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Employer Branding amongst Millennials in the Hospitality Industry

By

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Abstract

Purpose The purpose of this study is to reveal and enable a deeper understanding and provide a more refined view on the intersections of employer branding, and (dis)identification, through the empirical focus on Millennials, based in the hospitality context. This is investigated by asking two research questions: "how is the employer brand presented to Millennials in Hotels International?" and "how is the employer brand perceived by Millennials in Hotels international?" This has given rise to a new framework that explicitly distinguishes between brand (dis)identification and organizational (dis)identification, and which is our main contribution to academic and corporate practitioners. Furthermore, throughout this study, we challenge the recent hype around Millennials which is mainly a reference to the stereotypical views that seem to abound them.

Methodology This study is based on qualitative research by using social constructivist theory. The empirical research was carried out in two hotels who belong to the hotel chain Hotels International (pseudonym). In total, we conducted twelve semi-structured interviews with HR and management as well as with Millennials to shed light on our two research questions.

Findings and Implications Our main findings indicate that there is brand (dis)identification as well as organizational (dis)identification, but that these are not necessarily the same nor congruent. On that basis, we propose a framework that distinguishes between both. Within the framework four types of Millennials were identified – the organizational idealist, the brand advocate, the brand ignorant and the individualist. This study supports the notion of an active employee in the construction of employer brands, which highlights the perception side of our research. Lastly, based on our findings, we argue that the hype on Millennials is just that, a hype.

Keywords employer branding, (dis)identification, Millennials, hospitality

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1 Introduction

"A strong employer brand is more important than ever. Our research into the 'Best Workplaces for Millennials', (...) shows that top companies are getting ahead by turning their staff into engaged brand ambassadors. The results – better recruitment and retention of Millennial workers" (Great Place to Work, 2017).

This quote from Great Place to Work, a company that provides executive advisory and consultancy services to businesses, hints at the relationship between employer branding and Millennials, which is also the topic of this thesis, in which we additionally look at (dis)identification. As a side note, the term (dis)identification is used to refer to both, identification and disidentification. We investigate this relationship in the context of the hospitality industry, which is commonly characterized to suffer from low retention rates and to rely on young, high quality talent in order to ensure good customer experiences, which is especially important in today's competitive world of organizations (Brannan, Parsons & Priola., 2011). The quote by Great Place to Work highlights the importance of a positive employer brand in attracting and retaining Millennials (Özçelik, 2009). The idea behind it is to make Millennials identify with the brand and in that sense, turning them into brand ambassadors (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). In general, the fact that Millennials are the workforce of today and tomorrow (Espinoza & Ukleja, 2016), might carry some important implications for employer branding and (dis)identification which we aim to investigate throughout this thesis.

1.1 Employer Branding and (Dis)identification

Employer branding has evolved as a relatively new field with few scholarly studies (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004) to now being an integral part of the Human Resource Management (HRM) toolbox in organizations (Ainspan & Dell, 2001). Scholars and consultancies alike have started to place higher attention on the employer brand as an increasingly important asset for companies in the form of brand equity (Brannan et al., 2011; Great Place to Work, 2017; Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Özçelik, 2009). Further pioneers in this field have ascribed employer branding as a particular form of managing organizational identities by means of externally and internally portraying an attractive organizational image as a distinct employer (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens, van Hoye & Anseel 2007), or "employer of choice," (Rampl, 2014, p.1487). This is said to increase chances to attract and retain high quality talent and highlights the role of image, reputation and brand attributions, which can, according

to Brannan, Parsosn and Priola (2011), for instance, be created through successful branding campaigns.

It needs to be mentioned that some more critical academic scholars have highlighted the active part of the employee in the branding process (Charbonnier-Voirin, Poujol & Vignolles, 2016; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008), adding to the more mainstream views on employer branding, where branding is regarded more as to be produced only from the employer side (Ainspan & Dell, 2001; Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). On similar lines, Huzzard, Benner and Kärreman (2017) point out that the boundaries between employer brand production and consumption are permeable, which can be seen as a reference to branding work. Aggerholm, Andersen and Thomsen (2011) further contribute to this debate by mentioning that employer branding shall in general be looked at as a co-created process between the employees and the employer.

Closely aligned to employer branding is literature on identification and disidentification. This is because employer branding is said to positively influence employees' identification with the organization (Lievens, van Hoye & Anseel, 2007). This might increase their loyalty, engagement and retention, which can be beneficial for companies (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011). So, in essence, employer branding is commonly practiced by HRM for purposes of facilitating an employee's identification with the company (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). In that regard, the importance of value congruence between employee and employer is highlighted by scholars, such as Ashforth and Mael (1989).

Furthermore, especially the accounts on identification as a fluent, communicative process, proposed by Kuhn and Nelson (2002), are relevant in this thesis. This perspective on identification as a process that happens in interactions, and which is constantly altered, draws on the same lines of literature that regard employer branding as a two-way, co-created phenomenon (Arvidsson, 2005; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). However, as we will argue throughout this thesis, identification with the brand and organization are not automatically a given by-product of employer branding. Rather, it seems far more complex, as unexpected dynamics might evolve, such as employees resisting employer branding and its intentions to shape their identification processes (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Tarnovskaya, 2011). As a consequence, employees might not necessarily identify with what the employer and the subsequent organization try to portray (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

1.2 The Millennial Hype

This study has its empirical focus on Millennials. Millennials represent the workforce of today and tomorrow and is commonly believed to be a key element contributing to the current hype around them. The significance of this group is identifiable by the fact that they are a widely discussed, so to say 'hot' topic right now (Berset-price, 2016; Espinoza & Ukleja, 2016; Pfau, 2016). This is due to the commonly accepted impression that Millennials are hyped these days (Espinoza & Ukleja, 2016; Jenkins, 2018). Companies are catering to this cohort by inventing new, 'Millennial-friendly' products and by adjusting organizational practices to them (Berset-Price, 2016; Özçelik, 2015). Pfau (2016) even makes the claim that the current fascination with Millennials has created a whole new consultancy industry. He explicitly writes that "hundreds of firms, speakers, authors and individual experts are vying for a share of the "Millennials are Different" segment of the $150 billion-a-year global HR consulting market" (Pfau, 2016, p.1). This might already hint at what we propose in this thesis, namely that the whole hype might merely be made up and exaggerated by consultancies and popular press.

Google Web Search hits 42 000 000 entries for 'Millennials' nevertheless there is little consensus about what Millennials actually mean and imply. The term 'Millennials' can be traced back to studies of sociology and social sciences and refers to the generational cohort born at the start of the new millennium, which ultimately gave them the designation 'Millennials' (Berset-Price, 2016; Desai & Lele, 2017; Kowske, Rasch & Wiley, 2010). However, a precise definition of the term Millennials and exact dates for when this cohort begins and ends have proved elusive (Desai & Lele, 2017). In general, it seems as if the business world devotes more attention and concern their way than any other generation before.

More specifically, Millennials have become something of a fad or fashion, a reference to the negative stereotypes that are claimed to abound them (Espinoza & Ukleja, 2016). A popular belief, brought forward by popular press and consultancies, holds that differences in traits, attitudes and lifestyles between Millennials and previous generations are disrupting the workplace (Jenkins, 2018). Millennials are somehow different from non-Millennials. They are said to be entitled, impatient, having high expectations and do not stay for long in one company (Great Place to Work, 2016; Pfau, 2016; Sinek, 2016). However, it is debated to what extent their tendency to switch jobs is due to the fact that they are Millennials or because companies fail to provide meaningful work and challenging tasks (Pfau, 2016).

The way they are described sounds like they might have different psychological contract compared to non-Millennials. A psychological contract refers to unwritten expectations between an employer and an employee and defines their workplace relationship (Rousseau, 1989). The way Millennials were brought up might have influenced how they perceive and behave in workplaces and subsequently, their relationship with employers (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). For the sake of this thesis, we will use the term Millennials to refer to this whole hype made up around Millennials which concerns their supposedly different outlook on life and work (e.g., Sinek, 2016).

1.3 Aims and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to reveal and enable a deeper understanding and provide a more refined view on the intersections of employer branding, and (dis)identification, through the empirical focus on Millennials. Our interest in our topic is echoed by the recent profound attention paid to employer branding as the newest HRM tool (e.g., Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011), which we briefly touched upon above. This general heightened awareness comes from both, the academic and corporate practitioner. Specifically, this thesis aims to emphasise the role of (dis)identification as a mediating variable between employer branding and Millennials' engagement and retention in companies. The empirical context of this research is set in the hotel industry. In particular, the research for this study was conducted in two hotels that both fall under the parent company Hotels International (pseudonym). Hotels International is a hospitality company with a broad portfolio of different hotel brands and will serve as an illustration to assist our topic. In order to answer our two research questions, which we will introduce shortly, data was collected at two hotels that that fall under Hotels International, which will further be explained in the methodology part.

1.3.1 Research Questions

We intend to address the relationship between employer branding and (dis)identification with regard to Millennials by answering two research questions. Our first research question, which illustrates one side of the coin, is concerned with how the employer brand is presented to Millennials in Hotels International. This is important to explore in order to subsequently understand the second side of the coin, which is how Millennials perceive the employer brand in Hotels International. Accordingly, we address the following:

1. *How is the employer brand presented to Millennials in Hotels International?*
2. *How is the employer brand perceived by Millennials in Hotels International?*

The focus in this research is only on Millennials currently employed in the company, as they have a direct relationship to the company and thus, are to a greater extent already exposed to the employer brand, which makes them part of it. This is relevant with regard to the notion of an active employee (e.g., Kärreman & Rylander, 2008) that we intend to follow in this thesis. Next to this, since employee turnover is so prevalent in the hospitality industry (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011), conducting research with currently employed Millennials seemed most suitable for the purpose of this research. Therefore, their perception towards the employer brand of Hotels International is of more interest than that of prospective employees. It needs to be added that although we might not be able to empirically generalize our findings, we maintain the ambition to generalize analytically.

Furthermore, progressing with our two research questions prompted in the significance of exploring the complex relationship between brand (dis)identification and organizational (dis)identification. What many scholars fail to do is to draw a sufficient distinction between brand and organizational (dis)identification. Our findings suggest that these two might not always align and that their relationship needs more unpacking. We intend to fill this gap in literature by proposing a new framework (Figure 1) that conceptualizes this relationship. Within the framework, four categories are identified, depending on their degree of brand and organizational (dis)identification. These categories refer to four different types of Millennials, To which we each assigned metaphors for. 'The organizational idealist' refers to both, strong brand and strong organizational identification. 'The brand advocate' is a metaphor for those Millennials who can strongly identify with the brand, but not with the organization. The opposite is true for 'the brand ignorant'. Lastly, 'the individualist' is a reference to both, weak brand and weak organizational identification. These categories will be fully discussed in later stages. In essence, we maintain the ambition to offer a more nuanced perspective on employer branding and (dis)identification.

In addition, we aim to contribute to the more critical literature on employer branding by investigating our topic through the lens of branding work (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). This study will follow the accounts of authors such as Arvidsson (2005), Fleming and Spicer (2003) and Kärreman and Rylander (2008), who emphasise the active part of employees in co-creating

the employer brand and (dis)identification process. We argue, that the notion of an active employee in the context of employer branding has not been extensively researched yet, even though some scholars, such as the ones we just mentioned, have been hinting at this. Hence, the active co-creating/resisting side of employees towards employer branding (Tarnovskaya, 2011) will be investigated in this study, with special attention towards the impact Millennials have in the workplace.

The topicality and relevance of the research theme is further supported by the fact that few scholars have yet discussed the intersection of employer branding, (dis)identification through the empirical context of Millennials. There are some studies in sociology covering material on ongoing demographic changes, who nonetheless fail to put the hype around Millennials and their changing, work-related needs and demands into the context of employer branding and (dis)identification (Singh, Bhandarkar & Rai, 2013). Therefore, the lack of robust or academic findings on the subject of Millennials and the hype around them as well as their impact in the workplace, form another motivation for this research. We aim to critically approach the Millennial fad, to find out if there is even any actual substance to it. In essence, we will question the hype and its substance and subsequently the rather negative stereotypical views of Millennials (e.g., Espinoza & Ukleja, 2016).

To summarize, based on the problematization and research questions, this thesis aims to provide a theoretical and a practical contribution. Our main contribution of this research is our proposed framework on brand and organizational (dis)identification that was developed from existing literature and our findings. This framework helps to offer a more nuanced view on the relationship between employer branding and (dis)identification, by explicitly distinguishing between brand and organizational identification. We argue that the framework has potential to be generalized to different contexts and thus, forms our largest contribution, practically as well as theoretically. This is because a more refined view on employer branding might help academic as well as corporate practitioners. Theoretically, the framework can additionally serve as a foundation for other researchers, who are interested to further study this field. Practically, employers might benefit from understanding the interrelationship between employer branding and the (dis)identification process of employees. Further, since we make a focus on Millennials, this study aims to offer fresh and valuable insights into the hype made up around Millennials, which seems to be mostly made up by consultancies and popular press. Thus, we argue that our

findings might carry essential implications for corporations in terms of their working relationship with Millennials.

1.4 Research Limitations

We are aware that this thesis does not come without its limitations. Due to the limited scope of this study, not everything from the empirical material could be discussed and further explained. We acknowledge that the empirical data we collected and the findings we derived from them are subject to our and interviewees interpretations. Moreover, since the management of Hotel A set up the interviews for us, we could only work with the interviewees we were given and had to accommodate to that.

Another limitation is that the research is only based on one specific industry, namely the hospitality industry. It may be useful to extend the study to include organizations from a broader range of industries. Additionally, the small number of organizations that were included in our research presents a limitation. The collaboration with only two hotels may appear as insufficient for the broad topic of employer branding, (dis)identification and Millennials. Therefore, further research might be necessary to determine whether these results are generalizable to different types of organizations. Nevertheless, consistency across both hotels that we studied was asserted, which demonstrates that our findings have important implications for theory and practice and will contribute to existing literature on employer branding, (dis)identification and Millennials by generating new insights into this relationship. Thus, although our findings might not be fit for empirical generalization, we advocate that they can be generalized analytically.

1.5 Outline of the Thesis

This thesis consists of six main chapters: introduction, literature review, methodology, analysis, discussion and conclusion. We begin by reviewing relevant literature from different fields to gain a better understanding of the underlying context of this study. The main topics that will be covered in this thesis are employer branding, (dis)identification, Millennials in the workplace and the hospitality sector. Subsequently, we will present the methodology applied, including which research paradigm, methods and data collection methods. In the analysis and empirical chapter, we will provide background information on Hotels International and their employer branding campaign, and present and analyse our empirical material in relation to our two research questions. Afterwards, we will discuss our findings and introduce a new framework on brand and organizational (dis)identification. Finally, in the conclusion, we will revisit our

two initial research questions and summarize our main points, followed by practical implications and further research.

2 Literature Review

This chapter reviews relevant literature in order to explain the intersections of employer branding and (dis)identification, with the empirical focus on Millennials, within the context of the hospitality industry. Firstly, we will present an overview of employer branding, which will provide the reader with a broad understanding of the topic. Secondly, (dis)identification will be discussed in the light of employer branding. Thirdly, we will outline some popular notions on the Millennials in the workplace, with a special focus on the hype. Lastly, the hospitality industry and its retention problems will be covered. Our main ambition with the following literature review is to consider the degree to which knowledge from existing literature from different fields can add to and complement our understanding of what employer branding and theory on (dis)identification entail. Linked to this aim, we will move the literature into the context of Millennials and the hospitality industry.

2.1 Employer Branding

Branding is a concept that comes from marketing (Brannan, Parsons & Priola 2011). From there, it evolved from classic product branding to corporate branding in the management field to employer branding (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 2009). When reviewing the literature associated with employer branding, it becomes apparent that employer branding emerged by combining more traditional branding practices with the HRM field (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Edwards, 2010). From relative obscurity, approximately a decade ago, employer branding is more and more seen as an integral part of the HRM toolbox, as it aims to attract, motivate and retain a company's current and potential employees (Ainspan & Dell, 2001; Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Edwards, 2010). Hence, employer branding targets not only external stakeholders, but is also directed at internal stakeholders (Kärreman & Rylander 2008; Lury, 2004), and specifically acknowledges the importance of human capital (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Authors like Ainspan et al. (2001) argue that employer branding represents the value proposition of a company, or more explicitly "the employer brand establishes the identity of the firm as an employer. It encompasses the firm's values, systems, policies, and behaviours" that are expected (p.10; Backhaus & Tikoo 2004). Charbonnier-Voirin, Poujol and Vignolles (2016) outline in their journal that earlier research on employer branding has shown that employees are naturally attracted to employers whose values and personality align with their own. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) summarize this employer-employee relationship by stating that the attractiveness of and the advantages conveyed by an employer brand, depend on the perceived similarities between individual and employer. Further, Harris and de Chernatony (2001) argue that employees are "becoming central to the process of brand building and their behavior can either reinforce a brand's advertised values or, if inconsistent with the values, undermine the credibility of advertised message" (p.442). However, as Edwards (2010) notices, individual values among employees will vary to the same extent to which their perception of their respective employment experience will naturally be different from each other and consequently how they rate an employer's attractiveness.

Nevertheless, a major purpose of employer branding is to externally and internally communicate that the company is a desirable place to work, thus, highlighting the importance of a company's reputation (Berthon, Ewing & Hah, 2005). To extent this notion, Brannan, Parsons and Priola (2011) view employer branding as a soft HRM strategy to appropriate and internally disseminating the external brand as a means to enhance employees' engagement and loyalty through facilitating a discourse on aligning mutual interests with business objectives. This is why employer branding practices tend to involve extensive communication and brand campaigns (Edwards, 2010). In fact, several companies are adopting best practices of HRM, benchmarking their own efforts against competitors who have already gained recognition as 'best place to work' or 'best employer' (Barrow & Mosley, 2007; Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). With this also comes the notion of person-brand fit to ensure a level of congruence between employee and employer (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011). The role of HR in employer branding is among others to engage employees (Kahn, 1990). By facilitating an emotional attachment between employee and organization, by creating emotions of pride, developing effective reward and recognition schemes and by integrating the brand concept into all employee trainings and development programmes (Casico, 2014).

Further, employer branding has been advocated as an effective strategy for encouraging employees to 'live the brand' (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). Employees appear to become ambassadors of the employer brand, "sometimes dubbed by professionals as 'employee brand" (Charbonnier-Voirin, Poujol & Vignolles, 2016, p.435), which can be regarded as a direct extension of the employer branding literature. Scholars like Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) distinguish between external and internal employer branding. The former is about delivering an attractive image to potential employees, whereas the latter is about preserving current employees through making them identify with the image that the company portrays (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 2003).

Additionally, Fleming and Sturdy (2011) point out that the ultimate objective of companies is to make an employee love working for them, transforming the employee into a brand champion as he/she is offered to 'be yourself.' This perspective is contested in one chapter of Brannan, Parsons and Priola (2011), in which the authors explicitly argue that employer branding can exert pressures on homogenizing the workforce, which would suppress individuality in the workplace. As employees are expected to identify, embody and internalize the brand (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011), organizations try to actively shape their employees' identity by closer aligning employees' values, behaviours and attitudes with those of the employer brand (Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Some scholars of critical management studies, such as Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and Cushen (2009) regard these practices more cautious, as just another means to regulate and control employees in the organization. These authors are essentially debating the more mainstream outlooks on employer branding as a practice to merely 'present' the employer brand externally and internally (e.g., Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Instead, they emphasize its role as a control and regulation device by seeking compliance from their employees through influencing identity formation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

In general, employer branding draws attention to the employee's active part in the creation of a successful brand, also oftentimes referred to as 'branding work' (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008). According to Huzzard, Benner and Kärreman (2017), there is ambiguity around the origins and consequences of branding, since the boundaries between its production and consumption are obscure. Aggerholm, Andersen and Thomsen (2011) say, employer branding shall be regarded as a co-created communication process between the organization and its potential and current staff. This aligns with Arvidsson (2005), who points out that employees are no longer perceived as merely being branded by managerial practices, but as actively

participating in advocating and co-creating the brand. So, in a sense, companies are not static but moving branded spaces, in which brands are socially constructed. Employees do not just passively, but actively perceive employer brands through co-creation or even resistance in the form of, for example, cynicism (Tarnovskaya, 2011). Moreover, Hatch and Schultz (2013) point out that being branded is not only about how companies influence employees but also how employees influence companies. In line with the above, a core aspect of employer branding is the construction of a unique and appealing image and that encourages employees to identify with (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 2003).

2.2 Employer Branding and (Dis)identification

Another area of literature that is considered relevant to the notion of employer branding is organizational identity and identification with it (e.g., Edwards, 2010). Ashforth and Mael (1989) define identification in the context of the social identity theory as the "perception of oneness with or belongingness to the organisation" (p.22), or as Pratt (1998) indicates at least acknowledging a high pre-existing affinity with the organization's identity.

In one of their articles, Maxwell and Knox (2009) explicitly focus on current employees and investigated several factors that make them feel attracted to an organization's employer brand. They addressed this through the lens of social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991) to organizational identification, which holds that an employer brand pushes individuals to incorporate the organizational identity into their own self-concept, consequently facilitating what is known as organizational identification (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). Furthermore, according to the social identity theory, a positive organizational image positively affects employees' degree of identifying and being committed to the respective organization in a significant way (Frandsen, 2012).

This also explains why a positively perceived employer brand might attract more identification and commitment from employees (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Edwards, 2010) and according to a study by Cole and Bruch (2006), the less likely were employees' intentions to leave. So, when an individual and others regard an employer favourably, organizational membership increases an individual's self-esteem and correspondingly, their organizational identification and loyalty is likely to be strong (Lievens, van Hoye & Anseel, 2007), which may prevent turnovers (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011). Factors such as prestige, positive status and reputation associated with an employer brand of an organization play an important role in this regard (Van

Dick, Wagner & Lemmer, 2007) and "are likely to attract higher levels of organizational identification" (Edwards, 2010, p.13).

Kuhn and Nelson (2002) extend the notion of social identity theory, by introducing the communicative perspective, which defines identification as communicative acts located in contexts of social interactions with others. This is more in line with Alvesson's (2004) comment on identity which he explains as being socially constructed in direct relations to others and outside events. Thus, compared to the social identity theory, this perspective highlights identification as being not a stable product, but rather an ongoing communicative process that is a source and a product of identification at the same time (Kuhn & Nelson., 2002). In this regard, employees draw, produce, reproduce and alter the collective organizational identity through interactions with others. To extend this argument, Huzzard, Benner and Kärreman (2017) outline that since identity and brands are not stable but "can take on a life of their own" (p.130), they are resisting any manipulative and controlling efforts.

As already touched upon in the section above, employees are drawn to those employers whose values resemble their own (Charbonnier-Voirin, Poujol & Vignolles, 2016). To extend this notion into the context of identification, value congruence between employee and employer support an employee's identification with the company. In other words, if an employee perceives the employer brand to resemble his/her own identity and values, he/she is more likely to identify with it (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Therefore, creating an employer brand that reflects the values of an organization and targets future and current employees who can relate and embody these values might be pivotal for identity formation (Charbonnier-Voirin, Poujol & Vignolles, 2016). Further, Edwards (2009) demonstrate higher levels of employee identification when employees receive organizational/management support or perceive the organization to be an open communication environment (Bartels, Pruyn, DeJong & Joustra 2007).

This review on the interplay between employer branding and organizational identification still leaves room for unanswered questions. Employees might in fact not identify, but disidentify with the organization and the employer brand, especially taking into account Lievens, van Hoye and Anseel (2007), who outline that incoherence between different identities and images of and in organizations can cause problems for an organization and its stakeholders. This particularly holds in large and complex organizations which are characteristic of multiple and sometimes

even conflicting identities, which makes identification much more complex (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Also, Brannan, Parson and Priola (2011) emphasize that the process of facilitating identification has become more complex, which they lead back to several changes in employment patterns. These can be said to stand in direct relation with changes in workforce demographics (Özçelik, 2015).

According to Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) definition on disidentification, a disidentified employee holds a sense of self-distinctiveness through perceptions and feelings of disconnection from the organization and from what the organization stands for. Thus, contrary to identification, members do not internalize the organization's identity into their own self-concept (Boroş, 2008). In short, employees position themselves counter to the defining attributes of an organization. Some potential consequences of disidentification are mentioned by Dukerich, Kramer, and McLean Parks (1998) and Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) and include counter-organizational actions, such as criticism, distancing, cynicism and resisting organizational initiatives and goals. Disidentification might occur when a company shatters the meaning related to an employee's self-concept, producing in him/her the quest to seek for new meanings outside the company's context (Frandsen, 2012). So, in that sense, disidentification can almost be seen like an employee breaking up with the organization (Frandsen, 2012). Maxwell and Knox (2009) conclude, that organisational identification may be treated as the mediating variable between an employer brand and the behaviour of its employees.

2.3 Millennials in the Workplace

In general, an organization's workforce is constantly changing owning to younger cohorts entering the workplace, challenging employers by challenging the rules of work orientation and engagement (Özçelik, 2015). Requirements towards their prospective employment are changing remarkably. Literature on generational studies commonly classifies Millennials as the generation born from the 1980s onwards (e.g., Kowske, Rasch & Wiley, 2010). However, the lack of concrete and academic findings on the subject of Millennials and their impact in the business world still causes a lot of ambiguity around them. Desai and Lele (2017) emphasize that there are no standardized terms nor span of years to label and encompass various generations, rather researchers and especially consultants have come up and use different names when referring to generations. From this, it seems that popular press indeed came up with the umbrella term 'Millennials' to include that cohort, which is entering the labour market right now (Beall, 2017; Jenkins, 2018). In fact, the term Millennials appears to have become

something of a fashion-word in the business world. For the sake of this review, we will follow Desai's and Lele's (2017) account and stick to the term Millennials to refer to the popular discussion around them in terms of current workplace challenges.

A popular belief brought forward by press and consultancies is that differences in traits, attitudes and lifestyles between Millennials and previous generations are disrupting the workplace (Beall, 2017; Berset-Price, 2016; Jenkins, 2018). Consultancy company Gallup (2017) stresses that Millennials are profoundly different from other generations and will change the world decisively more, especially in terms of industries and way of communicating and connecting. The notion, that one of the major challenges for employers in today's business world is to identify the engagement drivers and threats of the Millennials is widely supported (Özçelik, 2015). The Millennials and what their arrival at the workplace implies are widely discussed in the popular press, as well as in a few scholarly publications (e.g., Jenkins, 2018; Kowske, Rasch & Wiley, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani., 2010; Özçelik, 2015). A famous speech by marketing consultant Simon Sinek on 'Millennials in the workplace' highlights the hype made up around Millennials and the somewhat negative connotation towards them:

> "Apparently, millennials as a group of people, which are those born from approximately 1984 and after, are tough to manage. They are accused of being entitled and narcissistic, self-interested, unfocused and lazy - but entitled is the big one" (Sinek, 2016).

Some stereotypical views on the Millennials include, for instance, that they place more value on autonomy, individuality, self-growth and transparency and are characterized as born social, tech-savvy, less focused, wanting to have an impact and by the need to feel approved (Beall, 2017; Jenkins, 2018; Kowske, Rasch & Wiley, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). It is very common for them to switch jobs multiple times and they acknowledge a balanced work-life (Twenge & Cambell, 2008). To add to this, Millennials have developed different views on work-life balance as they easily switch to other companies when the conditions they expect are not met (Memon & Kolachi, 2012).

A study conducted by the Korn Ferry Institute (2015) on Millennials yielded that they indeed demand more flexibility regarding work. Millennials only remain at their place work for an average of two years (Prokopeak, 2013), because they are said to perceive that employers can be unreliable and thus they refrain from over-committing to one organization. Rather, they

appear to place great value on self-development, new learning opportunities and career advancement (Özçelik, 2015). According to Great Place to Work (2017), Millennials who find meaning in their work are six times more likely to remain in their companies. Providing meaning is, thus, regarded as crucial in retaining Millennials, considering that Millennials have a turnover right that is three times higher than previous generations (Great Place to Work, 2017). In a recent report by consultancy company Gallup (Gallup Report, 2017) on Millennials, they state that "Millennials behaves as consumers of workplaces, shopping around for the jobs that best align with their needs and life goals." On this basis, Great Place to Work added that "(...) this makes the employer brand more crucial than ever for attracting young talent." (Great Place to Work, 2017). Along similar lines, Jenkins (2018) mentions that Millennials are much more brand-conscious, due to the fact that they grew up in branded societies (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011), which might also indicate that an employer brand might be crucial to them when making a job choice and in the day to day working life.

So, Millennials are commonly regarded with suspicion as they pose new challenges for employers (e.g., Jenkins, 2018; Sinek, 2016). Westerman and Yamamura (2007), for example, assert that generational preferences and demands may lead to misunderstandings and communication problems, which in turn lower employee engagement and thus, negatively affect retention. All in all, generational and therefore, cultural differences hold challenges for HRM with respect to employer branding references. According to Özçelik (2015) forward looking companies are investing strongly into means to attract and retain Millennials. As Glum (2015) points out, online advertising and social media are essential for HR and marketing in developing effective strategies to attract and retain Millennials, given their daily use of technology.

Those changes in how working life is organized and the decline of the concept of 'job for life' influence retention rate and loyalty to the company and as Brannan, Parsons and Priola (2011) highlight and might mean that identifying with the employer brand will become more complex. In this context, from Maxwell and Knox (2009), employers are advised to sell their brand in alignment with Millennials' values and by speaking to their needs and wishes in order to appeal to them. This might to a great extent determine how Millennials perceive an employer brand and might be decisive in their decision to stay or leave a company (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011).

The hospitality industry, in particular, is widely accepted to suffer from a low retention rate, a small talent pool and persistent problem with poor image (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011). This issue is said to have become even more prevalent given changing demographic patterns and shifting generational attitudes, especially since the sector is known for hiring young talent (Barron, 2008). Further, most turnovers are found to occur in the first months of employment, which might suggest that an employer would benefit from managing expectation of new hires early on (Barron, 2008).

Therefore, based on Brannan, Parsons and Priola (2011), employer branding and its role in enhancing employee commitment and engagement is believed to be of high relevance in this industry, as a means to increase attractiveness and prevent turnovers. Employer branding has been widely acknowledged in the services marketing literature, not at least because of its role in, as Edwards (2010) outlines, encouraging employees' identification with the organization to support service employees deliver and fulfil brand promises to customer through their 'branded' behaviour. One way of making customer-facing employees internalize brand standards is through trainings and internal communication (Lee, Kim & Yong Kim, 2013). This sector is also known for its ad-hoc approach to HRM in the form of unreliable and informal HR strategies (Hoque, 2000), especially with respect to recruitment. Although the service sector is said to be brand driven (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011), it is common for employees to be exposed to many different brands simultaneously, without one unifying corporate brand.

2.4 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter has reviewed literature from different fields in order to provide the reader with a more thorough understanding of the relationship between employer branding, (dis)identification and Millennials. Because this study investigates this relationship in the hospitality context, we also outlined important factors with regard to that sector. All in all, employer branding has received more attention from academic scholars as well as from organizations in recent years. This is attributed to several changes in the labour market, including the arrival of Millennials in the workplace, which affect the ways employers promote their brand to different groups of external and internal stakeholders. More critical voices have emphasized the role of employer branding as a control and regulation device by means of forming employees' identification work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Cushen, 2009). In addition, branding and identification are regarded as unstable and in motion, highlighting the

accounts on employees' active co-production of the employer brand, termed branding work (Arvidsson, 2005; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008).

3 Methodology

The following chapter will disclose the chosen research paradigm, how the research was designed, which data collection methods were used and lastly, it will consider limitations and our personal reflections as researchers.

3.1 Research Paradigm

Any useful and reliable research requires a methodological part with a suitable research paradigm that will be revealed in this section. The chosen research paradigm for this study is social constructivism. This research believes that the reality is socially constructed in line with Gergen (2015) and Prasad (2005) who outlined that the core of social constructivism is the idea that "reality" is something we create collectively through our interactions and ways of speaking about the world.

Applying a constructivist epistemology highlights the importance of recognizing the varying meanings and realities people live in. The reason for using this approach is because employer brands are socially constructed (Brannan, Parson & Priola, 2011). This study explores how multiple parties interpret branding practices which promote the brand towards the "world", in this case, employees (Gergen, 2015; Weick, 1995). Using social constructivism places different interpretations of the interviewees in specific situations they find themselves, thus, the research becomes subjective. In other words, they perceive these situations with their own view of the world. It is the role of the researcher to be aware of the subjective reality of the interviewees and to "understand their motives, actions and intentions" (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009, p.111).

Further, we adopt an abductive research process in our study to ensure the balancing of theories, empirical material and subjective interferences (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007). According to Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009), abduction includes "understanding" (p.4) by alternating between theory and empirical facts that are progressively reinterpreted interdependently, and

thus differs advantageously from both, induction and deduction which are regarded as too one-sided (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009). Further, Bryman and Bell (2015) describe abductive reasoning as considering accounts of the social world in the perspective and meaning of the participants in this social world. The analysis and discussion of our empirical data are based on theories and concepts laid out in the literature review as well as on interpretations, which are an inevitable part of any research.

3.2 Research Design

The research design is about structuring and organizing the undertaken research and to find a suitable data collection method that helps to answer the research questions (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson, 2015). The main design we follow achieve the purpose of this thesis is a qualitative, cross-sectional study of a multinational diversified hospitality company with a broad portfolio of different hotel brands which we renamed to Hotels International due to confidentiality.

In line with Bryman and Bell (2015), we chose a cross-sectional design for this study, incorporating two hotels, who, however, fall under the same parent company, Hotels International. The major reason for choosing a cross-sectional design rather than a multiple case-study approaches is because the emphasis is on the sample of cases to produce general findings, instead of on the individual and unique context of each case (Bryman & Bell., 2015). We do not aim to compare the different hotels to each other, rather we are motivated to show how our core phenomenon of interest occurs in different empirical settings, which helps to convey more trustworthy findings. Thus, conducting research in two different hotels on how the employer brand is presented and how it is perceived by employed millennials will make the whole analysis richer. Therefore, within the context of our research, a cross-sectional study appears as the ideal design to gather data, relevant in answering our research questions and thus, shedding light on the two sides of the same coin. However, we acknowledge the general, traditional weakness of any case study strategy as it provides little basis for empirical generalisation since the context dependent case studies often provide explicit, detailed, context-based information (Bryman & Bell, 2015). Nevertheless, we maintain the ambition to generalize analytically.

3.3 Data Collection Method

A common belief is that "data is some kind of 'raw material' for scientific investigation" (Styhre, 2013, p.56). However, that assumption disregards the fact that data is shaped by subjective and interpretative beliefs (Styhre, 2013). Thus, we follow the account that data is rather constructed than collected and regarded as given. The following section will outline all relevant information concerning how the empirical data has been constructed, ranging from what kind of data is used, information about the organization, how the interviewees were selected, and the interviews were selected and conducted.

3.3.1 Qualitative Data

This thesis is based on qualitative data. This type of data can prove or disprove various propositions that the researchers might have (Alvesson, 2003). According to Walliman (2011), the nature of this data is rather descriptive as it is expressed in words and not in quantifiable terms such as numbers, which implies they cannot be measured in any exact way. However, this does not mean they are less valuable since they give subtle and relevant insights into different phenomena, which in our case concerns the presentation and perception of employer branding to and of Millennials (Walliman, 2011). Walliman's (2011) account on this is nevertheless debated by other authors (e.g., Alvesson et al., 2009) who argue for a more nuanced view, by emphasizing the fact that data does not just describe and represents 'reality,' but constructs or constitutes it.

3.3.2 Types of Data

Furthermore, we have collected two different types of qualitative data. Primary data in the form of interviews is the major source of this research which we will complement with observations and field notes as well as with secondary data from Hotels International's website. The primary data was gathered by using semi-structured interviews in which we asked general and specific questions. This rather open approach to interviewing left enough room for interviewees to flexibly approach the questions and add their own story to it. It also allowed for new ideas to be brought up. Two different interview questionnaires were prepared which included a framework with the themes we aimed to explore. One questionnaire was used for HR and management, the other for currently employed Millennials from different departments (Appendix A and B). General questions were identical for managers and Millennials, whereas the specific questions varied, in accordance with how the management presented the brand and how the Millennials perceived the brand in Hotels International. The flow of the interviews was

natural and in a comfortable way, so there was no pressure on any side of the table. However, in some cases, we had to ask interviewees to draw a more concrete picture and to give examples to ensure that we understood their statements correctly. We also added questions where we saw fit that were not prepared in advance but were suitable and clarifying in the specific situation. In general, the questions were formulated in relation to the employer brand, specific branding practices and Millennials' (dis)identification with it in order to get topic-relevant answers. We also posed a few questions concerning application and recruitment procedures as a means to find out whether the brand was a matter to them when applying for the job or for future job applications.

It is assumed that the secondary data has been used for different purposes before and is therefore in the public domain (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The secondary data was gathered from Hotels International's website and social media channels. More specifically, employer brand-related documents such as the employer branding campaign "To the Journey," which particularly addresses Millennials (Hotels International, 2017) have been taken into account. The most obvious reason for choosing to analyse this campaign is simply because it hints at how they present their employer brand to Millennials and will, therefore, help to shed light on our first research question. Further, the company is proudly advertising "To the Journey" on their career section site. Hence, these secondary sources will complement and strengthen our primary data.

3.3.3 Data Collection

For the purpose of our research which is to explore how employer brand is presented to and perceived by Millennials in a hospitality context, we collaborated with two hotel brands that are subsidiaries of Hotels International. We interviewed various staff members of these two hotels, which are located in Denmark (Hotel A) and Qatar (Hotel B). Nine face-to-face interviews were conducted in Hotel A and three face-to-face interviews were conducted with Hotel B. Hotel A even invited us to stay in their hotel during the time during our research which enabled us to gain access to non-public areas. Additionally, one of us travelled to Hotel B in Qatar for the interviews and was also able to visit staff areas. We chose to use two hotel brands instead of only one because it allowed us to gain more representable answers which may yield more credible findings. We are aware that by doing so, we compromised simplicity for more complexity, however, this is justifiable by the fact that obtaining more data from different

sources will most likely lead to a more wholesome picture of our topic (Table 1). As mentioned above, although we cannot generalize empirically, we intend to do so analytically.

The main data collection was done via face-to-face interviews with management and Millennials. We split the interviews between HR/managers and Millennials, who are in the operations, therefore frontline employees/associates. As employer branding is integrated into HRM, we conducted interviews with staff from the HR department to get insights into their employer branding efforts, how they communicate the employer brand and if they take the Millennial hype into account. The study could have benefited from interviews with the marketing department as branding comes from marketing (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011). Although, we did not manage to get access to staff from Marketing, we were able to talk to the Recruitment Manager of Hotel A who is specialized in employer branding to Millennials and thus also highly resonated with our research topic. He was mainly in charge of organizing and setting up the interviews for us.

In order to get a better picture of the two sides of the coin and answer both research questions, splitting the interviews seemed an appropriate way to execute it (Table 2; Appendix A and B). On one side, we interviewed three human resources manager and one assistant manager of Welcome Office (Reception) whose work is closely brand related. All of them represent the company as brand message distributors to associates. These interviewees were however not Millennials, they rather belong to the previous generations, therefore 30 years old and above. On the other side, we interviewed eight Millennials from Hotel A and Hotel B from different departments and different levels in order to obtain clearer and more representable answers to our research questions (Table 1). Each interview lasted approximately 30 - 75 minutes and the names of the participants were changed to ensure their anonymity and confidentiality.

Presenting vs Perceiving the brand	Property	Interviewee	Designation
Presenting	Hotel A (Denmark)	Magda	CSR Manager
Presenting	Hotel A	Florian	Recruitment Manager
Presenting	Hotel A	Clara	HR Liaison
Perceiving	Hotel A	Sandra	Spa Receptionist
Perceiving	Hotel A	Ronald	Receptionist
Perceiving	Hotel A	Anna	Spa Therapist
Perceiving	Hotel A	Ole	Restaurant Trainee
Perceiving	Hotel A	Chris	Chef
Perceiving	Hotel A	Chloe	Booking Assistant
Presenting	Hotel B (Qatar)	Isabel	Assistant Manager of Welcome Office
Perceiving	Hotel B	Samira	Marketing Executive
Perceiving	Hotel B	Sven	Front Office Supervisor

Table 1. Data collection

The reason for choosing only four interviews on the presentation side is because we complement those with document analysis and observations and also because our focus is rather on Millennials' perception and identification with the employer brand. We have also looked into branding related documents on Hotels International's website and social media channels. This enabled a thorough understanding of the context of employer branding activities. During our interviews, all individuals were aware of our status as Master students conducting research for our thesis. We emphasized on this as well as on that their names will remain anonymously. Staying four days at the hotel allowed us to observe typical employee spaces, such as staff cafeteria or office hallways.

	RQ 1: Presentation of employer brand	RQ 2: Perception of employer brand
Who was interviewed?	Managers/HR Non-Millennials	Front line employees Millennials (Below 30 years old)
How were the data collected?	Interviews, document analysis and observations	Interviews
How many people?	4	8

Table 2. Design for Data Collection

3.4 Data Analysis

With regard to time, it is a cross-sectional study, firstly, because of the time horizon of our particular research and secondly, because of the multiple qualitative data collected from multiple sources. To break it down, cross-sectional study emphasises on observations and data collection throughout a short period of time and we clearly focus on a "snapshot" (p.155) of a particular problem by contributing to an existing phenomenon, rather than searching for a long-running analysis (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009).

All the interviews were recorded and manually transcribed. This enabled us to read through them and detect similarities in answers which we then merged into themes and subthemes, a process called coding (Strauss, 1987). We briefly followed Ryan and Bernard's (2003) techniques on how to analyse the data and identify themes. In accordance, we firstly, looked for repetitions in the data and common threads to discover overarching themes. Secondly, we filtered and consequently selected the themes that are most relevant in providing adequate answers to our research questions that we then put into theoretical context. The themes are the following:

> RQ 1: Managements' presentation of the employer brand to Millennials
> in Hotels International
> 1) Communicating with Millennials 2) Career and Growth Opportunities

> RQ 2: Millennials' perception of the employer brand in Hotels International
> 1) Brand Identification 2) Brand Disidentification

3.5 Reflexivity and Limitations

We are aware of the fact that all empirical material collected, and findings derived from these are the results of interpretations. Not only our own interpretations that we made as researchers but also of interpretations made by the interviewees. A generally accepted challenge of interviews is that they are politically charged as actors might perhaps engage in image management and might not always answer truthfully which hinders the generation of real and representable insights. In line with this, we are taking into account that the recruitment manager of Hotel A who helped us set up the interviews was informed beforehand about the research purpose of this study, he could have briefed the interviewees beforehand which affects the

results of the research. Thus, throughout this thesis, we made it our goal to engage in critical reflection towards the data which is what Alvesson & Sköldberg (2009) term "reflexivity" (p.8).

In short, we questioned what the interviewees were actually saying and did not simply accept it as the truth. This also counteracts to what Schaefer and Alvesson (2017) call "source critique" (p.1), which refers to a careful evaluation and critical questioning of information collected from interviewees. We are aware that we were not able to completely mitigate source critique as some of the interviewees were reluctant to share their honest and truthful opinions about issues and different matters, even though they were informed that their names would stay anonymous. In order to mitigate "source critique", we also tried to directly clarify interviewees' output during interviews.

Further, as this thesis is written by two researchers, we pointed out to each other whenever we realized we were being biased by our quest to find good material that would help to answer our research question. As Styhre (2013) emphasizes, "what we hope to find in the empirical data easily becomes the data, (...)" (p.64). For instance, during the interviews, we realized that we sometimes lapsed into using leading questions. The main reason for doing this was, however, to clarify questions whenever we noticed that interviewees struggled with understanding their meaning.

As our research is undertaken for an academic purpose, and we are thus limited by time and certain deadlines, researching and analysing is also limited. As mentioned in the data analysis section, this research is based on the cross-sectional study (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2009). The reason for using this study, instead of longitudinal, meaning long-running research, is only to contribute with a small piece of study to employer branding in a specific hotel chain with regards to Millennials. Overall, due to the short and highly context dependent scope of our study, we are aware that our findings are not fit for empirical generalization. Nevertheless. we aim to generalize analytically. This study contributes to existing literature by offering valuable, fresh insights into the intersectionality of employer branding, (dis)identification with the empirical focus on Millennials in the hospitality industry. By asking our two research questions we intend to explore the relationship between organizational identification and brand identification which is rather complex and might not always align. Thus, this literature gap needs more unpacking which we intend to do by introducing a new concept in the end.

In terms of the "To the Journey" campaign, we acknowledge the fact that companies' web pages tend to be biased to the extent that they show only one perspective. Companies use them in their favour to construct a highly positive image of themselves towards consumers and therefore, it may distort reality. Further, the award this campaign received from Great Place to Work was based on 'merely' 566 employee surveys which may not actually be sufficient considering that Hotels International currently employs over 400 000 associates (Hotels International, 2017).

3.6 Summary of the Chapter

According to Styhre (2013), the methodology provides a "bridge" (p.61) between a problematization of a topic and a theoretical framework. We have explained that this research follows social constructivism which is based on subjective interpretations of individuals. Further, we explained that our data collection is based on the qualitative method and includes both, primary and secondary data. The primary data was collected by conducting interviews and the secondary data through observations and field notes and by analysing the "To the Journey" employer branding campaign. To summarize our main points, we developed a research 'onion' inspired by Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2008) that is presented below, and which outlines all the layers of how we are proposing our methodology (Graph 1). In order to get to the centre, there are various layers to be 'peeled off' by using a suitable research paradigm and research approach.
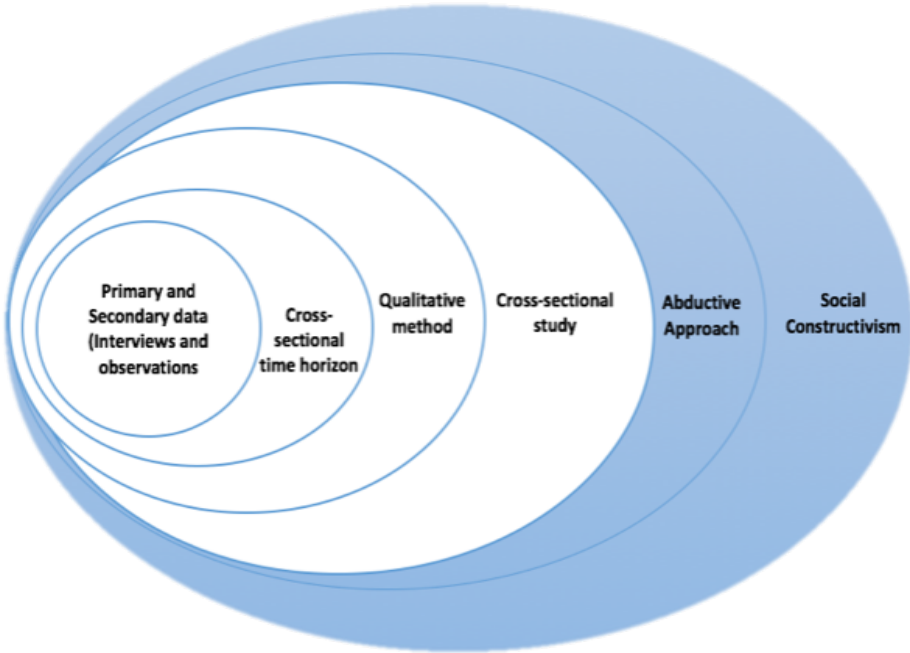
Graph 1. Research 'Onion' (Saunders, Lewis & Thornill, 2008)

4 Empirical Material and Analysis

In this thesis, we argue that employer branding is relevant to attract and retain employees by means of facilitating identification. For a better understanding of the intersections between employer branding, (dis)identification and Millennials in the hospitality industry, this chapter will analyse the empirical data in relation to our research questions:

RQ 1) how is the employer brand presented to Millennials in Hotels International,

RQ 2) how do Millennials perceive the employer brand in Hotels International.

The empirical data used to shed light on the first question was collected from four interviews conducted with HR and management as well as by analysing the brand campaign "To the Journey", which gives valuable insights into the presentation of the employer brand. The empirical material for the second research question will be presented based on eight interviews with Millennials currently employed in Hotels International. The table below (Table 3) shows the topics and sub-topics that were identified for each research question during the data analysis and coding process (see Section 3.4). We start by providing insights into the underlying context of this study by informing the reader about the background of Hotels International and Hotel A and B which serve as our case studies, as well as about the employer branding campaign "To the Journey." Thereafter, we present the empirical material that addresses our research questions and end the chapter with a summary of the most important points.

Presentation	Perception

1) Communicating with Millennials
  • Video
  • Recruitment strategy
  • Internal communication
  • Expectation management
  • Providing a purpose
  • Brand equity
	1) Brand Identification

2) Career and Growth Opportunities
  • 'Endless Possibilities'
  • Management support
	2) Brand Disidentification
	  • Non-identification
	  • Resistance
	  • Cynicism

Table 3. Topics

4.1 Background of Hotels International

Founded in 1927, Hotels International (pseudonym) is an instantly recognizable, international, market-leading, diversified hospitality company that manages and franchises a vast portfolio of hotels under 30 brands. In total, it operates more than 6,400 properties in 125 countries with approximately 409,000 employees worldwide of which up to 34% are made up of Millennials (Hotels International, 2018). Further, Hotels International also has award and loyalty programmes in place for its staff. A core value of Hotels International is to put people first, as expressed in the slogan: "take care of associates and they will take care of the customers" (Hotels International, 2018) So, although Hotels International is a large conglomerate, there is no single, unifying corporate brand, but rather many different brands that are either managed or franchised by Hotels International. Hotel A and B both belong to the brand portfolio of Hotels International, but at the same time are their own brand and even though many processes are streamlined according to Hotels International's brand standards, there is some room for flexibility in various areas. These facts contain important implications with regard to employer branding and (dis)identification, which we will come back to in the discussion part.

Furthermore, Hotels International was named a best workplace for Millennials by the global research and consulting firms Great Place to Work® and FORTUNE® (Hotels International, 2017). This success can be traced back to its highly recognized employer branding campaign "To the Journey", which has been particularly focused on recruiting and retaining top Millennial talent (Hotels International, 2017).

4.2 How is the Employer Brand presented to Millennials in Hotels International?

This section's findings illustrate the presentation of Hotels International's employer brand to Millennials. Two main topics were identified that will be discussed here. The first of these 1) Communication with Millennials, depicts how the employer brand addresses Millennials and how the employer brand messages are communicated to them. The second 2) Career and Growth Opportunities, concerns the continued emphasis on personal and professional growth opportunities for employees within Hotels International as well as management support (Table 3).

4.2.1 Communicating with Millennials

Hotels International's employer branding campaign "To the Journey" advertises the company as a great place to work for Millennials by particularly addressing them on their career page.

Part of the campaign are written statements from Hotels International's Chairman and Executive Vice President (EVP) and Global Chief Human Resource Officer. In these, they explain how "The Journey" at the company will look like for Millennials. The campaign is linked to the career section page, accessible through their website, and promotes the company as a place where Millennials can start their journey of "Endless Possibilities." Besides the written statements, more emphasis seems to be placed on colourful visuals and video instead of text, which might already indicate how companies are scaling to new trends in the business world to not fall behind. A remark made by the EVP and Global Chief Human Resource Officer illustrates how the employer brand is being presented to Millennials. More specifically, the EVP and Global Chief Human Resource Officer describes the culture of the company by using rather emotional terms such as emphasizing that it is a place where you can 'pursue personal happiness' and feel proud to work here. He also mentioned certain attributes that according to him are particularly relevant and attractive for Millennials:

> *This hyper-connected, tech savvy [Millennial] generation makes up a significant portion of our workforce – in fact, Millennials accounted for 69 percent of all (Hotels International) hires in 2016 in the U.S. alone. Personal happiness and wellbeing coupled with company pride are at the centre of our culture and Millennials are particularly attracted to job opportunities where they can feel good about themselves and their teams, have a passion for the work and also the organization overall. - EVP and Global Chief Human Resource Officer, Hotels International*

As previously noted, we conducted four interviews with people from management and HR at two hotels, who belong to the brand portfolio of Hotels International, to answer our first research question "how is the employer brand presented to Millennials in Hotels International?" In one interview with Florian, the Recruitment Manager of Hotel A, he told us to what he paid attention to during developing the recruitment strategy for Hotel A. He seemed a bit reluctant when he admitted that he looked at competitors who already won 'great place to work' and copied their approach. He further ascribed their success to the fact that they are either explicitly or implicitly targeting Millennials by interacting with potential candidates not in a top-down approach but on one level. He even classified Millennials as the YouTube generation who need to be talked to by means of video rather than formally written job postings. In Florian's words:

When I made the recruitment strategy, I also looked at who won employer branding websites last year or employer branding campaigns. And I can see that the websites and campaigns that target Millennials win. That is because Millennials are such a huge part of the workforce now. And I can see that what they succeeded in doing is talking directly to the candidates, interacting with them, selling their points at eye level. So usually from employee to candidate rather than from manager to candidate. And obviously talking to a YouTube generation they use video rather than text. - Florian, Recruitment Manager, Hotel A

Harnessing technology and video usage more was always brought up during our interviews. In concrete terms, interviewees indicated that they are trying to use and push video more as a means to scale to the new and become more relatable for Millennials. Thus, switching to video and building a bigger online presence are all factors that were considered regarding the communication format used for Millennials. The following quotes illustrate this point:

So, for instance, in terms of formats and channels, we have gone from formal job postings in written word to more video format. Also, we have to structure our approach on social media. - Florian, Recruitment Manager, Hotel A

So, I am really trying to see if we can push technology and video out more. - Magda, CSR Manager, Hotel A

Further, Florian told us that he actively tries to understand Millennials and what it is they buy in to, in order to attract and retain them within the company. Other factors besides the fact that it is an international hotel might actually matter more to Millennials:

We try to get a feel for what is it that they [Millennials] buy in to. Is it because it's an international hotel brand and they see themselves working in Singapore in 5 years or is it because they like sustainability? Food waste? Some want to build that into their careers. - Florian, Recruitment Manager, Hotel A

From this it seems as if HR and management tailor their employer brand messages towards what Millennials might value or care for. When we asked more specific questions regarding their employer branding activities, interviewees stressed the fact that they have to approach

potential candidates more actively, especially when it comes to Millennials. Thus, they cannot longer wait for Millennials to come to them as Clara, the HR Liaison of Hotel A acknowledged:

> *We cannot any longer sit back as an employer and wait that they [Millennials] come to us. Now the market is changing. Now, we are fighting for them. So instead of leaning back, we have to be more aggressive and active. That is what employer branding is about. - Clara, HR Liaison, Hotel A*

Florian also explained that the approach they take with respect to how they present the employer brand has changed over the years, not at least due to demographic changes. So, with Millennials on the labour market now they are restructuring their employer branding activities. He continued by saying that it has become crucial not just to release certain employer brand messages but to actually make employees internalize these brand messages as a means to make them stay:

> *I think earlier employer branding was a lot of external pressure and worked a little along the lines of your marketing campaign. So, it was very much pushing your message out to the different segments, whereas now with the Millennials it is just as important to tell the story or live the story internally in the organization to make sure you keep the people who are already here energized why we do what we do and then they spread it out. - Florian, Recruitment Manager, Hotel A*

Along these lines, Isabel from Hotel B also stressed:

> *As an employee of the hotel, if you don't live the brand yourself, it's impossible to pass it on to your guests - Isabel, Assistant Manager of Welcome Office, Hotel B*

These quotes might imply that it becomes more crucial to not only present the employer brand externally but also internally to ensure employees will pass on everything the brand stands for to customers. Moreover, internally presenting the employer brand might be especially relevant with regard to Millennials since they are not necessarily loyal to the brand but to other aspects of employment, as Clara hinted at:

They are not necessarily loyal to a brand. Maybe they are loyal to their apartment. Also, they have to like what they do, and know why we are doing it. They want to have a cause. We are aware of that! - Clara, HR Liaison, Hotel A

Concerns around loyalty and the crucial role of providing a purpose were voiced in other interviews as well. They also stressed that since Millennials tend to switch jobs and companies often and quickly, much attention has to be paid to managing expectations early on:

And also, expectation management is very important to make sure you don't lose people the first months. Because even more so than older colleagues, the Millennials are prone to change jobs. - Florian, Recruitment Manager, Hotel A

Magda also commented on meeting expectations of Millennials also in terms of technology. They need to move fast or in her own words:

Millennials expect things to be a certain way. So, we need to kind of think ahead to meet them where they are. We are not there. I mean we are behind all the time, because technology is also going so fast. I don't know if any company is really there yet. - Isabel, Assistant Manager of Welcome Office, Hotel B

Providing a sense of purpose seemed to be relevant in that regard as some interviewees outlined:

"There is a lot of questions about authority and there is a lot of expectations that we are not aware of. We know Millennials will come out and have a lot to say. We cannot just say: "I am your boss, I will tell you." They will ask you the question, "why?" and if they don't like what they hear, they are out of here." - Clara, HR Liaison, Hotel A

The elder generation has this culture that if I say jump, they ask "how high". But the younger generation asks "why". Both is good, but different so these cultures need to match together. - Isabel, Assistant Manager of Welcome Office, Hotel B

Isabel even acknowledged that Millennials behave differently compared to older colleagues and that these differences need to be accounted for and managed accordingly. What also came up during interviews are factors related to Hotels International's brand equity. For instance, one

member of management described the employer brand of Hotels International as having a lot of muscles since it is big and well known, which according to her appeals to younger people. Another interviewee mentioned something along the same lines by pointing out that the Hotels International brand kind of sells itself, which may be attributed to its strong brand equity. More concretely they stated:

It's a very ambitious brand. Big is always good. It has a lot of muscle. This is very attractive for young people. - Isabel, Assistant Manager of Welcome Office, Hotel B

(...) and then we put Hotels International and we see a lot of candidates coming here. The brand is well-known. So, the brand sells itself to some extent. - Clara, HR Liaison, Hotel A

4.2.2 Career and Growth Opportunities

Overall, we got the impression that the employer branding message really tries to lure potential and current employees into working for Hotels International by promising 'endless' career and growth opportunities to them. HR and management continually emphasized the fact that they provide a vast amount of growth opportunities for their staff. During the interviews conducted in Hotel A and B it appeared as if the main message of their employer brand is the prospect to professionally and personally grow within Hotels International. This is very well depicted by the following quotes:

It is not just a job it is a place where you can build a career. So, you might get an entry level job as waiter, bartender and then you can just go from there, both vertically and horizontally. - Florian, Recruitment Manager, Hotel A

So, people can transfer from different brands within Hotels International. I think that is important to know for younger people. This makes the brand more attractive. You have a lot of opportunities within the company. A lot freedom comes with that. Keep on growing. You can start as reception and end up as chef. The sky's the limit in that sense. You can grow and learn, and we have many education and learning opportunities. – Magda, CSR Manager, Hotel A

> *So yes, there is a lot of opportunities here (...) You learn and grow. - Isabel, Assistant Manager of Welcome Office, Hotel B*

Growth within Hotels International appears to be possible both in terms of switching to different departments or even to different hotels within the Hotels International brand portfolio and in terms of climbing higher up in the career ladder. Management explained that employees are not bound to one position but are free to change and stay flexible. As already touched upon, the employer branding campaign "To the Journey", too, claims to offer "Endless Possibilities" for its employees. In a written statement, the Chairman of Hotels International asserts that the core value of Hotels International is to put people first, which as he notes means not only the customer, but also the employee by providing opportunities to grow. He added that this is especially relevant for Millennials:

> *Our company has always been about putting people first (...). This means giving them opportunities to develop, (...). This is especially true for our newest group of up-and-coming associates. To them, a job represents more than just a pay check. It represents a chance to grow both personally and professionally and to contribute to something bigger than themselves. – Chairman, Hotels International*

Lastly, another aspect which was not mentioned yet in the above but arose during the interviews and links to growth is the prospect of receiving management support and which appeared to be highlighted as an important feature of the employer brand. Magda, for example, told us:

> *My job is to empower employees to be able to do that. To do their job even better. This is important and valued here - Magda, CSR Manager, Hotel A*

> *The structure is flat. We are not a machine, but rather a big family. – Clara, HR Liaison, Hotel A*

Clara explicitly stated that "we are not a machine," but a family. We got the impression that she was eager to generalize this statement by using the word 'we.' By pointing at the fact that it is rather like a family she appeared to refer to an environment of mutual support.

4.3 How is the employer brand perceived by Millennials in Hotels International?

This section's findings illustrate Millennials' perception of Hotels International's employer brand. More specifically, we will look into how interviewees relate to and identify with the employer brand and the organization. Two main topics will be discussed in this regard (Table 3). The first of these 1) Brand Identification involves the ways interviewees identify with the employer brand, whereas 2) Brand Disidentification concerns non-identification, resistance and cynicism towards certain brand-related attributes and messages.

4.3.1 Brand Identification

Interview subjects seemed to perceive the employer brand in the form of certain feature which they attributed to it. Some interviewees' main motive for working for Hotels International appeared to be due to certain feelings or features attached to it, such as the fact that it is a big, international, well-known and prestigious hotel chain. From this, interviewees seemed to derive feelings such as pride and belongingness (family), which might imply that the brand name might even be some kind of source for employees' self-esteem. To some the brand offers growth and career opportunities as well as learning experiences, which can be said to be in alignment with one of the main messages of Hotels International's employer brand message (see 4.2.2).

What regularly came up across many interviews was the feeling of pride attached to working for Hotels International. Ole expressed this the following way:

> *I am actually proud to work under the name that is one of the biggest hotel companies in the world. - Ole, Restaurant Trainee, Hotel A*

It seemed that they derive pride from the name of the company as it is big and well known. Sandra attributed huge status to working for Hotels International:

> *It is very appealing to work here. Status has a huge impact for people working here. Hotels International is associated with huge status. - Sandra, Spa Receptionist, Hotel A*

Samira and Sandra remarked that working for this brand can open many doors for you. So, it appears as if there are possibilities within Hotels International to grow and advance.

Due to the fact that this is a huge hotel so in itself it holds a lot of opportunities. -Sandra, Spa Receptionist, Hotel A

I was looking for a big chain that can open the world for you, to get more experiences and to have more chances to move. So, checked the bigger, more recognizable chains (…). It's cool to work here. - Samira, Marketing Executive, Hotel B

Samira gave the impression to really enjoy working for Hotel Internationals since it represents and offers many benefits. She continued by saying that the name "Hotels International" was decisive in her choice to apply there. Further, she seemed to really identify herself with the hotel since she works in the marketing department and the hotel is itself marketing-oriented. She added that she chose the hotel brand based on her personal preferences and things she values:

I came here for the name and I want to grow my career in Hotel B and this hotel represents myself (…) It is a brand that I really like, and it is really marketing oriented. - Samira, Marketing Executive, Hotel B

Similarly, Sven outlined that he can highly resonate with what the Hotel stands for. The core value of Hotels International is to deliver service by 'putting people first. Sven told us that he really believes in that:

I truly believe it is a great company to work at, because it gives you a lot of opportunities and they follow something that I recognize myself in as well. With 'put people first', with that thing, it might sound cliché, but I really believe, it is the right way. I like the idea behind it. - Sven, Front Office Supervisor, Hotel B

Across interviewees the possibility to grow within Hotels International was voiced in some way or the other. In fact, interviewees seemed to be aware of the fact that opportunities to grow and learn within Hotels International are offered by management as outlined by the following remarks:

It's not only that you have the opportunity to grow here, but that you can also move to different hotels and countries within Hotels International. - Sandra, Spa Receptionist, Hotel A

I have learned more than I expected in one year, about myself and about work, because I am working in a lot of different fields that I was not supposed to work, so I learned a lot. I learned in my personal life what I don't want any more in my future jobs, what I am not going to accept. I grew a lot from that. - Samira, Marketing Executive, Hotel B

Moreover, some of the interviewees indicated that for them working for Hotels International feels like being part of a family, which was actually also mentioned during the interviews we conducted with HR and management. So, Sven, for instance, told us that when he was send to a training to London he could immediately relate to all of it, even though attendees came from different hotels within Hotels International. Being part of Hotels International's 'family' appears to imply having similar conceptions. In Sven's words:

I could say, what feeling I had when I went to London for a training. I felt like we are from the same family and relate to everything. It really feels like one company. It does feel like a family. You have the same purpose, same goals. - Sven, Front Office Supervisor, Hotel B

Others further acknowledged that belonging to such a big international family comes with numerous perks, such as reward programmes that allow one to travel and stay at hotels at discounts. International trainings and a wide range of job opportunities across the Hotels International brand portfolio included as these two quotes show:

(...) they (Hotels International) see you as part of the family. That comes with a lot of benefits that you would probably not get anywhere else if you wouldn't work for Hotels International. And I also know from my colleagues that they are very attracted to this. - Ronald, Receptionist, Hotel B

One would assume that support is a natural consequence of being part of a family. When we asked if interviewees more specifically if they feel supported by management the answers varied. Some indicated that they indeed feel supported whilst others did not. These variations

might be due to the fact that we interviewed employees from different departments that report and are managed by different people. Those who feel supported appeared to base that on how well they can approach management, flexibility and mentoring.

> *Yes, I do (have support from management). The door is always open. (...) Both from my supervisors and from my boss and from my colleagues if that is necessary. - Ole, Restaurant Trainee, Hotel A*

> *Throughout the whole period, kind of being mentored by my front office manager, what always lead me towards different ways of thinking, expand my way of thinking... - Sven, Front Office Supervisor, Hotel B*

On the other hand, however, some interviewees did not perceive management to be supportive of them. Some even gave the impression to be very frustrated about the fact that management does not listen nor appreciate nor 'walk the talk':

> *They (management) always say, the door is open, but I don't experience it. - Chris, Chef, Hotel A*

> *I don't feel enough appreciated! It feels like a factory! - Chloe, Booking Assistant, Hotel A*

Chloe's remark very much contradicted the previous statements on how Hotels International is being perceived as a big family. She told us she feels totally replaceable and just as a number in the system. Next to this, Samira complained that management would not listen to someone young and with less experiences:

> *...but there are lots of barriers. They don't listen to someone younger and with less experiences. I can feel it here sometimes. I go to the GM, I go to the hotel director, I send an email and I don't get a reply. (...) and no one listened to me! Why? Because you are young, not experienced, you have been working in this market for one year.*
> *- Samira, Marketing Executive, Hotel B*

The last couple of quotes can be said to carry a negative undertone with them, which refers us to the next topic of what we categorized as brand disidentification. To be more concrete, a few interviewees portrayed a degree of detachment towards the brand, brand standards and management practices and which did not seem to align with their own values. This was voiced in various ways, for instance, through frustration just like the above quotes showed, indifference or even resistance and cynicism.

4.3.2 Brand Disidentification

The above sections suggest that interviewees perceive the employer brand it in terms of numerous brand attributes. They seemed to actually be able to relate to the employer brand and identify with it to some extent. Nonetheless, other interview subjects expressed different reasons for why they work for Hotels International, which might not necessarily stand in any relation to the employer brand and which might imply a certain degree of non-identification. Furthermore, we detected a few interviewees who even seemed to show a level of resistance and cynicism towards the employer brand and management practices which can be said to be a direct consequence of disidentification. In terms of non-identification, some interviewees simply did not seem to care that much about the brand. Rather, they appeared to actually not identify with what the employer brand conveys. Chloe even emphasized:

> *I mean some people couldn't care less if it is Hotels International or any other. (...) I don't even think about the brand that much. - Chloe, Booking Assistant, Hotel A*

This might imply some level of indifference towards the brand. Moreover, some interviewees named other factors as the reasons why they work and like working for Hotels International. More specifically, participants articulated that their main reasons for working in the hotel are rather the environment and colleagues.

> *Because my co-workers are amazing people and it's a learning environment where we share and help each other in all areas to grow and come up with new ideas. - Sandra, Spa Receptionist, Hotel A*

> *I think for me honestly saying is my colleagues. By that I mean, the culture. I feel safe, surrounded by good energy. People take care of each other. - Anna, Spa Therapist, Hotel A*

Sandra continued to talk very passionately about her quest to deliver great customer experiences. From this we got the impression that for her the task of performing in an excellent way to please guests from all over the world is what makes her like to work in Hotel A.

Also, here we have a very international guest experience where I have to perform in an excellent way. So, I find that very attractive. - Sandra, Spa Receptionist, Hotel A

Some interviewees seemed to care a lot about their jobs, tasks and purpose of providing customer service and not so much about which brand it is they work for. Ole and Anna illustrated this point:

It doesn't matter what brand you are in it would always be "the guest is number 1. I just want to give good service and I just want to make people happy, to make the guests happy, that's my job and that's what I am living for. (...) that is my passion. Even if it was not a Hotel A, I would work here. (...) I like the colleagues I have, (...) so even if it wasn't Hotels International, I would work here. - Ole, Restaurant Trainee, Hotel A

Hotel A is more about, what I can see, giving the best you can. What they [customers] need and that's what you can provide. - Anna, Spa Therapist, Hotel A

In many cases the employer brand might actually not be that decisive, which might hint to employees working in their current job despite the brand. The feelings they have towards the organization seems stronger than for the employer brand itself, as the above quotes showed. Some interviewees perceived the brand merely in terms of the brand standards, rather than the brand itself. This might imply that some employees do not always identify with the brand and related factors, but rather with other aspects that come along with their employment in the organization. One interview we conducted with a chef even gave the impression that he does not care at all which brand or organization he works for, as long as he can advance as a cook and be creative. He displayed the ambition to master his cooking skills, regardless of brand or organization.

For me it is just about becoming better and better in what I do, becoming more creative and provide amazing dishes. - Chris, Chef, Hotel A

He added, though, that he would pay attention to restaurant awards like the Michelin stars. In addition, it appeared as if some interviewees actually experienced some level of resistance towards the brand and management methods. A few interviewees can be said to have portrayed a degree of cynicism towards certain brand messages, standards, rules and management practices, which is very well outlined by the remarks below:

> *It is a lot of administration work that does not make sense which waste time and is actually not needed. For example, ordering a flyer. A GM comes to me who needs a flyer. I need to go to all the departments for the approvals and the last approval is the GM' s. So, why do I have to go through all this? If the only approval that matters is his. - Samira, Marketing Executive, Hotel B*

Samira further acknowledged that a lot of how the brand is sold outside is actually just a lot of what we will call 'bullshit' and does not represent reality. According to her:

> *But also, once you start working there, you come to realize it is not the same way as you sell it outside. I mean, I am in marketing, I have to sell the hotel and I know the passion points. I can make it cool and kinky, but after working here for a long time you get to know the other side of the coin. It is not as nice as it sounds. If you go to the back office, it is not as cool. - Samira, Marketing Executive, Hotel B*

Ronald also seemed to question some management decisions and sounded very frustrated when telling us that:

> *Sometimes there is not enough people working and when we get complaints from guests, let's say 70% of it is because of lack of staff. That is a management decision. - Ronald, Receptionist, Hotel B*

Along these lines, Ole told us that he has to follow certain procedures as predefined by brand standards that he seemed to completely disagrees with and we even got the impression he finds them rather ridiculous. He explained what the hotel staff is prescribed to do whenever the hotel accommodates VIP guests. He complained:

If there is a brand standard, there is a brand standard. Sometimes, I don't agree except when there is over 600 people in the hotel, but then we have VIP guests. We have to open our restaurant, because they don't want to sit with "normal" people. So, we have to open the restaurant and I don't agree because they can close the section in the breakfast restaurant and sit there. We then need to spend more money on more staff. - Ole, Restaurant Trainee, Hotel A

The above might imply the tendency of employees to distance themselves from certain brand standards in certain situations in cases where they do not agree with them. In these situations, it appeared that they, in fact, disidentified with particular brand aspects and management practices. Although from the interviews we understood that they still seemed to comply with brand regulations and not actively engaged in resisting them, but rather passively by regarding them with cynicism.

4.4 Summary of the Chapter

This section has provided the reader with a thorough presentation and analysis of the empirical data collected from Hotel A and B. The analysis on how the employer brand is presented to Millennials in Hotels International resulted in findings related to how the brand is communicated to and with Millennials, as well as the prospect to grow and advance ones' career within Hotels International (Table 3). We received varying answers with respect to how Millennials' perceive the employer brand in Hotels International, suggesting that brands are generally perceived differently by various people, depending on their receptiveness and interpretations. We discovered that to some interviewees the brand seemed to be more decisive than to others with regard to reasons why they work and enjoy working for Hotels International. Certain interviewees identify with the brand and what it stands for, whereas others seemed to be more at distance towards this. They do not identify with the brand but rather with other aspects of the organization, such as the environment, the task, the service, the job, or a purpose they formulated for themselves. These can be said to hint more towards organizational identification rather than brand identification. All in all, our findings indicate that there is brand (dis)identification as well as organizational (dis)identification, but these are not necessarily the same or congruent. This will further be developed in the following discussion chapter, where we will propose a framework (Figure 1) to shed more light on both, brand and organizational (dis)identification.

5 Discussion

"If we lift the lid on the slick and shiny branded world…"

(Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011).

…we might be exposed to a different picture, or at least a more nuanced view on the relationship between the two theoretical domains, employer branding and (dis)identification which we researched by taking an empirical focus on Millennials. Our original interest in this topic was grounded in filling a gap in current literature by looking more closely into this relationship and its implications. Throughout this thesis we aimed at understanding our two research questions "how is the employer brand presented to Millennials in Hotels International" and "how is the employer brand perceived by Millennials in Hotels International", thus, looking at two sides of one coin. By asking these two research questions, we noticed that the employer brand might actually not always be that decisive for employees. This has given rise to a further unpacking of the relationship between brand (dis)identification and organizational (dis)identification. What can be said already is that these two might not always align. Throughout the analysis process, it became apparent that the perception side more relevant than the presentation side which will be explained in later stages.

This chapter will discuss the important implication with regard to this relationship by introducing a new framework based on the findings from our analysis (Figure 1). We start by discussing some of our main findings in relation to branding work in order to highlight the construction of employer brands in two-way interactions, between employer and employee (Arvidsson, 2005; Kuhn & Nelson, 2002). Based on this we will introduce the framework on brand and organizational (dis)identification which outlines four different types of Millennials identified within our empirical research. Afterwards, we will lay out some (practical) implications for employer branding derived from the framework. We will end this chapter with a discussion about if there is some actual ground to the Millennial hype pushed forward mainly by popular press and consultancies.

5.1 Framework of Brand and Organizational (Dis)identification

Starting from our two initial research questions, two of our central findings are that people perceive the brand differently and that the employer brand might not always be the most

decisive factor in facilitating identification with the organization. Some interviewees did not seem very receptive to employer branding (messages), implying that not all branding attempts are unquestionably successful. These findings raise various questions, such as why the brand matters more to some than to others and prompted in the significance to further unpack the relationship between brand (dis)identification and organizational (dis)identification, which we will undertake by proposing a new framework (Figure 1) based on reviewed literature and on this study. By extending the literature on employer branding and (dis)identification, this framework will contribute to a better understanding of it.

From the literature review we know that an employer brand aims at making individuals incorporate the organizational identity into their own self-concept, which then supposedly enhances their identification with the organization overall (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). However, our findings overlap more with those of Edwards (2010), who argued that values among employees will vary to the same extent to which their perception of their respective employment experience will vary and consequently how they rate an employer's attractiveness.

Our material suggests at least some degree of ambiguity, since the currently employed Millennials that we have interviewed perceived and related to the employer brand in different terms. In some cases, interviewees even displayed a level of resistance and cynicism towards certain brand-prescribed procedures and management practices (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Tarnovskaya, 2011). In line with the social constructivism that applied to this study (Gergen, 2015), we acknowledge that individuals' perceptions of employer brands are subjective and depend on their receptiveness and own interpretations of certain brand attributes and messages, which makes it difficult to pinpoint to exactly which factors were decisive in facilitating brand and organizational identification.

5.1.1 Branding Work

To begin with the explanation of the framework, it is helpful to remind the reader that we intended to look at our topic through the lens of branding and identification as taking place in interactions. As the literature review suggested, employees are not just being branded by employers and organizations but can actively co-create employer brands, also referred to as branding work (Arvidsson, 2005; Cushen, 2009; Hatch & Schultz, 2013; Tarnovskaya, 2011). Based on this, we propose that an employer brand might thus not merely be presented but rather constructed by different stakeholders, which implies that organizations are indeed branded

spaces in constant flux (Arvidsson, 2005; Cushen, 2009). Further, changes in the work environment, such as the arrival of Millennials, might indeed constitute changes in employer branding practices (Özçelik, 2015). Hence, referring back to our two research questions that investigated both sides, presentation and perception, we argue that presentation does not happen in isolation. Employer brands are rather constructed in two-way interactions between employer and employees (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011). This also aligns with Arvidsson (2005), who points out that employees are no longer perceived as merely being branded by managerial practices but as actively participating in advocating and co-creating the brand. An employer brand might, thus, not be presented but rather constructed by different stakeholders.

From this we derive that employees are to some extent "central to the process of brand building" (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001, p.442). They are not passively branded. If their values do not align with the ones ascribed to employer brands and organizations than their credibility is undermined. This is essentially in line with the accounts on the active part of employees in terms of branding practices (Hatch & Schultz, 2013; Tarnovskaya, 2011). So, in other words, it is not just about employers presenting the employer brand, which would suggest a very one-sided communication, but it is also about the other side of the coin, of how employees, in our case Millennials actually perceive, receive, and respond to it, which defines their degree of identification. By considering both sides of the coin, presentation as well as perception we argue that alignment between these two might positively affect employees' identification process which is congruent with Backhaus and Tikoo (2004). In line with our findings, employees actively co-produce the branding process by actually not being receptive to it, not responding to it and essentially by portraying a degree of indifference, or even resistance or cynicism towards it (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Tarnovskaya, 2011). In short, employees can influence employer branding to a great extent, both positively and negatively (Arvidsson, 2005).

From our findings, we contend that the extent to which employer brands can be said to positively influence both brand identification and organizational identification depend on an individual's receptiveness to the messages it communicates and how they subsequently interpret and make sense of these (Edwards, 2010). Our findings clearly show that some Millennials were simply not receptive to the employer brand, which permeated into weak brand identification. This did, however, not automatically mean they could not identify with the organization. In similar lines, Van Dick, Wagner and Lemmer (2007) listed several factors such as an employer brand's prestige, positive status and reputation as defining for increasing

organizational identification. We can only partially agree with this, since the results of this study suggest that these factors play an important role for employer brand identification, but do not necessarily result in organizational identification. Based on the impression that many scholars do not seem to sufficiently differentiate between brand identification and organizational identification, we argue for a more refined view since both carry different implications which we will discuss on the basis of our proposed framework (Figure 1). We are aware that even though, this framework is a simplification of reality, we maintain the aim to offer a more nuanced view on employer branding and (dis)identification by distinguishing between brand and organizational (dis)identification.

5.1.2 Four Types of Millennials

It is apparent from our data that we can distinguish between brand (dis)identification and organizational (dis)identification, since our findings suggest that employees have different relations to both. From our findings, we derive that employees who portray a strong brand identification care first and foremost for the employer brand. The brand is the deciding reason for why they work for the company. These Millennials portray a level of indifference towards the rest of the organization. The opposite is true for weak brand identification, in which Millennials portray a certain amount of indifference towards the brand. Based on the results of our analysis, Millennials who can be characterized as to strongly identify with the organization do so, due to traditional organizational factors, whereas weak organizational identification implies that the company is not cared for.

In total, we found four categories that can be traced back to various answers we received across interviewees. We contend that each of these fields, as seen in the framework (Figure 1), help to shape a better understanding for employees and employers, by illustrating four types of Millennials to which we have denoted four different metaphors respectively, depending on the degree to which Millennials can be said to either strongly or weakly identify with the brand or the organization. To exemplify the four categories and respective metaphors we will share one quote from our previous analysis to illustrate each case.

It should be added that there is no logical reason for these categories to be exclusively for Millennials. As we will discuss after introducing this framework, interviewees did not give Millennial specific answers. In particular, the analysis revealed no situation in which interviewees portrayed any of the ascribed traits and attitudes claimed by consultancies and

popular press. From this we can conclude that Millennials are the latest hype, dreamed up by consultancies. Finally, in order to conceptualize and uncover the relationship between brand (dis)identification and organizational (dis)identification we will now take a closer look at the framework and its components (Figure 1).
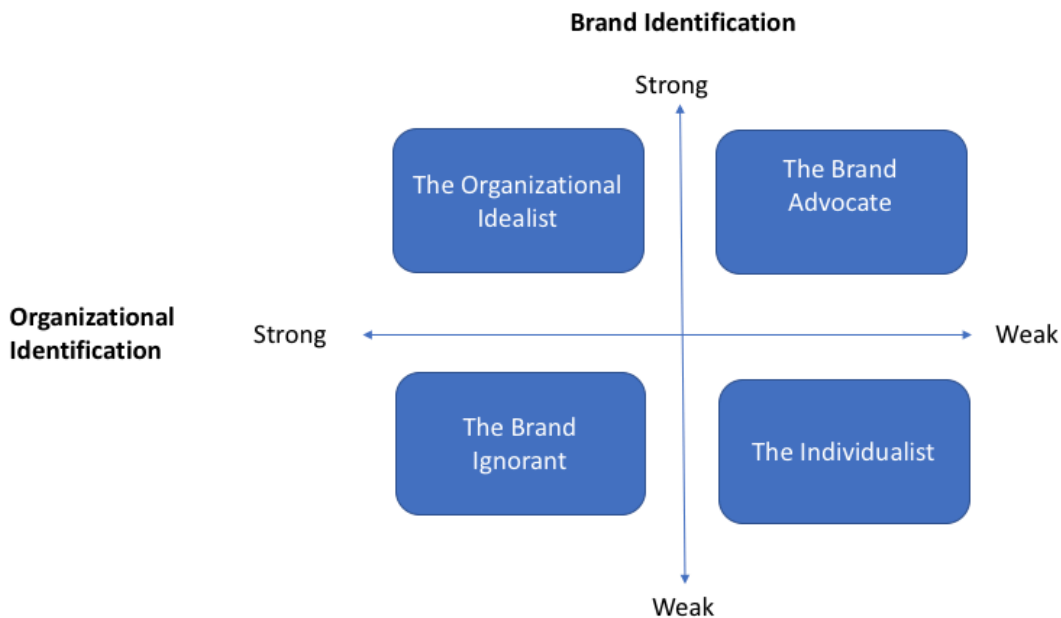
Brand Identification

Strong

The Organizational Idealist

The Brand Advocate

Organizational Identification

Strong ← → Weak

The Brand Ignorant

The Individualist

Weak

Figure 1. Types of Millennials

The Organizational idealist

We adopted the metaphor of an 'organizational idealist' to refer to the most compliant Millennial employee for organizations and employers, since in that category, brand identification and organizational identification are strong. According to the literature on employer branding and identification, employer brands and branding can support employees' identification with the brand and consequently with the organization (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Maxwell & Knox, 2009). If this is the case, employees are said to portray higher degrees of loyalty which is beneficial for companies (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011). After analyzing our data, we can confirm that certain aspects of these two statements from the literature were reflected in some of the answers we received from our interviews with Millennials. We argue that those interviewees who would fall under this field are those, who indicated that they value what the brand stands for. They are receptive to brand messages and interpret those according to how it is intended by employers. Millennials that we interviewed seemed to identify themselves with brand related as well as organizational-related factors. The organizational idealist is well summarized by the following quote from our interview with Sven:

I truly believe it is a great company to work at, because it gives you a lot of opportunities and they follow something that I recognize myself in as well. With 'put people first', with that thing, it might sound cliché, but I really believe, it is the right way. I like the idea behind it. - Sven, Front Office Supervisor, Hotel B

This quote proves that one type of Millennials in organizations can be classified as an ideal employee to some extent. As Sven pointed out he believes it is a great company to work for since he can personally relate to the organization and brand which implies both a strong brand and organizational identification. The fact that these Millennials are very receptive to brand messages, might at the same time make them also a potential subject to efforts of regulation and control by employers (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

The idea behind the metaphor of an 'organizational idealist' captures perfectly the content of "The Organization Man" in the classic management book by Whyte (1956). Due to gender sensitivity, we will refer to it as the organization person. Whyte (1956) describes the organization person as someone who subordinates himself to the demands of an organization, a conformist. "Only as he collaborates with others does he become worthwhile, for by sublimating himself in the group, he helps produce a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts" (Whyte, 1956, p.7-8)

The Brand Advocate
We accredited the metaphor 'brand advocate' to those Millennials who express a strong brand identification but a weak organizational identification. We chose this metaphor according to Maxwell and Knox (2009) who assert that employer branding has been voted as an effective strategy for encouraging employees to 'live the brand'. In this regard, an employer branding practices can positively affect an employee's identification process with the brand, potentially turning this type of Millennial into a brand advocate Charbonnier-Voirin, Poujol and Vignolles, 2016). The brand advocate is in favour of the employer brand and supports and recommends externally. The reason for restricting this advocacy only to externally is because Millennials from our research appeared be more superficial in that they value surface-level factors, such as prestige, status, brand name and their own career growth. From the analysis of our first research question we know that these brand attributes are aligned with how the employer brand is presented by Hotels International (see 4.2). Effectively, the employer brand provides meaning to the brand advocates, in terms of their own career aspirations. This category was echoed in

our findings and is well illustrated by Samira's statement, who was one of the Millennials that we have interviewed:

I came here for the name and I want to grow my career in Hotel B and this hotel brand represents myself (...) It is a brand that I really like, and it is really marketing oriented. - Samira, Marketing Executive, Hotel B

The quote demonstrates that this type of Millennials can relate to the brand and what it stands for. They value certain aspects of the brand and regard it as beneficial for their career advancement. The brand might represent an appealing entry on their CV that can open doors for them. Therefore, brand advocates are highly receptive for employer brand messages, resonate with these and ultimately consume the brand accordingly. In spite of this, Millennials under this field are not necessarily loyal to the organization. They portray a certain level of indifference towards the organization. The organization is not decisive in their job choice, the employer brand is. These individuals even seem to regard the employer brand as some kind of source of self-esteem (Lievens, van Hoye & Anseel, 2007). More specifically to our research context, those Millennials who fall under this category might switch hotels within the Hotels International brand portfolio. This might not be detrimental to Hotels International per se, it might just mean that more resources have to be spent on recruitment and training to familiarize new employees with a specific organization.

The Brand Ignorant

We assigned the metaphor 'the brand ignorant' to the category in which organizational identification is strong, whereas brand identification is weak. Millennials who fall under brand ignorant are those who portray indifference towards the brand and its attributes. This category is most clearly reflected in our findings by those Millennials who pointed at more traditional extrinsic and intrinsic organizational motives for working at that specific organizations, that do not stand in any direct relation with the employer brand. Extrinsic motives include material factors of the employment contract such as the salary and reward programs (Hennessey & Amabile, 2005). With respect to our research context, interviewees explicitly expressed their appreciation for the various award and loyalty programs of Hotels International. Additionally, intrinsic motives concern factors such as job-satisfaction, meaning and purpose regarding work and the feeling of "belongingness to the organization" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p.22; Hennessey & Amabile, 2005). Brand ignorant Millennials indicated that they like and want to

continue working in their respective hotels, amongst others, due to their colleagues, the working environment and the purpose they created for themselves which centered around delivering great service to customers. Additionally, in some cases some identify more with their task and job but not the brand. Anna's quote outlines this fairly well:

I think for me honestly saying is my colleagues. By that I mean, the culture. I feel safe, surrounded by good energy. People take care of each other. - Anna, Spa Therapist, Hotel A

This category is the opposite of the brand advocate in that brand ignorant Millennials work for the organization despite the employer brand and not because of it, since the brand does not issue much impression on them. Instead, the brand seemed rather irrelevant to them, which suggests that employer brands might not always have any deciding effect on employees. Furthermore, they even at times portrayed resistance or cynicism towards certain brand standards in situations when those did not align with their personal values and conceptions (Tarnovskaya, 2011).

The Individualist

Finally, the metaphor of 'the individualist' is suitable for the last category where Millennials neither identify with the brand nor with the organization. Employees in this category can be said to be loyal to themselves, and not the organization or their employer. Therefore, we propose that to these employees the brand of the organization does not matter. They identify rather with what they do, with their skill sets, abilities and passions and their own personal values. From this we derive that the individualist strongly identifies with his/her profession. In essence, although brand identification and organizational identification are weak, professional identification is strong. Employees under this category almost appear as free-lancers who work on their respective projects without being overly committed to particular employers long-term. Instead, they are comparatively indifferent towards brand and organization. They appear as relatively detached or at distance from the rest, such as their colleagues and broader organizational life which might also make them subject to resistance or cynicism (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Dukerich, Kramer, and McLean Parks, 1998; Tarnovskaya, 2011).

In our empirical material, this category only revealed itself during the interview with the chef. He explicitly highlighted that he is mostly concerned with cooking and mastering that skill and did not indicate at all that the organization matters to him in that regard. Instead, the prospect of being creative in what he does seemed most relevant, as well as the possibility to be free

from too many instructions, in order to imagine and create new dishes. He appeared to prioritize this over everything else:

For me it is just about becoming better and better in what I do, becoming more creative and provide amazing dishes. - Chris, Chef, Hotel A

The above carries important implications with regard to our reviewed literature. Many academic scholars in the field of employer branding and (dis)identification state that organizations and employers can influence employees' identification process to a great extent (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Maxwell & Knox, 2009). In spite of this, the individualist suggests that employees' identification processes are rarely that straightforward. Thus, we argue more along the lines Huzzard, Benner and Kärreman (2017) who mention that an individual's identity is constant flux, thereby resisting any manipulative and controlling efforts.

Furthermore, we initially thought that this field would be much more prevalent in our findings. Based on our literature review we assumed that Millennials would naturally fall much more under this category, since they are described as being less loyal to organizations (Great Place to Work, 2017) and according to Prokopeak (2013) they perceive that employers can be unreliable and thus avoid being overly committed to only one organization. However, referring back to our findings, we cannot confirm this notion made by popular press and consultancies.

5.2 (Practical) Implications for Employer Branding based on the Framework

The sections above raise various questions that still require some closer inspection. With regard to the framework (Figure 1) discussed above, the four types of Millennials that were identified, might carry important implications for managerial practices. More specifically, after our research and respective analysis of empirical material, we question to what extent our findings support more mainstream studies on employer branding (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Particularly, no sufficient evidence was found to support accounts on the crucial role of employer branding in facilitating identification between employee, employer and organization (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Edwards, 2010).

More specifically, even those Millennials who fall under the brand advocate and who were able to identify with the employer brand, showed no significant signs that they identify with the organization. Further, interviewees representing the brand ignorant category effectively

portrayed indifference towards the employer brand, indicated, nonetheless, that they identified with the organization. We emphasize that this is not due to the employer brand, but due to other organizational-bound factors. The individualist reflected in our finding, did simply not identify with neither. The data reported here appear to support the assumption that the effectiveness of employer branding might be overestimated at times and might, thus, not be that important in making Millennials identify with the organization.

Based on this, we challenge the general effectiveness of employer branding and contend that it might also just present a currently fashionable HRM tool which managers commonly adopt to follow this trend. Following DiMaggio and Powell (1983), this is not unusual in the corporate world. These authors refer to this phenomenon as 'isomorphism' which describes the "constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions" (p.149). If we place this into the context of this thesis, we can derive that employer branding might fall under isomorphism, which in other words means that HR and management use employer branding because everyone seems to do it. So, in essence, it might also be just another hype, just like the Millennials hype. Therefore, we argue that employer branding practices might oftentimes be overestimated, especially if used superficially (Barrow & Mosley, 2007).

In general, we advocate for more caution towards adopting best practices of employer branding, or so called one-fits-all approaches. These rather standardized approaches towards HRM might treat recruitment and retention issues in companies rather superficial (Barrow & Mosley, 2007; Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011). The commonality for HR and management to take on best practices is clearly shown in our data by the statement of the Recruitment Manager of Hotel A (ch.4.2.1). He told us that during designing his employer branding website he 'copied' what competitors were doing. From the sections above, we know that some interviewees indicated certain similarities with the four different categories we developed. One possible implication of this is that not all Millennials in Hotels International are able to identify with the employer brand and the organization. We argue, that this can be traced back to managements fairly surface-level approach towards employer branding. Therefore, we suggest that managers should take on a more customized, organization specific approach to employer branding.

Furthermore, we advocate towards a stronger internal component of employer branding practices. We suggest that employer branding should not merely be seen as an external

recruitment tool (Hoque, 2000), but also as an internal tool to communicate the employer branding messages amongst employees (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). During our analysis, we noticed that the Recruitment Manager of Hotel A always referred to their employer branding activities in terms of their recruitment strategy which might imply that they treat it more as an external tool. Nevertheless, he and another interviewee from HR recognized that employer branding needs to be more about not only "telling the story" but also "living the story." This might hint towards the potential benefit of a stronger internal component of employer branding practices.

Nevertheless, we remain cautious towards employer branding, since the framework suggests that managers might need to pay more attention towards specific organization-bound issues, instead of the employer brand in order to increase employee retention. On that basis, we contend that employer branding might just take the sight away from more pressuring issues within organizations, such as providing better extrinsic and intrinsic motivations such as meaningful work and loyalty programmes.

5.3 Is the Millennial Hype a Fad?

We were specifically interested in making a focus on Millennials, since they are a highly discussed, 'hot' topic in the business world right now (e.g., Espinoza & Ukleja, 2016; Gallup report, 2017; Prokopeak, 2013; Sinek, 2016). Throughout this thesis, we aimed to see to what extent the we might see the hype around Millennials reflected in our findings. When initially approaching our thesis topic, we assumed that there is some actual ground to the Millennial buzz. This hype which is rather laid out in a negative way, is mainly a reference to their ascribed distinctive traits and attitudes that are said to disrupt workplaces (Beall, 2017, Jenkins, 2018). Millennials are said to be less easily satisfied with their jobs, unless the job and preferably also the company exhibit a clear and meaningful purpose which is moral and ethical and has a positive impact somehow (Kowske, Rasch & Wiley, 2010; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Sinek, 2016). Additionally, consultancies and popular press seem to 'warn' organizations of their tendency to switch jobs more often compared to previous generations (e.g., Gallup, 2017; Great Place to Work, 2017; Jenkins, 2018; Memon & Kolachi, 2012). Yet, in line with Pfau (2016) we question if this tendency of theirs to change jobs can also be attributed to the more ephemeral routine of work life and not simply due to the fact that they are 'Millennials'.

There appears to be an elemental degree of ambiguity around the topic of Millennials (Desai & Lele, 2017). This is also mirrored in the results of our analysis, which are somewhat ambiguous and twofold, and which might also explain why they have not been a central topic in academic research. Based on our analysis and empirical chapter, it seems that on the one hand, HR and management of Hotels International implicitly target millennials. This can be detected by the way they try to speak to what is important to them, to find out what they buy in to and by specifically addressing them in their employer branding campaign "To the Journey" (Hotels International, 2017). From this we can derive that Millennials are indeed accounted for, or at least, employers appear to be aware of the hype around Millennials. On the other hand, however, just because they are aware of the hype does not necessarily mean that there is some actual ground to it. Since we received very varying answers on out topic from the Millennials we interviewed, we suggest that these stereotypical views and classifications of Millennials brought forward by popular press and consultancies cannot be generalized across a whole cohort of various people. Thus, after careful inspection of our empirical data we cannot fully support the existing accounts on the challenges caused by Millennials in the workplace, as suggested by current literature (e.g., Özçelik, 2015; Sinek, 2016). Rather, we question if there even are any significant differences between Millennials and non-Millennials.

Our findings suggest that the Millennial hype might be exaggerated by consultancies and popular press and is in reality just a fad. This point can also be supported by conventional wisdom that firstly, press, especially popular press needs a good story that sells, even if they have to make one up. Secondly, consultancies are commonly regarded as to produce problems where there are none as a means to generate profits (Alvesson, 2004). We therefore agree with Pfau (2016) who claimed that the current fascination with Millennials has created a new consultancy industry. As a consequence, we argue that with the Millennial hype, which is mostly a reference to their detrimental effects on workplaces, a world of reality is constructed that has commercial advantages but is built on sand.

5.4 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter has discussed our main findings from the previous analysis. In particular, this study has investigated our two research question through the lens of branding work, as a construct between two or more parties and has highlighted the active part of an employee in that regard. Thus, we have argued that it is insufficient to merely present the employer brand, since it seems much more to be about how this brand is perceived by employees, which determines their

identification process. Therefore, both sides of the same coin need to be looked at. We advocated for a more nuanced view on the relationship between employer branding and (dis)identification by distinguishing between brand (dis)identification and organizational (dis)identification. We conceptualized this relationship in a framework that is comprised of four categories. These categories have been assigned respective metaphors – the organizational idealist, the brand advocate, the brand ignorant and the individualist – to describe various degrees of brand and organizational (dis)identification. Along these lines, we have outlined some practical implications. Furthermore, in terms of the Millennial hype, we have questioned whether there is any actual ground to it or just constructed by consultancies and popular press for commercial benefits.

6 Conclusion

In this final chapter, we will revisit and conclude our two research questions, "how is the employer brand presented to Millennials in Hotels International" and "how is the employer brand perceived by Millennials Hotels International". With the material and data we were given, we aimed to consider employer branding from two perspectives. These research questions were based on our quest to investigate the relationship between employer branding and (dis)identification with the empirical focus on Millennials in the hospitality industry. Firstly, we will return to our research aims and contributions. Secondly, we will summarize and further discuss practical implications followed by suggestions for future research.

6.1 Research Aims and Contribution

Recent scholars on employer branding and (dis)identification seemed to have failed to sufficiently distinguish between organizational and brand identification and the role of the employer brand in that regard. Rather, they have given more general notions on identification (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). Therefore, the aim of this research was to reveal and enable a deeper understanding on the intersections of employer branding, and (dis)identification, through the empirical focus on Millennials. Our main findings indicated that there is brand (dis)identification as well as organizational (dis)identification, but that these are not necessarily the same or congruent. On that basis, we proposed the framework (Figure 1) that distinguishes

between brand and organizational (dis)identification and identifies four different types of Millennials within organizations.

The organizational idealist can be said to be to some extent 'brain washed' by the company. These types of Millennials resonate strongly with the brand and the organization. In essence they value what the brand stands for and at the same time also identify with the organization and their practices. The brand advocate highly identifies with the brand, but not with the organization. This type of employee values specific brand attributes, such as status, prestige and career growth within that brand, but on the other hand, the specific organization is not decisive in their job choice. The brand ignorant strongly identifies with the organization, yet not with the brand as much. More traditional organizational factors seem important to this category of employees. These concern extrinsic and intrinsic motives, such as colleagues, working environment and their job tasks. These Millennials might easily see themselves in another brand or even in a small local hotel. The last category, the individualist, represents the type of Millennial who does not identify with the brand, nor with the organization. The main purpose of this employee is to fulfil the job or the task, to gain certain skills and leave, when he/she is 'bored' of the routines or perhaps have to extend his/her own creativity somewhere else. This type of employee seems the least loyal to the company long-term.

From the framework, we derived that employer brands are generally perceived differently by various stakeholders, which aligns with the social constructivist theory applied in this research (Gergen, 2015). On that basis, perceptions are subjective and thus, reality is something that is created collectively through interactions (Prasad, 2005). On that ground, we argued that employer brands are also created collectively through interactions between employers and employees (Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Maxwell & Knox, 2008).

Based on mainstream literature (e.g., Ambler & Barrow, 1996), it seems as if it is commonly assumed that employer branding practices will affect employees the way intended and will facilitate identification. However, we did not see this reflected in our findings from our analysis, which is why we have highlighted the notion of branding work and the active part of employees in employer brand constructions in line with the accounts of more critical academic scholars of employer branding (Arvidsson, 2005; Cushen, 2009; Kärreman & Rylander, 2008; Maxwell & Knox, 2008). Based on this and from our findings, we can conclude that the employer brand is not merely a presentation from the management side, but rather that the employer brand is a

construct which is created from both sides, employer and employees (Arvidsson, 2005; Tarnovskaya, 2011).

Moreover, we established that an employer brand may not be always decisive for employees in general. One of our main findings was that Millennials do not necessarily identify with the employer brand or organization. They might even be resistant towards it (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Tarnovskaya, 2011). We questioned to what extent the employer brand is actually important, especially if approached superficially and that HR might benefit more from focusing on specific organization-bound issues, rather than the employer brand.

We also concluded from our research that the hype around Millennials, is just that, a hype. We were unable to find sufficient evidence to support the rather negative stereotypes that are assigned to this cohort of people, mainly by consultancies and popular press (Gallup, 2017; Jenkins, 2018, Sinek, 2016), that cannot be generalized across a whole cohort of various people. We argued that the negative connotation carried by Millennials is exaggerated. Ultimately the cross-sectional study raises the question if there is actually any solid basis for the excessive hype on Millennials as a distinct demographic and the problems they bring into the workplace. Contrary to expectations, this study did not find a significant difference between Millennials and non-Millennials. During the interviews, we could not detect any of the stereotypical views on them.

We are also aware of the fact that our own interpretations may have affected the research. Next to this, it is important to bear in mind that the Recruitment Manager of Hotel A set up the interviews for us which made us suspicious to what extent the answers from the interviewees are relevant and reliable for our research. Moreover, we observed that some of the interviewees may not always answered us truthfully due to their engagement to the company. The current findings will be shared with both hotels we collaborated with in order for them to pay more attention on this topic and develop it further. In fact, this research paper is created not only for the academic purpose but for the practical as well.

6.2 Practical Implications

The results have given rise to theoretical and managerial implications in terms of employer branding. When developing their organization's employer brand, managers should begin by understanding what employees might find attractive about their organization, which is in line

with Maxwell and Knox (2009). Managers should refrain from adopting best practice approaches of employer branding by following trends and fashions (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), but rather try to customize it to their organizational context. This is also consistent with the notion of the person-brand fit which ensures a level of congruence between employee and employer (Brannan, Parsons & Priola). Nevertheless, we advocated for a stronger internal component of employer branding in order to deal with retention issue and potentially increase loyalty to the company (Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Özçelik, 2015).

The framework on brand and organizational (dis)identification that we developed may help to shape a better understanding of different types of Millennials to employers. Four categories – the organizational idealist, the brand advocate, the brand ignorant and the individualist were determined based on the answers we received from the Millennials we interviewed. In spite of this, there is no logical reason why these categories cannot be used for non-Millennials, since no significant evidence was found to support the stereotypical views on Millennials. Nevertheless, these categories each refer to a different degree of brand and organizational identification. Although this framework is quite systemized and simplified, we argue that is has the potential to be generalized to different contexts. The framework can be considered as a tool for management to understand the relationship between employer branding, (dis)identification and Millennials better and undergo steps on creating suitable working conditions with regards to the brand the organization.

The framework can be especially useful for management, in order to positively influence their identification process. We argue that HR and management's focus should not entirely rely on employer branding to solve employee turnover issues, but instead also pay attention to other factors. From the framework we concluded that traditional organizational factors might be of importance, such as to provide meaningful work and learning opportunities. In terms of Millennials, we followed Pfau (2016), who states that management might benefit more from focusing on organizational aspects that lead all employees to apply, retain and perform at their best, in other words, to not distinguish too much between Millennials and non-Millennials.

Next to that, we suggest that employer brand messages should be communicated more internally towards current employees. In that regard, we advise managers to closely watch to what degrees their presentation of the employer brand aligns with how it really is in the company. This is important so that initial expectations of new recruits and even current

employees are met, which might prevent them from leaving and might facilitate higher engagement (Brannan, Parsons & Priola, 2011).

Lastly, with respect to Millennials, we would advise HR and management to be cautious towards the hype around them, which we have disposed as a myth as it seems to be built on sand. Companies should, thus, question in what ways this demographic cohort of various people affect their companies and should be remindful that there are most likely many positive sides to Millennials, that are however rarely discussed.

6.3 Suggestion for Future Research

We have addressed and analysed the research questions based on existing literature and our findings, even though this topic can be developed further. We argue that the effectiveness of employer branding might be overestimated, and hence suggest there is room for further research into this topic. Especially with regard to best practices and the differentiation between internal and external employer branding. Internal employer branding might also carry important implications with regard to normative control and regulation of employees (Cushen, 2009), which could be further researched.

However, possibly, the employer brand and branding activities might have some kind of subconscious effect on employees that they are not even aware of. Why else would Millennials seem to comply with certain brand standards they do not agree with? Why else do they feel part of the family? Why else do they care so much about providing excellent service and put the customer first? This might benefit from further research.

It might be particularly interesting to study a larger scale of people within one organization to collect more responses or compare different hotel brands and industries which might generate a better overview of the research theme. Also, more research could be done on Millennials to see to what extent this cohort distinguishes itself from other ones.

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8 Appendix A

Interviews for HR and management

<u>General Questions</u>

- How long have you been working for this hotel?
- What is your position at this hotel?
- Have you worked in Hotels International before?

<u>Specific Questions</u>

- How do you present the brand? / What image are you (the hotel) trying to create?
- What are you doing in order to promote the brand?
- Are you aware of millennial trends and traits? If so, how do you incorporate that into the brand?
- What specific practices do you do to attract and retain employees?
- What kind of recruitment/retention problems do you experience with Millennials?
- How would you prevent high staff turnover? (If you would be in charge)

<u>"To the Journey" campaign</u>

- Are you aware of the brand campaign "To the Journey? If yes, can/do you relate to it?
- How significant is the brand campaign "To the Journey" in recruiting Millennials?

9 Appendix B

Interviews for Millennials

<u>General Questions</u>

- How long have you been working for this hotel?

- What is your position at this hotel?

- Have you worked in Hotels International before?

<u>Specific Questions</u>

- How do you perceive the brand?

- How does the brand express itself?

- How important is the brand to you (in everyday work life)?

- Can you relate and identify to the brand?

- Were you aware of the brand beforehand? If yes, how?

- In what ways was the brand important to you during application?

- Are you aware of the values (brand) of the hotel chain? / Can you identify with the values?

- Can you see yourself at this company in next 5 years?

- Does this job meet your initial expectations?

- How do you rate your work-life balance?

- Do you see clashes in how employees from different generations behave? Do they have different needs and demands? And if so, what are they?

- Have you experienced any personal and professional growths since you have started here?

- In what ways do you feel supported by management?

- How would you prevent high staff turnover? (If you would be in charge)

<u>"To the Journey" campaign</u>

- Are you aware of the brand campaign "To the Journey? If yes, can/do you relate to it?

- How significant was the brand campaign "To the Journey" when you applied?