then we have to speak in English"*.

These statements emphasized the researchers' findings, since nearly all published company reports were written in English and thus giving each person all over the world access to it and therefore the opportunity to understand its content.

All in all, the findings shared the impression that the company presented itself very formally and professionally outside the graduate community and was also aware of its duty to meet the clients' expectations, since it aimed that *"we [the company] do our utmost to meet the clients' needs and exceed their expectations"* (Case Company, 2018b, p. 4). According to the findings, the researchers saw that the focus is primarily set on attracting and satisfying clients in order to show that the company is taking its tasks and position within the industry serious.

4.1.2 Presenting the Brand Within the Graduate Community

In general, next to the above-mentioned ambition of the company to serve clients, one further was to "*work strategically to build relationships with future employees [such as] students."* (Case Company, 2018a), since *"we want to be the number one … for students applying for jobs at all."*, added Paul who is working as an Audit Associate.

By zooming into the graduate community and concentrating on the firm's external appearance during the career fair in form of the company representatives' dress code, it became clear that the formal presence with suit and tie also applied regarding the attraction of university graduates. However, Ole's statement seemed to be contradicting in the context of the target audience since he pointed out that

> *"… we are trying to show them [graduates] a little bit of a more relaxed firm. … I think it [employer branding event] is a really good way to connect on a more relaxed and casual way with your applicants, your candidates. … we are trying … to give the student a sense of who we are more in like soft values".*

This contradiction between the formal dress code and presenting 'a more relaxed firm' was also underlined by Rosa who added that *"the … most … we can do there is to show them [students] that we are more fun people."*. Additionally, the case company published on its Swedish career website (Case Company, 2018a) that *"employees also organize activities with a greater focus on social exchange and sport. We hope that the various activities will give students a clear and authentic picture of us as an employer."* (p. n.d.), where 'sport activities' could be associated with having fun in this context. So, all these findings showed that – despite the more formal and professional picture the company attempts to convey to corporate clients – their contact with students followed, at least to a certain extent, a different rationale. Although the company representatives wear very formal clothes, as mentioned earlier, which was observed by the research team during the career fair, the employees tried to approach students on a more laid-back note. This relaxed attitude was also emphasized by Elisa, who mentioned that *"when we [employees] talk internally, it is pretty laid back."*.

Casual Friday

Within the atmosphere characterized by a laid-back note when it comes to attracting graduates through employer branding activities, Ole mentioned that

> *"[a]t [our company] it is like casual Friday … I think that we try to picture that part of us."*.

'Casual Friday', as the term already self-explanatory expresses, stands for wearing casual clothing on Fridays. In this industry, this implies that the suit and tie can be stored in the cupboard and everyday clothing can be worn. Here, in the context of attracting university graduates as well as referring to the interviewee Ole, it means that the company wants to show itself casual and natural among the target group, what can be translated and interpreted as relaxed, informal and close to reality, which in turn fits to the above-given statements of presenting a realistic and authentic picture to the outside world.

Student Ambassadors

Since the first impression usually stands and falls with those who present the company and thus forms a certain first image in the head of the graduates, it is difficult to change once it is there. During the observations, the research team realized that all company representatives present at the career fair were quite young and could therefore also be freshly graduated. Most of the twelve employees were even LUSEM alumni, which could also be traced back to an intention of the case company. Former students of this university were supposed to attract graduates, which is a very smart strategy, as the alumni know the university and its requirements on the one hand, and on the other hand it seemed as if the company wanted to present itself as the best employer for students of this particular university. Barriers could be removed because there was a certain proximity between the company representatives and the target audience of graduates when it comes to the career entry or even age, which was also confirmed by the interviewee Ole, who worked as a HR coordinator and recruiter:

> *"on these work fairs, we most of the time send the quite young … co-workers because … it would be another thing if senior managers would be there, it would feel like that they are a bigger step to go to them."*.

In this way, graduates were given a certain incentive to apply for a job so that they potentially become a part of the company in future, too. So, in order to prevent students from having a false perception of what makes the company stand out, or in the worst-case scenario to view it as a stiff, rusty or stale employer, the case company has employees that are at the same time also ‘student ambassadors’. Their task is to represent the company to students especially at career fairs and link both the target group with the case company by being the direct contact persons in all respects. The findings from the interviews pictured the necessity of having such student representatives to attract the target audience, which has high demands when it comes to the choice of a desirable employer. Here, it was also demonstrated that the employees were aware of their role as student ambassadors and their impact on the external perception of the company itself. Paul pointed out that

> *“[w]e have the student ambassadors … What we have to do as a student ambassador is to plan different fairs. … And we also have the different projects … And, there are other fairs where we just represent ourselves … where students can come to us to ask questions to different jobs. It is very important to have such student ambassadors to attract and come closer to the students.”.*

Andreas emphasized how important it is to have such ambassadors because otherwise

> *“we will lose a lot [students] … if we … will not have any student representatives”.*

Paul expressed that he appreciated his role as a student ambassador

> *“because I still like it to have … so many … good interactions with students … where I really feel like, I can inspire them and give them … tips on how they should apply for. … And also it was not a very long time ago when I was a student myself (laughs), so I know it is a jungle when you apply for jobs.”* (Paul).

The research team also got this impression during the career fair observations which Paul described above. The company representatives were really into their jobs as student ambassadors since their enthusiasm became noticeable when talking to students. There was a lot of laughter and the whole conversation situation seemed to be very relaxed. When referring back to Paul, who is working as a student ambassador in addition to his daily job as an Audit Associate, it seemed like he was able to put himself in the graduate’s position, because he left university a short time ago, which reflects the above given findings regarding age issues noted during the observations. This factor could therefore also be part of the employer branding strategy when attracting university graduates. In this way, the students and therefore the company's potential future employees would get the chance to talk to someone who could understand their situation within a realistic environment. Paul's comment underlined this finding while mentioning that

> *"I got a lot of personal messages [via LinkedIn] from students, that they are happy to meet us and wondering if I am having tips for jobs."*.

Not only Paul and further employees who presented the company at the fair were giving tips on applications or the process itself. Also, on the case company's website it was stated that *"certain cooperation in different contexts ... enables us [the company] to contribute knowledge and advice for the younger."* (Case Company, 2018a), so that it appeared to be one of the company's ambitions to give advices to students, or the younger generation in general. Additionally, in regards to the career page of the Swedish case company, application as well as interview tips for graduates were provided, which in turn made the entire recruitment process more transparent, feasible as well as personal in a way: *"Are you going for an interview with us? There come several tips!"*.

Student Atmosphere

After presenting the themes of 'Casual Friday' and 'Student Ambassadors', it seemed like it ended up in – according to Paul – an existing "*student atmosphere"*.
'Student atmosphere' – a term that can also be associated with a relaxed attitude and fun in a casual setting. During the interviews, also Rosa and Knut in particular repeated the word *fun* in different contexts:

> *"when I first met them [the company] ... It was so much fun"* (Rosa).

She continued by saying that

> *"working with [Student Unions] ... is the most fun thing"* (Rosa), and that

> *"it is one of the most fun part of my job being a student representative"* (Rosa).

Furthermore, Knut gave an example:

> *"I was talking to one student ... and she was like, I want to work at a firm ... where I can have a lot of fun ... I said, then come to us"*.

This impression was also gained during the observations executed by the study's research team. As mentioned several times before, the company representatives were all in a good mood and laughed a lot at the career stand, so that the researchers as an external party had the impression that a very positive working atmosphere existed.

Friends or even Family

Referring back to the beginning of this section, where Rosa talked about *"fun people"* in the context of representing the company to graduates, she continued by saying that *"they [students] should want to work with us as colleagues, or friends"*. Even if it is often said that professional and private life should be separated, this does not seem to apply in this case. Knut even experienced the contact with the graduates as a student ambassadors as *"I speak with a lot of students, and when I speak I feel like that I am speaking with my friends."*. So, the findings showed that by presenting the company to graduates in an informal way, the company representatives tried to deliver the image to the outside world that working for this particular company is like meeting friends or even making new while working. Here, the company also underlined on its Swedish career website that *"the company ... encourages social exchange between company representatives and students through sports activities in order to get to know each other better"* (Case Company, 2018a), meaning that an informal 'get-together' is even intended, which could complement the theme of 'student atmosphere'. In this context, Rosa and Paul stated that

> *"you can sit with a partner and feel like you are sitting to almost a friend"* (Rosa),
>
> *"you can get your friends."* (Paul), and
>
> *"you get very close to your colleagues and ... you get a lot of friends here"* (Paul).

In addition, the research team identified another employee who started his career at the case company directly after university. To offer students an overview about the career possibilities at this chosen company, he gave a written interview, which was available on the company's website (2018a). Here, at the very beginning of the interview, he said that *"I have met some of my best friends at [the company]."* (Alexander), which underlined the findings gained from the interviews as well as the observations. During the observations, again, the atmosphere at the case company stand was at any time very personal and it seemed as if all company representatives were getting along well, joking and laughing a lot – like being around with friends. Some of them approached students directly to start a relaxed conversation. The researchers' feeling of a casual, laid-back atmosphere was also reinforced by two students who talked to a company representative first during the career fair and were then briefly interviewed by the observing research team:

> *"It was so much fun to talk to them, they are very cool and friendly and shared their experiences with me, I felt welcome. But I had the general feeling that they are all best friends (laughs), but still professional. They took the time to answer all my questions even if there were other students behind me waiting for a talk which made me feel valued."*, he told the research team.
>
> *"I like them. He [the company representative] was really interested in my hobbies, listened carefully to all my questions, gave me his opinion and advices on different things or career plans and he did not ask for grades. That was fun.",* said another advised student.

Again, all these observations gave the impression that all twelve company representatives were on a friendly and relaxed footing with each other and apparently passed on that feeling to the graduates, too, that one student even had the feeling that the company representatives are 'best friends'. Both students underlined during the short interview with the research team that they felt appreciated, while all their questions were answered. This could be traced back to the fact that the researchers noticed that the conversations lasted on average around 8 minutes, which exceeded the duration of interaction between students and representatives from other companies, where the observers recognized a higher fluctuation. So, the company representatives spent a lot of time on the individual students, which could be proven by the advised student's statement above.

While interviewing Rosa, she was not just referring to the fact of *making friends*. She even went one step further by describing her colleagues and their collaborations within the teams as

> *"family-like when you are on a team, so you are usually saying the X family … I embrace that you can speak about everything and that you can be open."*

So, this statement stands for itself and thus clearly expressed that the atmosphere within the company and among its employees is relaxed and welcoming, which also underlines the abovementioned findings gained from the observations.

Be Real and Down To Earth in Communication

When taking communication into account as a further theme when it comes to the presentation of the company within the graduate community, the research team observed that the company representatives seemed to speak out honestly what they thought as they gave the students personal recommendations whether their expectations could be met when working for the case company, or not. Moreover, the findings showed that also the interviewees perceived the communication at any time as *"open and honest"*, both within the company and towards the interested graduates, too. Here, Elisa emphasized this impression by adding that

> *"conversations are on a more personal level … with students … and also sometimes in English …, more on eye level [since the company] is not trying to communicate to be someone they are not. We want to present us authentic."*.

In this context, Paul as a student ambassador explained how he handled talks with the target group, which again pictured the attitude of naturally communicating with graduates on the same level to attract them:

> *"[At career fairs] I tried to be … like the person I met [when he was looking for a job] to be real because I think it was the right way to … talk to the students and to be very down to earth. I think it is really good to have a … clear communication, maybe also in English."*.

Furthermore, and according to Elisa and Paul, conversations with graduates were partly held *"in English to reach everyone. Everyone should feel welcome."*. This statement could be nurtured with the findings gained from the career fair observations. Due to the fact that the students at the targeted university came from all over the world, most of them did not speak Swedish. In order to avoid such a potential language barrier which could have a deterrent effect, the company representatives communicated in English in most cases – except graduates from Sweden.

In addition to the findings gained from Elisa's interview where she stated that the conversations with students are on a personal level, Paul was convinced that *"it works to talk to them [students] on the same level."*. This was also emphasized by Ole who made it clear that

> *"[w]e really want to feel them like people on the same level and we speak the same language"* (Ole).

Here, using a

> *"more simple language ... [since] complicated titles and names of departments does not really attract"* seemed to be even intended *"instead of just saying that we [the company] are working with transaction services, ... describing how these transactions can look like, and what kind of clients you can work with, just make it more accessible for the students to understand."* (Ole).

In other words, these findings showed that the employees want to talk to the students exactly as they do to each other in order to give an authentic picture of everyday working life and the relationship between the staff, to show that *"they [the company] are real"* (Elisa). This could also be detected during the observations as the research team could not see a different behavior of the company representatives between talking to colleagues and students. Therefore, it made the impression of showing that they really are the way they present themselves, to be down to earth. However, if this would not be the case and the company would present a distorted image to the student community, Andreas identified a risk

> *"because sometimes people might have other ideas when they come here and then we cannot meet them and then we get an even higher turnover rate than we have today."*.

All in all, the findings given in this section could be summarized in such a way that the company was represented by student ambassadors in a casual, informal and relaxed way, even if the presence in suit and tie mirrored at the first sight another picture. To communicate who the company really is at eye level with graduates in the matter of their career entry and further questions regarding jobs or the case company itself, making employees in the role of student ambassadors should simplify the initial contact and loosen up each conversation situation. The findings highlighted this personal atmosphere again and again. Several times, fun at work and the feeling of making friends was mentioned, which apparently did not only exist among colleagues, but should also arise when it comes to attracting graduates.

4.1.3 Specific Employer Branding Activities for Graduates

After outlining how the brand and therefore the company is presenting itself outside of and within graduate communities, this section should focus on which employer branding activities are used to attract this specific target audience of university graduates. Here, it is differentiated between university cooperation, offline activities and social media activities.

In this context, in an already mentioned post from the company's local website, it was underlined that

> *"we [the company] work strategically to build relationships with future employees – students as well as the gainfully employed."* (Case Company, 2018a).

This statement could also be supplemented with the interviewee's answer where Knut pointed out that different channels could be used to come and stay in contact with graduates, which could be seen as a vital component of the company's employer branding work:

> *"[it is] relevant to build relationships with students at all. It can be done through social media, it can be done through events, but I think in the end it is the relationship that is the most important.".*

In the upcoming paragraphs, the single ways how these specific employer branding activities for the mentioned target group could look like as well as its usefulness when it comes to attracting graduates, is highlighted based on the study's findings.

University Cooperation

Firstly, during the interviewees, the respondents talked a lot about the close cooperation with selected Swedish universities and diverse points of contact, where graduates have the possibility to talk to company representatives, and especially to student ambassadors, face-to-face. On the company's website, the often-aforementioned idea of building relationships was also repeated in this context, while stating that

> *"[the company] is traditionally at the forefront of student relations at universities and colleges in Sweden. Through our student activities we want to impart knowledge to students in areas that are not covered by universities and thus prepare them for working life. The aim of our cooperation with universities as well as different student*

> *organizations is to develop relationships with competent students at an early stage in order to work for [the company] later on and to show who we really are and that we are unique."* (Case Company, 2018a).

When talking about the cooperation itself, Rosa specified that *"we focus less on all schools in Sweden, but target a few schools".* Rosa justified that by saying that the company aimed at concentrating on *"very highly ranked universit[ies] globally with a lot of good students".* These considered universities were also presented on the company's career website, where a short text about the respective partner university and its cooperation was published (Case Company, 2018a). Moreover, an event calendar with all upcoming events was provided as well as the contact details of the student ambassadors, which made it easier for students to get in touch with them. This showed that the case company was consciously selecting with which universities they wish to cooperate to attract *"candidates that ... are later top-performers"* (Kerstin). All these statements and observations indicated that the case company attached great importance to the high quality of young professionals by making use of highly respected universities. Julian clearly evaluated the cooperation with universities as *"the most effective ways to attract new employees",* which was approved by Kerstin since she stated that *"you need personal meeting, so a relation to the schools".*

The findings pictured that such cooperation with targeted universities could be valuable to the company since it could contain a large number of highly-qualified potential employees. Furthermore, the case company's employees seemed to recognize that value in a great extent and therefore clearly highlighted the necessity of having a cooperation when it comes to attracting graduates.

Offline Employer Branding Activities

Secondly, activities such as career fairs, student projects, case competitions and having fika [Swedish tradition which means 'having a coffee'] were mentioned by the interviewees and then summarized by the research team as offline employer branding activities. In the context of acknowledging the importance of increasing the company's visibility among the target group and spreading the awareness about the company during these employer branding activities, it was highlighted that

> *"it is quite good to show early that we exist"* (Rosa).

For this purpose, the case company used visual material at their stand by having a branded counter, banners, informational material, brochures and displays with its logo. A tablet computer was provided, which made it possible to explore the company's career website, for example to look at current job postings. In addition, a screen was integrated into the company's fair stand where the students were able to play a memory game. Many stopped at the stand and waited to play, even if no prize was handed out for the best score. While doing the observations, the research team had noticed several times that a few out of twelve present company representatives encouraged the gamer and praised them well. It was observed that they even challenged each other, which automatically created an informal atmosphere. Since the name had to be entered on the screen at the end of the game, the company representatives often addressed the graduates by name affecting that an interaction between both parties became personal, natural and smooth. To also give the students the possibility to call them by name, too, all company representatives wore name tags. According to Rosa and as previously mentioned, these actions were intended since

> *"we [the company] actually hire people ... at a more natural level, with games, projects".*

Besides the playful activity, the company representatives handed out *semlor* [a traditional Swedish pastry, which is only served at a certain time of the year] at their career stand, which made it even more attractive to stay. This again highlighted the idea of having a relaxed exchange – talking to an employee about his/ her experiences and the graduates' future career plans while having fika in an informal environment. According to the following statement, the company was aware of its effects as they wished that

> *"they [students] feel invited and ... tell them what, share your experiences or maybe give them Swedish fika. ... I think it is important to not stand behind your monitor and to have a clear and open body language. ... they hopefully get a positive vibe from us."* (Paul).

The observations made during the fair revealed the personal side of the interactions even more by the fact that the company representatives, as previously mentioned, shared their own experiences with potential future employees.

Social Media Employer Branding Activities

Thirdly, the social media presence was introduced which belongs to the online employer branding activities of the case company in regards to attracting the study's target group of university graduates. In general, the company is primarily present on the social media channels Facebook, Instagram and Twitter.

As previously stated, Paul mentioned that he

> *"got a lot of personal messages from students [via LinkedIn], that they are happy to meet us and wondering if I am having tips for jobs."*.

The researchers observed a certain pattern that could be associated with this statement. This behavior of getting messages from students could be caused by the fact that some company representatives offering networking via social media, primarily LinkedIn, directly to students during the conversation. Next to LinkedIn, Paul specified the company's social media activities:

> *"we [the company] work a lot with Instagram and Facebook."*.

This way of communicating with graduates could be seen as very informal, which belongs to an important social media branch of the company's online employer branding activities. While following the company's Instagram Stories [set photos and videos which disappear automatically after 24 hours] (Case Company, 2018c), the research team identified that its content was quite informal, too. Here, Ole underlined that

> *"you [the company] can really choose yourself how and where you want to profile yourself and [graduates] can have a sense of come closer to the … workers, follow them during the day [on Instagram], see like it is behind the walls, and how it is to be in the lunch room, and more like … informal things, that you want to know of the culture, the organization. So, they are able to check if they fit. Many students use that service."*,

The often-aforementioned characteristic of informality when it comes to target-group-specific employer branding again appeared in this context by giving graduates the possibility to look behind the curtains of this case company. Rosa also noted that the company uses social media to draw attention to events or upcoming student projects *"like for [the project] we do these Facebook events"*. Here, the research team sees the advantage that this information could reach many more graduates because *"lots of students are on [Facebook]."* (Rosa). However, Paul clarified that *"we [the company] are not only seen on social media and that is good as it is"* since *"the word of mouth is very important and should not be underestimated"*.

In the end, Paul evaluated and compared the company's different employer branding activities and stated that

> *"social media ... is the first contact with the students, ... but I would also say that the personal meetings [are important], because I still like it to have ... so many ... good interactions with students ... where I really feel like, I can inspire them and give them ... tips on how they should apply for"*.

Overall, Andreas also considered that

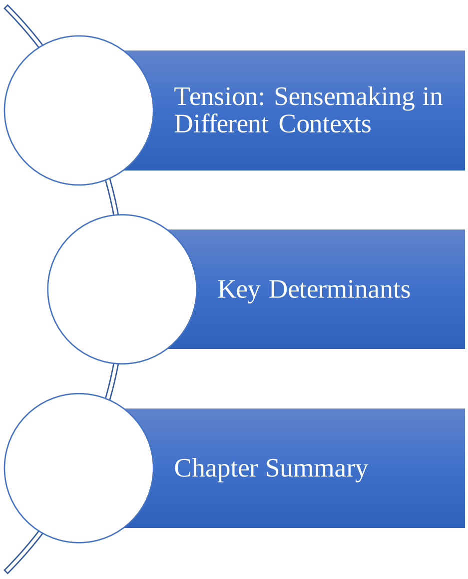
> *"it is very important to compliment that [offline and online employer branding activities]"*.

So, these findings showed that next to the company's social media activities, the interviewees were convinced that the 'old', well-proven activities, such as career fairs or student projects were still relevant when it comes to building relationships with students and attracting graduates for starting their career at the case company.

In the following chapter, all findings gained from the ten semi-structured interviews, the non-participant observations as well as several company documents, will be discussed with regard to targeted employer branding activities aiming at attracting university graduate in the context of Weick's theory of sensemaking.

5 Discussion

In this chapter emphasis is given to discuss and interpret the key findings from the empirical section brought forward previously. For this purpose, the main finding is presented for both audiences, clients as well as university graduates, and linked to the concept of sensemaking by Weick. Since this study's focus is set on graduates as the target group, key determinants are introduced which should help to get an idea of how the company attract them through employer branding activities, connected to relevant literature.



Throughout the process of data analysis, the researchers noticed that there is a certain tension existing when addressing corporate clients and addressing university graduates as potential future employees through branding activities. In this section, this tension is presented and discussed in-depth. This is done by first showing briefly the interpretations of the research team on data regarding employer branding towards clients and afterwards towards the target audience of university graduates, followed by a comparison of the two images incorporating Weick's concept of sensemaking.

The study's aim was to explore how employees make sense of employer branding activities tailored for university graduates. To gain primary data, ten employees of the chosen case company – located in the consultancy industry – were interviewed and observations during a career fair were made. In addition, documents of the company were studied as a secondary source. The findings obtained from these sources showed clear correlations to the literature studied at the beginning and the theoretical framework presented in chapter 2, so that the researchers identified three key parameters that should help to answer the research question in the end. *Authenticity, informality* and *building relationships* were found in various aspects, interview statements and observations related to the case company's target-group specific employer branding activities for university graduates. The findings and their meaning in connection with employer branding and Weick's sensemaking approach are discussed later on.

5.1 Tension: Sensemaking in Different Contexts

The findings pointed to a difference in conveying messages around the corporate brand to the mentioned audiences of corporate clients and prospective employees, in this case university graduates. The research team observed a certain tension in the company's employer branding activities: on the one hand, the company representatives tried to create a formal and strict image for the client community, while on the other hand, employer branding towards graduates showed a contrasting image, namely that of an informal communication and a relaxed working atmosphere. Both images constructed by the company, reveal the awareness to adjust their strategy in order to adapt to the demand and expectations of these mentioned target groups.

This distinction between employer branding strategies is evaluated by the research team as a tension that persists in the field of branding, existing among the two audiences, which both fall in the range of external branding (Foster, et al., 2010). Both strategies are worth significant considerations, since the tension at hand can be considered as a result of sensemaking activities the company stands behind. In this case, sensemaking is realized in two forms, as discussed below. To remember, Weick's concept of sensemaking in its nature is an organizational practice to construct a social reality by current employees to prospective ones, which is highly relevant in the case of the company presented to attract university graduates through tailored employer branding activities.

5.1.1 Branding Towards Clients

In respect of branding towards clients, it was pointed out by the interviewees that the working environment is rather strict, and so is the language used at the workplace. A more informal language is only used on unofficial occasions, said one interviewee. In general, the company presents itself in a very professional and formal setting when executing employer branding activities beyond the graduate community. The research team understands the image primarily as a way to attract clients to show the high quality of services they can get from the company and thus stand out from the competitors.

In the context of the client audience, sensemaking is presented in a form that demonstrates the formal, professional and goal-oriented characteristics of the company, which are regarded as attractive instead of a relaxed, 'fun' sphere (interview) as found in the graduate community.

5.1.2 Employer Branding Towards Graduates

Referring to employer branding activities towards the identified target group of graduates, it seemed that the company realized the requirements and expectations the young generation has towards future employers – challenging tasks, career advancements and a work-life balance. Thus, it acts accordingly to fit such demands in the context of the great inquiry for highly qualified employees, which was introduced before by Silzer and Dowell (2009) who talk about talent scarcity and Michaels et al. (2001) regarding *War For Talents*.

When facing the graduate community regarding tailored employer branding activities, the company uses current employees, so former graduates, that had recently gone through the process of recruitment. This confirms the idea of 'brand ambassadors' proposed by Grams (2011). From literature on employer branding, the research team considers this as an illustration of the assumption that the satisfied employees often step into this role. This should contribute to encouraging the target group to develop interest in working for the company, aiming at extending "the internal core of the brand" (Grams, 2011, p. 182). Based on the empirical data obtained it was rather clear that the selection of company representatives was not random. The fact that all at the observed career fair present representatives were quite young, is justified by the reason that they are more similar to the target group, as many of them graduated not so long ago. By being 'similar' to the target group it also becomes much easier for the company to deliver the image that would fit the graduate community given more understanding of their interest and expectations. In this way, more junior employees tend to become closer to the young audience and are able to share more valuable experiences which may guide the graduates in setting the direction of their own career path. Moreover, many company representatives are alumni of the same university which they work closely with, which also seems to point the way of the company's intentions in terms of employer branding and its related activities. Here, the representatives are making sense and constructing meaning to prospective employees. So, the research team judges such a strategy as highly efficient, which was also noted by the interviewees, and can be evaluated as a rather unique way of conducting employer branding activities towards university graduates.

In addition, the researchers found out that this strategy of having student ambassadors as contact persons for the graduates leads to the presentation of the company's image, which is in this case relaxed and informal, including the language used and the atmosphere created during employer branding activities. The research team recognized due to the conducted interviews that the company is aware of the importance to adapt to the expectations of the target group in order to be perceived as an attractive employer and to be authentic at all time. This is highly relevant in the context of the employer value proposition (EVP) introduced by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) since EVP represents a complex of offerings made by the company to attract employees. Such offerings are those associated with advantages that makes the company to be more attractive to work at, including organization’s culture, favorable working environment, among others (Mosley & Schmidt, 2017). So, it can be clearly seen that the case company is fulfilling this proposition in the form of providing desirable working conditions and colleagues as the selling point within employer branding activities, which can in turn be connected to the concept of a ‘psychological contract’ (Moroko & Uncles, 2009). It describes mutual expectations, amongst others, of employees and employers as part of the working relationship (Moroko & Uncles, 2009) and can therefore be evaluated as a more informal agreement.

In regard to Weick’s (1995) concept of sensemaking, employer branding is delivered in the way that each employee makes sense of his/ her experience and passes information to the target group to construct a certain image in their heads. Here, it is aimed that they perceive the company as a desirable employer, which is at the same time the main idea of corporate branding when it comes to current employees (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Barrow & Mosley, 2011). Generally, the concept of sensemaking can be understood as a prerequisite to meaning creation through the process of delivering thoughts and ideas of one individual to the other (Weick, 1995). In this context, the findings of the research team on the company making sense of their tailored employer branding activities can be revealed. As it can be seen from the empirical data, the current employees build a relaxed, informal and therefore casual ‘student atmosphere’. In this way, they make students feel more comfortable to interact with the company representatives, while ensuring a ‘down-to-earth communication style’, which could be observed during the career fair. Here, the researchers of this study evaluate this as a strategy on the part of the employees to increase the chances of future employment. The company representatives actively promote such an environment by presenting the organization’s activities and practices to the university graduates, and thus make sense of their respective social reality with the awareness of working effectively towards the targeted audience.

Since employees are one of the main sources to deliver the employer brand to the target group, the representatives create the specific image the company considers to be important and convincing to the graduates in order to stand out from competitors. This goes in line with the idea of 'individual sensemaking' where employees are needed to provide a consistent image to those that are not yet involved into the organization (Weick, 1995; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Such meaning creation and delivery of a company's culture can indeed be seen as an illustration of sensemaking in employer branding. Moreover, it can be shown by what has been repeatedly mentioned by several interviewees that they feel like working with 'friends' or that it even feels like having a second family, meaning their colleagues. This can be considered as a typical way to make sense of their work when communicating it to the target group and promoting the employer brand itself.

At the same time, it has been mentioned previously that the outward appearance of the company representatives at the career fair was rather formal. But is not the appearance of the company representatives then controversial in a way when it comes to attracting university graduates? They present themselves formal in a suit, but want to reach the young target group in a cool and casual way? Here, the study's researchers have two assumptions: on the one hand, again, wearing suit and tie, is certainly partly due to the consultancy industry, which is often associated with a bourgeois and conservative behavior, so that sense is made primarily through personal interactions in the form of language and storytelling; on the other hand, it could also be a good company strategy which might display a hidden message to show prospective employees that it is a serious business within a 'hierarchical branch' (interview), which does not mean that working within the company is also conservative.

All in all, the existing tension between the different branding strategies can actually serve as additional proof of the use of sensemaking in the case company's employer branding activities. It becomes clear that the company adapts its employer branding strategy to the expectations of the various target groups by optimally coordinating the various brand images. This is done through individual sensemaking of the company representatives to attract the target audiences and create a positive image according to the specific expectations they have on the company. Since the employer brand itself is a firmly anchored, unmistakable image of the company in the minds of employees and applicants (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), the aim should be to make this picture perceptible as holistically as possible with all senses since clarity in work leads to sensemaking.

5.2 Key Determinants: Attracting Graduates Through Activities

Since this master thesis is based on the target group of university graduates, the researchers took a closer look at these and discussed how employer branding activities are designed by the case company. During this phase, key determinants were identified due to the fact that statements on the fields of *authenticity*, *informality* and *building relationships* were perceived both during the observations and increasingly through the interviews again and again. These determinants are so interconnected that an *authentic* and *informal* appearance of the company and its representatives is the foundation for *building relationships* with graduates when it comes to target-group-specific employer branding activities. In the following, these three conspicuous features are discussed in more detail and brought into the context of relevant literature, introduced in chapter 2.

5.2.1 Portrayal of Authenticity

Existing literature is considering the portrayal of *authenticity* as one of the essential elements of the concept of employer branding (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Wilden, et al., 2010). The employer brand's communication characterized by transparency and honesty enables the company to create a credible and authentic image to the outside world (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), which aim is to attract specific target audiences. During the interviews, many employees stressed again and again that the perception of an authentic employer is indispensable to attract graduates. Authenticity was defined in the manner of 'giving students a sense of who they are' and 'showing that the company really is the way it presents itself'.

While doing observations at the career fair, the research team got the impression that the representatives tried to show the company as an employer in a very authentic way, which can be supported by the statement of the advised student that the employee 'asked for hobbies and gave general advices instead of asking for grades'. This enables the company to clarify what makes it outstanding as an employer as well as what prospective employees could expect from their work.
However, providing this 'real picture' to the world outside does not always have to be positive and can therefore also be a challenge, since the employer brand as well as its presentation is regulated by the employees themselves (Bach, 2009). In turn, people might draw conclusions

about an employee's appearance and behavior, which can have a positive or negative effect on target values such as employer attractiveness or application intention, depending on the behavior shown. If someone is having a negative impression of a person that is associated with the company, it could influence or even destroy the entire image of the company (Franklin & Pell, 2001; Parry & Tyson, 2013), so that its messages and values communicated to the world outside would not be credible anymore. Thus, there shall be no information asymmetry between potential and actual employees, so that no false expectations are aroused towards the employer and its activities (Bach, 2009). It should be ensured that the perception of organizational characteristics after joining the organization corresponds to the ideas conveyed in employer branding before joining the company. For example, if a client becomes an employee, problems could appear which could lead to an ‘unwanted fluctuation’ (interview), when it comes to the here mentioned tension between the external appearances.

To present the company as an attractive employer to the target group of graduates in an authentic way, tailored offline and social media employer branding activities were executed by the case company, such as career fairs and the usage of social networking platforms. One interviewee mentioned the necessity of doing so since ‘positioning the company in the minds of potential employees in the early stage is important’, which can be substantiated in literature by Hatch and Schultz (2003) who support the idea of ‘anchoring the organization as a brand in the people’s heads’. The ability of practicing several employer branding activities at the same time can be supportive for winning more potential employees and ‘should not be underestimated’ (interview), since it is also possible to address and treat single target groups individual. This customized approach offers the company the possibility of presenting itself as well as its brand in a realistic and credible way, as the company ‘can choose how it wants to profile itself’ (interview). While the company can then ‘position itself how and wherever it wishes’ (interview), a better company-candidate fit can be generated, which is necessary according to Berthon, et al. (2005), who see the attraction of competent and talented candidates as one of the main ambition of employer branding.

Furthermore, Kaur et al. (2015) emphasize that social media activities make it possible to ‘look behind the curtains’ (interview) of the company, which supports Backhaus and Tikoo’s (2004) aspect of transparency which is closely linked to portraying an authentic image. According to one interviewee, this gives university graduates an insight into the day-to-day business of the company, its culture and values (interview). However, the result that ultimately counts for the company is whether the candidate finds the organization's values in his/ her own ones (interview). This aspect is also considered in literature as employer value proposition (EVP) (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), which was presented in Figure 2. Another aspect is to create transparency within an authentic environment through dialogue (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), where the presented Transparency Report of the case company can be evaluated as the best example in this context. Here, symbolic attributes in particular can have a strong effect on the labor market because they make an employer differentiable and 'unique' (Case Company's Website), while functional attributes within an industry usually resemble each other (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Foster, et al., 2010).

In addition to the mentioned activities, the consultancy company cooperates with targeted universities to do individual student projects. In the literature, the need for individual treatment of the young target audience when it comes to recruitment and employer branding activities in particular, is mentioned since Chhabra and Sharma (2014) see 'an increasing desire for individuality'. In the case company present, this aspect of individualism is only partly taken into consideration since it exclusively cooperates with selected schools, which means that not every graduate is targeted and thus, cannot be treated as an individual with its own expectations and desires, that in turn is not in line with Chhabra and Sharma (2014). Further literature strengthened the statement of individual treatment by saying that authenticity in context of the Millennials generation (Rigoni & Adkins, 2016), including the selected target group of graduates, is vital to attract them as they have high demands and ask for an overview what they can expect and what is offered (Caballero & Walker, 2010).

All in all, a company can be supported in its recruiting success when employer branding conveys ideas that are particularly desired by the target group and are received positively and authentic. Here, the portrayal of authenticity is made up of several properties that were identified at the end of the findings chapter, thus building a bridge to the other explored characteristics of attracting graduates through tailored employer branding activities.

5.2.2 Informality

During the interviews, the aspect of informality was repeatedly mentioned when it comes to attracting graduates through employer branding activities. This pattern of communication was also noted during the observations characterized by a 'cool and fun environment' (interviews with employees and talk with advised students). In this context, the aspect of informality is also realized by adopting a ‘down-to-earth communication style’ while talking to graduates (observations). The empirical evidence from the observations carried out by the research team reveals the welcoming feeling the company representatives created during the interaction with students at the observed career fair (talk with advised student). In literature, Lloyd (2002) describes it as “the company’s efforts to communicate to existing and prospective staff that it is a desirable place to work.” (p. 64), which idea the case company follows by creating such an open and welcoming ‘student atmosphere’ at the career fair stand, mentioned during the interviews. During the career fair, the observers identified a memory game which was provided by the company on a big screen that was integrated into their fair stand. Although there was no prize to win, this strategy seemed to be successful, as many students were attracted to the stand, whereby the company representatives came in contact with potential employees in a smooth and informal way by supporting them orally. This can be also seen as an effort of the company (Lloyd, 2002) to attract graduates in a ‘fun’ (interviews) and thus informal way.

When it comes to personal recruitment communication, it helps candidates to better understand the value orientations of the company and its employees, and conversely, the company gets to know the concerns of the potential employees, too (Wilden, et al., 2010; Kaur, et al., 2015). Personal communication on a ‘more relaxed level’ (interview) also provides them with a more authentic picture of the employer, aiming at getting ‘a positive vibe’ (interview) from the company. Furthermore, in a personal, informal conversation, questions can usually be asked and answered that formal communication often cannot address (interview). Here, the researchers see a close linkage to the previously mentioned ‘psychological contract’ between a company and its current or also potential employees (Moroko & Uncles, 2009), as it communicates, for example, expectations and development opportunities for the company’s employees in an informal way. But, the research team sees the risk that too high promises can be seen as a breach of the psychological contract, which can lead to 'inner dismissal'. Transparent and honest communication is therefore necessary at any time.

As already mentioned, the case company also uses – next to university cooperation and offline employer branding activities – social media as a channel to come into contact with university graduates, which importance in today’s talent attraction is outlined by Kaur, et al. (2015). A few interviewed employees stated the usage of social media and were aware of its necessity while one person named a specific example: he was contacted via the social networking platform LinkedIn and was asked for job tips, whereby an informal chat was created. In literature, this type of communication – using social media in hiring processes – is described as a 'new platform of interactions' for the younger generation (Kaur, et al., 2015). Even though other online channels, for instance the company's website, focus on the professional aspect of the company's activities, Instagram is used to show the informality of the company (interview). The aforementioned *Instagram Stories*, which enjoy great popularity among the graduate community (interview), are often filled with relaxed, informal, and even funny in the sense of entertaining contents, spotted by the research team while studying corporate documents. This furthermore strengthens the informal image the company tries to communicate to the target group of university graduates and, according to Kaur, et al. (2015), 'revitalize' the business.

5.2.3 Building Relationships

Next to the already mentioned company's cooperation with selected universities in Sweden, which aim is to come and stay into contact with potential employees, according to the empirical findings, it seems that the company consciously wants to establish close relationships with the mentioned target audience or even has its own strategy to do so. The idea of buildings relationships between the company and its prospective employees was also previously mentioned in the context of external branding in chapter 2.

Referring to Foster et al. (2010), people usually need meaningful points of contact in order to internalize the relevance of the brand and the sense of itself. A possible way how to do that is provided in marketing literature. Here, Grams (2011) and Devin (2016) mention the so-called 'brand ambassadors', who are employees which communicate the company's values and its brand promise to people outside the organization to build a relationship with them. In the literature, these ambassadors are often located in *internal branding* (Grams, 2011) – concentrating on adopting the branding concept within an organization –, which is one part of *The Triangle of Branding* (Figure 1). However, in the company chosen, the study's research team sees that the employees are more than just brand ambassadors, emphasized by the fact that they even call themselves 'student ambassadors' (interviews). This means that they present on the one hand the company and its brand to the outside world, but are on the other hand also the contact persons for graduates when it comes to a potential future career entry at the case company (Grams, 2011). One interviewee said that he 'tries to be like the person he met' when

he was looking for a job, which can be seen as a transitioning position from a student (outsider) to an ambassador (insider) by joining and working for an organization.
When it comes to communication in the field of building relationships, the case company provides an event calendar on its Swedish website which shows exactly at which universities interested students can get to know the company's employees personally. Additionally, the student ambassadors' contact information is published (Case Company's Website), so that students can directly address them. In literature, attracting potential employees 'personally' is, according to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), seen as an assistance of employer branding as a concept. Therefore, these kind of services, offered by the company, can be seen as part of employer branding.

Moreover, on the company's website, it was stated that building relationships with prospective employees belong to their strategy, which is in line with Lloyd (2002), who describes this strategy of staying in close contact as 'the external focus'. In turn, this also underlines the relationships' necessity in practice at the same time, that was evaluated as 'relevant' by two interviewees. Here a connection can be created to the previously mentioned determinants *authenticity* and *informality*, since 'sport activities and those focusing on social exchange' are consciously organized to come in contact with graduates (Case Company, 2018a), which take place on an informal level. Literature supports this thought by relating it to the target group's steadily growing demands (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014), meaning that the younger generation asks for this type of personal communication on eye level (Caballero & Walker, 2010). In addition, Kaur, et al. (2015) mention that social media employer branding measures primarily address today's younger generation. This thought can also be found in the interviews, where some intervieews pointed out that social media, as mentioned before, makes it possible 'to come closer to the company and to look behind the curtains' which can be used as a tool to build relationships from a more hidden side.

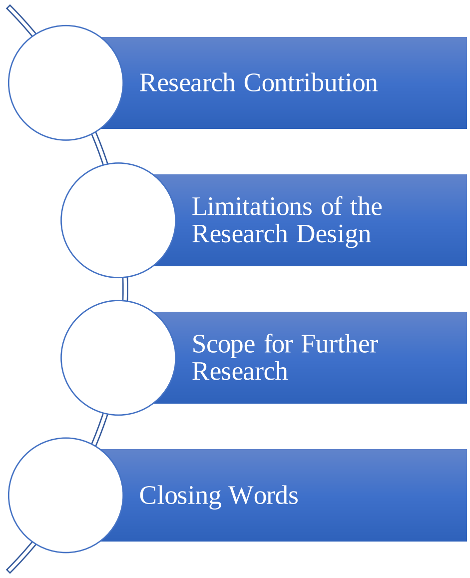
In the end, building relationships with the target group of university graduates in the early stage of their career can be depicted as a win-win situation due to the fact that on the one hand students get insights into the company, its culture and atmosphere. On the other hand, the company comes into contact with these prospective employees, their demands and expectations to which the organization can react according to the target group in order to present itself as an attractive employer.

5.3 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the explored tension between the external images was discussed, when it comes to clients and university graduates as target audiences. Different conditions were decisive for the company in adapting its brand strategy and creating a certain image. This switch between presenting the company in two ways is ensured by the adoption of individual sensemaking of the current employees. The research team further identified the three key determinants *authenticity*, *informality* and *building relationships* that should contribute to attract university graduates. All in all, thorough discussion was brought forward to answer the research question in the next chapter, where a review and a general picture around the research will be presented.

6 Conclusion

In this last chapter, the research team concludes the study's results of the master thesis at hand. Afterwards, the formulated research question is answered by taking both the theoretical as well as the practical implications into account. As every research has its limitations, the restrictions of this research design are presented followed by a section which should provide impulses and recommendations for further studies on the concept of employer branding and fields related to it. Last but not least, closing words are given by the researchers to round off the thesis and to stimulate the reader to reflect on the overall thesis.



According to Foster et al. (2010), branding is one of the most important components of an organization's work. In this master thesis, the aim was to understand sensemaking within tailored employer branding activities in order to attract university graduates to start working for the case company, located in the consultancy industry. Here, it has been investigated which practices the case company uses to work towards different target audiences – clients and university graduates –, as well as how they make sense in the process of carrying out employer branding activities. Here, the employees of the selected company play a decisive role in communicating the image to the outside world, but above all when it comes to addressing the target group of university graduates. To collect empirical data through qualitative research, the research team examined both primary as well as secondary sources, including ten semi-structured interviews, non-participant observations at a career fair and a document analysis, such as the company's website, published reports and social media channels. Thereafter, all data gained were categorized into thematic groups depending on the sub-topics touched. The issue covered Weick's idea of sensemaking around tailored employer branding activities, where the researchers focused in this study on employer branding within the demanding university graduate community, which was compared to external branding towards clients.

6.1 Research Contribution

In order to recall the research question presented in chapter 1, it is mentioned again here:

How do employees make sense of employer branding activities tailored for university graduates?

Throughout the analysis of the empirical data obtained, the research team have distinguished two findings. In this thesis, the research question of how employees make sense of employer branding activities tailored to university graduates was answered. The main finding of this study is that a tension exists between the images presented to the clients on the one hand and to graduates on the other hand. When facing the client community, the company strives to reveal a professional image of delivering high quality services. At the same time, in the context of interacting with students, a more informal and relaxed picture is given. This tension is interpreted as the need to adapt individually to the mentioned target groups and to show these images accordingly. In this regard, the research team identified the nature of employer branding activities of the case company that lies in sensemaking. The company representatives, many of those being former students from the universities targeted by the firm, work as student ambassadors towards attracting prospective employees through making sense of the image they want to present to them. This is realized through individual sensemaking, where an image on what it is like to work at the company is created. It is considered to be needed in order to adapt to the expectations of the high demanding target audience of university graduates and thus, to increase the level of interest to work at the case company.

Furthermore, certain determinants of the company's employer branding activities towards university graduates were identified throughout the research. The portrayal of authenticity and informality singled out as the key ingredients for building relationships with graduates which the case company highly values. In addition, the findings were highly incorporated into Weick's concept of sensemaking and therefore reflect on the theoretical framework set up in the beginning of the research process, presented in chapter 2.

6.1.1 Theoretical Implications

The study contributes to the existing literature by filling in the research gap identified that links the concept of employer branding to Weick's theory of sensemaking. While most literature on employer branding mainly concentrates on the graduates' expectations on companies as their potential employer, the way companies approach employer branding and their activities has been neglected. In this regard, the current research added a more in-depth understanding of employer branding from the employer's perspective. The tension acknowledged in this work between the image presented by the company to the target groups of clients and university graduates has shown that sensemaking is followed throughout the entire process of the branding activities. Moreover, the company uses sensemaking as an instrument to adapt to the expectations of the various target groups in external branding. In this sense, it can be argued that this research provides a deeper insight into the topic of employer branding, which can be located both in marketing literature and organizational studies. It should be added that all concepts, such as corporate branding, internal branding and external branding, related to employer branding can benefit from this study, too.

6.1.2 Practical Implications

Any research should have practical implications. In this context, the research team identified several that deal with the topic of sensemaking. Here, it is claimed that the employees of the case company create the attractive employer brand through individual sensemaking. In this regard, it is essential that current employees recognize the importance and validity of what they stand for in the sensemaking process. To be more specific, it is of great meaning that current employees make sense out of their work first before making sense to prospective employees, as it is obvious that those who see no sense in their own work cannot transport it to others. Therefore, it should be ensured that current employees are stable in their work and understanding in order to convey the brand to potential future employees. In this case, the sense is communicated informally to address and attract the target group of university graduates individually in the long term.

Furthermore, the research team considers it as vital to note that there is a tension existing between the two images – branding for clients and employer branding for university graduates –, which may affect the employees involved in the process of sensemaking. Even if both images shape the work of the company to a great extent, as described by the interviewees, it still pictures a challenge to be perceived as authentic and credible in its message when it comes to presenting the individual image to a target group.

6.2 Limitations of the Research Design

When it comes to conducting research, it is important to acknowledge its weaknesses and limitations. The following part introduces the reader to the limitations of the study's research design. This can provide impulses, which are subsequently presented in order to explore further topic areas within employer branding or ideas associated with the concept.

"All … research projects have limitations; none is perfectly designed." (Marshall & Rossman, 2010, p. 76). However, limitations should not be seen as negative, restrictive or influential, even if they have an impact on the data interpretation. It is rather about the researchers' understanding that a perfect, flawless design cannot exist in reality (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). Studies can be geographically or temporally limited, meaning that they represent an image of the world in a certain place and time, within a particular context (Given, 2015). In other words, the results cannot be transferred to other settings without distorting their origin. As the time frame for preparing this work was limited, extensive research characterized by a larger number of interviews and observations was not possible.

In general, the research quality is strongly reliant on the researchers' skills due to its subjective nature (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Since nobody is out of biases, these can affect the study and its outcome. Also, knowledge and personal experiences are influencing factors. Even if qualitative research is helpful to get a deeper understanding of the field, the process can be time-consuming in all respects. Moreover, this type of research usually comprises non-structured text material and therefore it is challenging to visualize qualitative data, in comparison to quantitative. As the former describes the phenomenon, the latter one gives definitions, so that it is almost impossible to reliably determine which statements are relevant and which are not (Bryman & Bell, 2015), without taking personal classifications unconsciously into account.

Limitations can also occur in regard to the chosen research methods. Researchers are always dependent on the interviewees, their knowledge and availability. For this study, only people working in HR, employer branding and related areas as well as LUSEM alumni were interviewed. But if this radius would be extended and further people would be interviewed, either by increasing the sample size, or simply choosing employees from other departments, the results would certainly vary (Given, 2015).

Due to the fact that observations are a one-time impression, they are not exemplary, cannot be compared or even generalized. Even though the results cannot be copied into other contexts and be transferred to all companies within the industry, the research team believe that the study would provide with more insights in understanding similar organizational settings. Since the researchers only visited one career fair for the target group of university graduates, the findings are limited in its value. Although as the observations during the career fair have been kept anonymous regarding place and time, it is in the human being's nature to behave differently once they have realized that they are observed to show themselves at their best. The distance to the person observed also depends on how exactly information is captured. In this context, noise or other influence factors can distort comprehensibility. Furthermore, the management of impressions lacks on measurability and thus limits research. As limitations can be hardly controlled, it is of great importance that the researchers are aware of those so that the extent of the restrictions is minimized throughout the entire research process (Bryman & Bell, 2015).

6.3 Scope for Further Research

During this study, the researchers came up with several issues that could be explored even more intensively in regards to tailored employer branding and its activities. These prospective fields are briefly explained below to hopefully send impulses for additional research. The incentives are linked to both applied methodology as well as further content-related research. Here, this thesis could be used as a basis to study additional fields or for comparing it to new approaches.

The researchers see further potential for exploring several related themes. In the following, some ideas within the research environments are given:

i. Initially, the research was limited to just one company operating locally in Sweden. Since it is acting on an international level, it is recommended to examine how the case company perceives targeted employer branding in another country or even to analyze a competitor within the consultancy industry to make comparisons. It would be of interest of both in terms of the knowledge gained and in order to be able to look at the presented findings critically, to question or even generalize them.

ii. Secondly, the researchers focused on attracting graduates by tailored employer branding activities in the context of Weick's concept of sensemaking. In future studies, it would certainly be of great value to discuss whether the explored tension between the external presence of the two images to attract clients and graduates has an effect on the employees' identity within the company. Here, corporate identity in the context of sensemaking could be studied to deepen what was only partially addressed in this study.

iii. Thirdly, the existing tension is due to the branding strategy that the case company considers to be effective. A future study on whether such adaptation actually works for different audiences with varying demands and whether it has a positive effect as expected by the firm, would enrich current studies. It could also be the target group's perspective to assess the situation at the other end of the interaction.

iv. Lastly, in this study, social media as an employer branding channel for attracting graduates was briefly mentioned, but its content was not analyzed in-depth. Therefore, it would be of great value to study the company's social media activities when it comes to tailored employer branding activities for the younger generation in general.

6.4 Closing Words

All in all, when building and maintaining the employer brand, it should be ensured that the employer image is attractive and differentiating from the perspective of the target group, and at the same time it should be guaranteed that the ideas conveyed are authentic and can also be experienced in real life after joining the organization. Therefore, it is vital not only to pay attention to how something is communicated through employer branding activities to the world outside, but also to be clear about how the message reaches those who should be attracted. As one of the interviewed students said:

> *"I had the impression that they are all best friends …, but [they are] still professional."*, and that is exactly what the company is trying to convey to university graduates.

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Appendix

Interview Questionnaire

Code

General information (not reading out loud word by word):
First of all, thank you for your participation, your interest in the topic and that you are supporting us during our Master Thesis. This interview is fully standardized to guarantee an anonymous evaluation during the whole process. Therefore, we will change basic information (gender etc.) and code the single interview sheets. In the next 60 to 90 minutes, we will ask and discuss questions in the fields of corporate values, culture, identity and [the company] as a brand. To avoid misinterpretations, we will write down your main statements as well as recording this interview to guarantee a correct and clear analysis. If you do not agree with this procedure or if there are questions you cannot or are not allowed to answer, please let us know. Lastly, if you have any other questions now or also during the interview, feel free to interrupt and ask at any time. Again, thank you for your help and we will start with the interview and the recording now.

Interview guide

Background of interviewee: Responsibility at the case company, further background (alumni etc.)

1. What are the company's values and which are your personal ones? How are they integrated into your daily life/ business?

2. "Bring your best to [the company] every day" is stated at the company's website. What is meant by "best", how would you define the term?

3. In the corporate values, it is stated that the company is "open and honest in [its] communication". How does that work in practices when it comes to attracting graduates? Please share your experiences.

4. The company states that so-called "comprehensive benefits" are offered. What are they about and how do they help when attracting and winning graduates? Please give examples.

5. Please tell us about the language used at the company. Swedish? English? Others? Do you see any advantages/ disadvantages/ barriers when communicating with

international students?

6. "Generation Y" and "Millennials" are common terms nowadays. In your opinion, which type of jargon/ communication in general is needed to attract today's graduates (job descriptions, career fairs, further activities)? Please share your experiences.

7. Do you personally think that Social Media is having an influence on recruitment activities for university graduates? How?

8. Do you see any changes when comparing to practices for previous generations? If yes, please explain how/ why and give examples.

9. In general: What is the company's aim of doing employer branding activities for graduates? Please share examples.

10. <u>Interviewer notes:</u> Just for LUSEM Alumni …
    - Which corporate image did you get when talking to representatives of [the company] for the first time? Did you notice anything special?
    - How do you experience [the company] now as an employee? Do you see differences/ similarities compared to your first contact?

Now, we are continuing with some more general questions regarding your cooperation with LUSEM (Lund University School of Economics and Management).

11. What are the company's motivations to cooperate with Lundaekonomerna/ other student unions?

12. How do you understand the benefits of cooperating with student unions?

13. What channels are the most effective to market employer branding?

End of the interview and recording is stopped now.

Observations – Field Notes

Code

1. How does the company representative communicate?

2. What contributes to the conversation?

3. Gesture/ Body Language

4. Facial Expression