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The Perceived Innovativeness of Employer Brands

A Qualitative Investigation of the Meaning, Sources, and Role of Employer
Brands' Innovativeness from the Perspective of Talents

by

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Keywords	Perceived Innovativeness, War for Talents, Employer Brand Management, Brand Knowledge, Brand Stimuli
Thesis purpose:	The purpose of the thesis is to explore and understand the meaning, sources, and role of brands' perceived innovativeness to talents due to the proposed importance of the attribute within the so-called war for talents as well as contemporary theoretical and practical discourse.
Methodology:	In accordance with the relativistic and interpretivist stance taken, a qualitative methodology is adapted through the utilization of semi-structured interviews and the application of an abductive research approach.
Theoretical Perspective:	The perceived innovativeness of employer brands from the perspective of talents is studied through a theoretical framework that blends brand, marketing, and human resource theory. Within these fields the overarching theoretical notions of brand knowledge, brand associations, brand stimuli and employer value propositions are utilized to address the research question.
Empirical Data:	23 semi-structured online interviews were conducted with talents, which are defined as technology or business students that aim to start their professional career within 18 months. The interview transcripts are the foundation for the analysis and subsequent findings.
Results:	The empirical data generated through the interviews results in multiple findings as well as subsequent theoretical considerations. First of all, the results highlight that the meaning of innovativeness to talents is fragmented and multidimensional and furthermore adds various new aspects to prevalent notions of innovativeness. Additionally, the results indicate a broad spectrum of brand stimuli that can be considered as sources of talents' perception of employer brands' innovativeness. Moreover, the results reveal three sources of subjectivity that seem to influence talents' brand knowledge and resulting brand evaluations. Finally, the results provide arguments for a reconsideration of the role of innovativeness in the attraction of talents, which might be different and less influential than expected.
Practical Implications:	The thesis leads to two alternative directions which managerial practice is encouraged to choose from: Either to forget about innovativeness in the context of perception and avoid its application in all talent facing activities or to manage the perceived innovativeness of brands with more attention to the details of its complex nature.

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1. Introduction

What do Google, Amazon and Apple have in common? They are all not only corporations from the technology sector, but also portrayed to be innovative, even the world's most innovative companies according to the Boston Consulting Group (Ringel et al., 2019). A further commonality of them is that they are all listed amongst the most attractive employers of present times (Roth, 2019; Universum Global, 2019). Are these commonalities between Google, Amazon and Apple just a coincidence or the result of an actual link between corporations' innovativeness and attractiveness as an employer?

Previous theoretical and managerial research on the matter points towards the second option. The link between corporations' innovativeness and employer attractiveness has been discussed with prominence. Across a great selection of research, corporations' innovativeness has been depicted as crucial in the attraction of employees (Berthon, Ewing & Hah, 2005; Bonaiuto et al., 2013; Mosley, 2012; Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017). Several reasons for the appeal of innovativeness to employees have been proposed, ranging from the general credibility (Cheng-Hsui, 2001), over the increased financial performance (Eisingerich & Rubera, 2010), to the more interesting, creative and exciting character of such employers (Slaughter & Greguras, 2009). In that context innovativeness seems not only to have an appeal to employees that are already working for other, competing employers (EY, 2018), but also to students that are looking for their first employer after the completion of their educational career (EY, 2018; Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017). Within the context of the latter, innovativeness is even proposed as the most important employer attribute for technology students and at least the third most important attribute for business students (Mosley, 2012; Universum Global, 2019). The reach of such observations becomes clear, when reflecting upon the intense competition that employers are facing.

Across the world corporations express concerns and worries regarding the lack of talented employees that are required to achieve sustained success (Elving et al., 2013; Mosley, 2012; Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017; Wilden, Gudergan & Lings, 2010). Even throughout the most recent global financial crisis (2007-2009) the lack of such employees continued to increase (Prising, 2018). From this lack arises an intense competition between employers for the limited amounts of talented employees that are available (Elving et al., 2013). Even though this competition has been ongoing for decades and became a prominent field of theoretical and practical discourse, it took until 1998 that it was given its popular name, the so-called war for talents (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). Since then talents have been defined in numerous ways, depending on the perspective taken and the persons asked (Edwards, 2017). As the perspectives around talents, also the disciplines dealing with the attraction of talents changed throughout the time. Historically it has been a subject dedicated to the discipline of human resources. Recently, resulting from the broader perspective of corporate brand management, the attraction of talents also became a point of discourse within brand management, which evolved into the focused discipline of employer brand management (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Roper & Fill, 2012). What these disciplines have in common is their acknowledgment of the complexity that is linked to the attraction of talents as thousands of employers are hunting for the same talent

(Elving et al., 2013), but also their focus on the establishment of a preferable brand perception in talents' minds for attributes that those feel attracted to (Martin et al., 2005; Roper & Fill, 2012). Reflecting back to the outlined emphasis on the relevance of innovativeness, it appears logical that 32% of the world's most valuable brands leverage it as an attribute in their brand identity and 74% use it prominently in their brand communications (Interbrand, 2020).

1.1 Research Problem

Whether or not an emphasis of the attribute in branding and marketing is a viable way for employer brands to achieve a perception of innovativeness is far from known, even though innovation and innovativeness are old rather than new fields of research. As early as 1934 Schumpeter wrote about innovation as new combinations of existing resources, knowledge, or other factors (Fagerberg, 2006). Since then innovation and its meaning have been scrutinized and discussed from multiple perspectives such as products, processes, marketing, management, and economics (Garcia et al., 2002). Innovativeness on the other hand is considered as the continuous production or creation of innovations over time. Similar to innovation its meaning has been discussed from various angles (Hauser, Tellis & Griffin, 2006). Corporations' number of patents (Höflinger, Nagel & Sandner, 2018) or their degree of product newness (Garcia & Calantone, 2002) are two examples of objective and measurable constituents that have been posited as the meaning of innovativeness.

What unifies this traditional research is that it conceptualizes innovativeness and innovation from an internal, corporate perspective. In opposition to that, the management of perception requires insights into the perspective of stakeholders such as consumers or talents and thus, an external instead of internal perspective on corporations. Therefore, the knowledge gained through traditional research on innovation and innovativeness is not transferable to the understanding and management of perception, where subjective rather than objective constituents are important. Recognizing this potential disparity in understanding, recent research has started to focus on what is called perceived innovativeness (Shams, Alpert & Brown, 2015). In this stream of research the subjective perception of innovativeness from the perspective of external stakeholders moves into focus.

Here, the perceived innovativeness of corporations has been investigated throughout the perspective of external stakeholders such as consumers (Lowe & Alpert, 2015; Shams, Alpert & Brown, 2015) or experts of other corporations (Lee & Colarelli O'Connor, 2003) as well as with different focal points, be it product, firm, or brand. Firstly, perceived product innovativeness has been proposed as the degree of product newness and improvement over similar existing alternatives (Lowe & Alpert, 2015). Secondly, perceived firm innovativeness has been described as an enduring firm capability that results in new, creative, and impactful solutions or ideas (Kunz, Schmitt & Meyer, 2011). Lastly, perceived brand innovativeness has been posited as the brand's perceived ability to provide new and useful solutions to consumer's needs (Eisingerich & Rubera, 2010). What the three different perspectives have in common, other than emphasizing the role of newness, is that they are all based on consumers' point of view and their perceptions or proposed perceptions of what constitutes innovativeness.

Despite its emphasized importance and potential differences towards the perception of other, previously investigated stakeholder groups, talents' perception of employer brands' innovativeness has so far not been explored. More specifically a profound exploration of three different but interrelated aspects is missing. Firstly, the meaning that talents associate with the perceived innovativeness of employer brands. Here, it could be assumed that the meaning of innovativeness to talents overlaps with the meaning to consumers. However, this has to our knowledge not been investigated prior. Therefore, we are left with assumptions rather than knowledge regarding the meaning of innovativeness to talents. Secondly, the sources from which talents' perception of employer brands' innovativeness originates from. Again it could be assumed that those overlap with the sources from which consumers' perception of brands' innovativeness originates from, namely corporations' products, services, and processes (Brexendorf & Keller, 2017; Henard & Dacin, 2010; Shams, Alpert & Brown, 2015). However, the distinct focus of talents on corporations casts doubts on the precision of those sources of perception. At the same time it is unknown if the general sources of brand perception that are proposed in the general context of employer brand management (Cable & Turban, 2001; Pavitra, 2018; Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen, 2013; Theurer et al., 2018; Van Hoye & Lievens, 2009) also affect talents' innovativeness perception. Thirdly, the role of innovativeness in terms of talents' attraction to employers, which has been emphasized and proposed prior (Berthon, Ewing & Hah, 2005; Mosley, 2012; Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017), but neither investigated in detail nor in qualitative elaboration with talents themselves. The exploration of these three aspects marks the starting point of this research.

1.2 Research Purpose & Question

The purpose of this thesis is the dissolution of the contrast that arises between the emphasis of the importance of employer brands' perceived innovativeness in theoretical and practical discourse as well as the simultaneous absence of a profound understanding of what such perception means and encloses, and from which sources it originates. In this context the thesis also aims to further explore the role of employer brands' perceived innovativeness itself as a detailed and qualitative elaboration with talents themselves seems to be missing. As such the research is located within the intersection of the field of perceived innovativeness, the stakeholder group of talents and the discipline of brand management. Within this intersection the following research question is formulated:

- *What are the meaning, sources and role of employer brands' innovativeness in the perception of talents?*

Building on the premise of the research stream of perceived innovativeness, we argue that a holistic understanding of talents' perception of employer brands' innovativeness requires their involvement in the knowledge creation (Lowe & Alpert, 2015). Following this, a qualitative approach was chosen as part of which we conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with talents, defined as business or technology students that aim to start their professional career within 18 months. The interviews provided us with 304 pages of empirical material, from which multiple findings and subsequent theoretical considerations and managerial implications evolved.

1.3 Research Contribution

The thesis at hand contributes to brand management and market research practice as well as academic discourse. An advanced understanding of the meaning and role of innovativeness from the perspective of talents benefits brand management in a fourfold manner. Firstly, it serves practitioners with greater insights into the attributes that constitute employer brands' perceived innovativeness in the minds of talents. Secondly, it benefits managerial practice with an overview on the brand stimuli and sources of subjectivity that can shape talents' perception of brands' innovativeness, which opens up the opportunity to manage those sources of perception in a more effective and efficient manner. Thirdly, it provides practitioners with an advanced awareness for the complexity and difficulties that can result from the usage of attributes with multidimensional and fragmented meanings in brand identities and communications. Finally, it generates valuable knowledge on the distinctive characteristics and perspective of talents as a critical stakeholder group for corporations and their brands. Simultaneously, it serves market research practice as it adds precision to the investigation and measurement of employer brands' innovativeness and its role in talents' evaluation of employers' attractiveness, which opens up the opportunity for more detailed and profound conclusions, implications and actions drawn from it.

Besides that, it contributes to the recently evolving academic discourse on the perceived innovativeness of brands and corporations through the exploration of the talent's perspective. Here, the research reveals the fragmented and multidimensional meaning of innovativeness in the perception of talents, that expands existing theoretical definitions as well as previous observations made from the perspective of other corporate stakeholder groups. At the same time the research provides an overview of potential sources of talents' perception. Those take shape in the form of a range of different brand stimuli as well as three sources of subjectivity that seem to influence talents' brand knowledge and thus, the foundation of their brand perception. Finally, the research offers arguments for a reconsideration of the importance and role of perceived innovativeness emphasized in the theoretical discourses of employer brand management and human resources.

1.4 Thesis Disposition

To provide the reader of our thesis with an advanced orientation, this first chapter concludes with an overview of the six overarching chapters through which we will address the formulated research question. The first chapter, which is concluded throughout the following lines, introduced the background, problem and question to the research. The second chapter provides a review of the existing academic research in the broader field of innovation and innovativeness as well as the more specific field of perceived innovativeness. Throughout the third chapter we furthermore present the theoretical framework to the research question under investigation, which compiles several theoretical building blocks and is summarized in an analytical framework on which our research is based upon. The fourth chapter focuses on the methodological foundation of our work. Included within are detailed descriptions of the foundational philosophy, design, data collection method, analysis approach and quality of our

research. In subsequent to that, the fifth chapter presents the findings and analysis of the research, which are in accordance with the research question divided into three sections of findings and respective analytical considerations. The sixth and last chapter concludes the thesis by summarizing its main aspects, findings, theoretical contributions, and practical implications as well as outlining general limitations and directions for further research in the future.

2. Past Research on Innovativeness

Throughout the following chapter we aim to provide the reader with a review on the current state of academic research and knowledge in the field under investigation. This includes an overview on the knowledge evolving from the traditional, corporate perspective on innovation and innovativeness as well as an exploration of the present knowledge on perceived innovativeness, including the focal points products, firms, brands, and organizations.

2.1 Innovation & Innovativeness

The two words 'innovation' and 'innovativeness' are not the same. Although they often are used interchangeably their meanings are different (Kim, Tang & Bosselman, 2018). Traditionally, innovation has been focused on the outputs of newly created elements or a new combination of existing elements derived from corporations' activities (Schumpeter, 1934, cited in Fagerberg, 2016) and it is different from an invention in the sense that it provides economic value and is implemented and spread to other parties that the one 'creating' it (Garcia & Calantone, 2002). Courtright and Smudde (2009) argue that there are two fundamental views on innovation. On the one side, from the organization's point of view, innovation is about the organization's capability to create new and better products and services – a view similar to that of Schumpeter. On the other side, from the market's point of view, innovation is about how the newer and better products as well as services get into and spread throughout socio-economic systems (Courtright & Smudde, 2009). Worth mentioning is that the definitions used within marketing, management, and engineering vary extensively (Garcia & Calantone, 2002), but Rogers (2010, p.11) definition of innovation: "... an idea, practice, or object which is perceived as new by the individuals or other units of adoption." is possibly the most common one due to its broadness. Furthermore, Rogers' definition includes the important part of perception which will be elaborated upon later.

Innovativeness on the other hand can be seen at a top level as the consequent production or creation of innovations over time and is most commonly used as a measure of the degree of 'newness' of an innovation (Garcia & Calantone, 2002). However, like the meanings and definitions of innovation differ, the meanings and definitions of innovativeness also differ depending on the context - be it marketing, technology, management, or economics (Hauser, Tellis & Griffin, 2006). Garcia and Calantone (2002) argue for different contexts as the reasons to the differences of definitions. Hult, Hurley and Knight (2004, p.304) define innovativeness as "… the capacity to introduce some new process, product, or idea in the organization." in their study on innovativeness impact on business performance. Even though the definition is rather broad, Kim, Tang and Bosselman (2018) argue that this definition has seen wide use in academia. The definition shares similarities with Rogers' (2010) definition of innovation in the sense that 'new' takes the centerstage. However, it is an internal perspective that neglects what people external to the corporation consider. This is problematic since the meaning of innovativeness to consumers is disparate to that of the corporation (Lee & Colarelli O'Connor, 2003).

Lee and Colarelli O'Connor (2003) highlight that innovativeness have been operationalized at various stages of analysis. Furthermore, they emphasize that the measurements applied vary between the perspectives. While Garcia and Calantone (2002) argue for the degree of newness as the sign of being innovative, Höflinger et al. (2018) assert that patents are considered to be the ultimate and acknowledged measurement of an organization's innovative performance. Thus, the brand with the most frequent, advanced, and newest output of innovations should be considered as the most innovative brand. However, there are strong signs that subjective perceptions of innovative performance might differ from these objectively measurable criteria (Höflinger, Nagel & Sandner, 2018). The above mentioned types of definitions and descriptions of innovativeness and innovation seem reasonable from an engineering or production standpoint but should not be applied in brand management neither used as guidance for brand communication since these are not about products, technology or patents, but the perception of stakeholders.

Recent research has started to look into what has been called perceived innovativeness (Lowe & Alpert, 2015) and the overarching concepts of reputation for innovativeness (Henard & Dacin, 2010), perceived product innovativeness (Garcia & Calantone, 2002), perceived firm innovativeness (Kunz, Schmitt & Meyer, 2011), perceived brand innovativeness (Brexendorf & Keller, 2017; Hetet, Ackermann & Mathieu, 2019; Shams, Alpert & Brown, 2015), and perceived organizational innovativeness (Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017). What these research streams and concepts have in common is that they are focusing on the perception of innovativeness, a subjective viewpoint from the beholder that does not have to be shared by others. In addition to that, they emphasize an external viewpoint on innovativeness in opposition to previous definitions that define innovation and innovativeness from a conceptualized corporate perspective. The following sections will explain the differences and similarities between the outlined concepts in detail.

2.2 Perceived Product Innovativeness

As mentioned prior, innovativeness has long been evaluated with the 'degree of newness' (Garcia & Calantone, 2002). Highly innovative products are thus those products that are seen as having a high degree of newness while low innovative products are the opposite. Garcia and Calantone (2002), who conducted a literature review on the topic, continue to argue that based on the literature one can either look at product innovativeness from a macro- or a micro-perspective. From the macro perspective, innovativeness translates to the capacity of the innovation to create a paradigm shift in the industry, whereas from the micro perspective innovativeness is the capacity "... of a new innovation to influence the firm's existing marketing resources, technological resources, skills, knowledge capabilities or strategy." (Garcia & Calantone, 2002, p.113). The latter perspective thus views product innovativeness as something that is either new to the corporation or new to the customers of the corporation. Unfortunately, Garcia and Calantone fail to provide a definition of what 'new' or 'newness' means in this context.

Lowe and Alpert (2015) are on a similar note when they state that the main approach to define perceived product innovativeness (PPI) is to decide how new the product is, but they argue that it is not sufficient even though it is of importance. To them 'newness' is defined as "… perceived concept newness - how new or different consumers perceive the product concept to be." (Lowe & Alpert, 2015, p.3). Other than new, their research shows that a product has to provide a significant improvement to consumers to be considered innovative. Therefore, Lowe and Alpert (2015, p.4) define consumer perceived product innovativeness as "… the perceived degree of newness and improvement over existing alternatives.". Put simply, an innovative product is newer and better than other products. They further stress that the concept of the product needs to be perceived as new in order for the product to be perceived as innovative (Lowe & Alpert, 2015). As an example: an existing product just with a renewed packaging can still be perceived as innovative.

Fu and Elliot (2013, p.260) are on a similar line as Lowe and Alpert (2015) when they define PPI in the following way: "Perceived product innovativeness reflects the degree to which a new product is viewed as possessing new and unique attributes and features as compared to other products in the category from a consumer's perspective.". Notable in their definition is that as long as the product has some "new and unique attribute" or "feature" it can be perceived as innovative by the consumer. In their study they showcase that PPI directly influences consumers' purchase intentions, but points toward that when "truly new" product categories are assessed the approach is based on potential future benefits rather than past experiences (Fu & Elliott, 2013). They argue that this is a sign that attitudes can be influenced through new information. The academic discourse on PPI has thus been focused on what Garcia and Calantone (2002) denote as the micro perspective, focusing on corporations and consumers rather than paradigmatic changes.

2.3 Perceived Firm Innovativeness

While consumer perceived product innovativeness can be seen as a micro perspective focusing on one element of the corporation, consumer perceived firm innovativeness (PFI) reflects a more overarching perspective. Simply because the products of a firm are perceived as innovative, the firm does not have to be perceived as innovative as a whole (Garcia & Calantone, 2002; Kunz, Schmitt & Meyer, 2011). Kunz, Schmitt, and Meyer (2011, p.816) define PFI in the following way: "… the consumer's perception of an enduring firm capability that results in novel, creative, and impactful ideas and solutions.". The conceptualization is thus grounded in the consumer's point of view and considers innovativeness as a capability rather than a descriptor. In their article they conclude that a firm can create the perception of being innovative by focusing on creative ideas that result in new solutions which have an impact on the market (Kunz, Schmitt & Meyer, 2011). A conclusion that is mirrored in their stated definition. Furthermore, they argue that the opposite also holds as it is not possible for firms to be seen as innovative if their creative efforts fail.

There is an overlap between perceived product innovativeness and perceived firm innovativeness which is apparent in Henard and Dacin's (2010) concept of reputation for

product innovation. Henard and Dacin (2010, p.321-322) scrutinized how a firm's reputation for product innovation, which they define as "… a constituent-specific perception of a firm's track record of product innovations, degree of creativity, and potential for continued innovative activity in the future." impacts consumers. Thus, they take a similar, but adjusted stance than Kunz, Schmitt and Meyer (2011) when they solely focus on perception, rather than a capability, while still agreeing that a reputation for product innovation (RPI) is specific to one individual. Arguably, reputation for product innovativeness and perceived firm innovativeness should be seen as similar descriptions of the same phenomenon. Although, bearing in mind that innovative products alone are not sufficient for the firm to be perceived as innovative. In their research they propose that if a firm has a high level of RPI, consumer loyalty and excitement is increased (Henard & Dacin, 2010). However, they argue that it takes time to create such perception and thus achieve its benefits.

2.4 Perceived Brand Innovativeness

Like all of the perceived innovativeness literature, consumer perceived brand innovativeness (CPBI) is a subjective assessment that is grounded in consumers' perception (Eisingerich & Rubera, 2010; Hetet, Ackermann & Mathieu, 2019; Shams, Alpert & Brown, 2015). While PFI is located at the firm level, CPBI or simply brand innovativeness is naturally situated at the brand level. Hetet, Ackermann and Mathieu (2019, p.1) have conducted the, to our knowledge, most recent and comprehensive research on the subject, where they define brand innovativeness in the same way as Eisingerich and Rubera (2010, p.66) do: "… the extent to which consumers perceive brands as being able to provide new and useful solutions to their needs.". Once again, a simplistic product-oriented definition of what innovativeness entails is applied. The stated definition shares characteristics and is tied to the previously mentioned definitions in the sense that a firm's innovativeness is dependent on its capability to deliver innovative offerings (Hetet et al., 2019, Kunz et al., 2011). Shams, Alpert, and Brown (2015) propose that it takes time to build CPBI, similar to PFI. However, it also encompasses the totality of the brands' offerings, not only specific singular products. Furthermore, it has been suggested that it is further differentiated from PPI by being associated with other associations such as "wow" or "colour" (Shams, Alpert & Brown, 2015). Closely related to CPBI is Corporate Brand Innovativeness, which Brexendorf and Keller (2017, p.1535) describe as corporations' reputation for providing "... novel and useful solutions for its constituents.". Consequently, the corporate brand's reputation does not only apply to consumers but the entirety of the corporation's stakeholders. They further emphasize that such provision should be done in a reliable manner (Brexendorf & Keller, 2017).

What then creates the perception of a brand being innovative and what does it lead to? It has been suggested that if a brand's flagship product is an innovative product, it can act as a key signal for CPBI (Hubert et al., 2017). Additionally, it has been argued for that to create perceptions of brand innovativeness, managers should focus on developing advanced technologies and superior design in their product offerings (Shams, Alpert & Brown, 2015). Thus, CPBI is closely linked to corporations' product catalogs. It has been suggested that CPBI leads to advertising flexibility (Barone & Jewell, 2014), customer loyalty (Kunz, Schmitt &

Meyer, 2011) and commitment (Eisingerich & Rubera, 2010). Furthermore, CPBI correlates with the intention to buy (Hubert et al., 2017). However, it is not an easy task to achieve a reputation for innovativeness and thus be perceived as innovative by external stakeholder groups.

2.5 Perceived Organizational Innovativeness

As a combination of perceived brand innovativeness and perceived firm innovativeness, one can find perceived organizational innovativeness. As noted, perceived firm innovativeness is to a large extent dependent on product innovativeness or the degree of newness (Garcia & Calantone, 2002). Besides that, it is also dependent on the organization's capability to be open to new ideas, being creative and having a willingness to change (Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017). However, as with the entirety of the perceived innovativeness discourse there is no consensus regarding the foundational factors of perceived organizational innovativeness neither there is one agreed upon definition (Shams, Alpert & Brown, 2015; Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017). Sommer, Heidenreich and Handrich (2017, p.301) define perceived organizational innovativeness as "… a company's ability to develop new ideas and to engage in creative processes which result in new products, services or technological processes.". Thus, they provide a similar definition to Kunz, Schmitt, and Meyers' (2011, p.816) definition of PFI but omit the essential stakeholder perspective. In their research it is however evident that they incorporate a stakeholder perspective even though it is not explicitly stated, since they are reviewing the importance of perceived innovativeness from a talents' perspective (Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017). Furthermore, they argue that perceived organizational innovativeness is two folded. On the one side there is innovative culture and on the other product portfolio innovativeness. They assert that compared to the employers location, popularity and size, which they term the 'traditional determinants of employer attractiveness', innovative culture and product portfolio innovativeness exhibit a greater effect on employer attractiveness and thus, can be considered as the most important of the two (Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017).

Perceived innovativeness is as noted of importance to potential employees. Potential employees view corporations that are more innovative as more interesting, exciting, unique, creative, and original (Slaughter & Greguras, 2009). Research conducted by Bonaiuto et al. (2013) showcases that one of the most idealized brand attributes[1] among aspiring employees are corporations' abilities to innovate and thus, being innovative. In their study they consider innovativeness as an inherent organizational capacity to adapt to the market. Sommer, Heidenreich and Handrich (2016) who specifically studied the effect of perceived innovativeness on employer attractiveness found that it enhances employer attractiveness. Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005) further argue that innovativeness is an important aspect of employer attractiveness as it is an aspect of what they call interest value. Lastly the prominent employer brand management researcher Mosley (2012) asserts with the support from a study conducted by Universum Global that innovativeness is one of the most sought-after corporate

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[1] The theoretical notion of brand attributes will be further elaborated upon in the upcoming chapters.

brand characteristics among talents. As showcased, innovativeness is sought after by talents and potential employees overall. However, what constitutes innovativeness and which attributes that shape the perception is not as clear and well researched as with the case of consumers. In Table 1, a summary of the multiple definitions used within the different perspectives is provided to showcase the similarities but also the varying focal points.

Table 1. Overview of Definitions. Displays the different definitions used within the perspectives.

Perspective	First Author	Definition	Attributes
Innovation	Rogers (2010)	An idea, practice, or object which is perceived as new by the individuals or other units of adoption.	New, Personal, Usage, Idea, Practice, Object
Innovativeness	Hult (2004)	The capacity to introduce some new process, product, or idea in the organization.	New, Openness, Changing, Process, Product, Idea
Perceived Product Innovativeness (PPI)	Lowe (2015)	The perceived degree of newness and improvement over existing alternatives.	Newness, Impact, Significant improvement, Personally relevant
	Fu (2013)	The degree to which a new product is viewed as possessing new and unique attributes and features as compared to other products in the category from a consumer's perspective.	New, Unique, First
Perceived Firm Innovativeness (PFI)	Kunz (2011)	The consumer's perception of an enduring firm capability that results in novel, creative, and impactful ideas and solutions.	Novel, Creative, Impactful, Enduring
Reputation for Product Innovation (RPI)	Henard (2010)	A constituent-specific perception of a firm's track record of product innovations, degree of creativity, and potential for continued innovative activity in the future.	Creative, New, Continuous, Excitement
Perceived Brand Innovativeness (CPBI)	Eisingerish (2011)	The extent to which consumers perceive brands as being able to provide new and useful solutions to their needs.	New, Useful, Fulfilling
	Hetet (2019)*	The extent to which consumers perceive brands as being able to provide new and useful solutions to their needs.	New, Useful, Fulfilling
	Shams (2015)	Consumers' perception of a brand's track record of product innovations, degree of creativity, and potential for continued innovative activity in the future in a given market.	New, Creative, Continuous, Different, Special, Useful
Perceived Corporate Brand Innovativeness (PCBI)	Brexendorf (2017)	A firm's reputation in providing novel and useful solutions for its constituents.	Novel, Useful, Reliable, Consistent
Perceived Organisational Innovativeness (POI)	Sommer (2017)	A company's ability to develop new ideas and to engage in creative processes which result in new products, services or technological processes.	New, Creative, Continuous

* Hetet et al. (2019) use the same definition as Eisingerish & Rubera (2010)

To sum up, the traditional internal corporate perspective on innovation and innovativeness is a thoroughly researched domain, the external subjective focus of perceived innovativeness is rather new. The perceived innovativeness literature thus marks the start of a research stream that aims to encapsulate and answer what it is that creates notions of innovativeness among external stakeholder groups. Here consumers have been in focus even if innovativeness is of importance to other stakeholder groups as well. The importance of being perceived as

innovative by external stakeholder groups has been asserted due to the many benefits that follow such perception. In the following chapter the theoretical foundations of the research at hand are presented with corporate brand management and employer brand management setting its principal context.

3. Theoretical Framework

In its most compromised form, the research problem at hand focuses on the meaning, sources, and role of employer brands' innovativeness in the perception of talents. Investigating this research problem involves the interaction of various academic disciplines in the form of brand, marketing, and human resource theory. In order to prepare the following research, it is consequently fundamental to describe the theoretical framework to the research problem under investigation in detail. Following this purpose, the chapter at hand aims to familiarize the reader with the overarching context in which the research problem is located, to examine the theoretical building blocks of the research in more detail and to clarify the fragmented terminology in the respective field.

3.1 Corporate Brand Management

For a long period of time the management of prospective employees' and thus talents' perception of a corporation has been entirely left over to the discipline of human resources (HR), which traditionally deals with the entire strategic and operative management of a corporation's existing and prospective workforces (Anselmsson, Bondesson & Melin, 2016; Mosley, 2012). Talent management can be seen as a subordinate division of human resources that is solely focused on the attraction of talents, however no definite definition of it exists (Bolander, Werr & Asplund, 2017; Martin et al., 2005; Serban & Andanut, 2014). This traditional center of gravity changed through the rise of corporate brand management, in which the focus amongst brand scholars and practitioners shifted from the product to the corporation (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012; Brexendorf & Keller, 2017; Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Notable about the rise of corporate brand management are various fundamental shifts: first of all, the expanded theoretical focus of brand management, which shifted from the consumer to the entirety of corporate stakeholder groups such as media, investors, governments, partners, suppliers, employees and thus, also talents (Balmer, 2001a; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Keller & Richey, 2006; Martin et al., 2005). Secondly, the strategic instead of the operative mindset of corporate brand management, which results in a long term rather than short term perspective in the management and communication of a brand (Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Roper & Fill, 2012). Thirdly, the expansion of responsibility for the brand from the brand management department to the entire organization (Anselmsson, Bondesson & Melin, 2016; Balmer & Greyser, 2006; Roper & Fill, 2012). Fourthly, the increased number of brand stimuli that needs to be managed (Balmer, 2001a; Hatch & Schultz, 2003). Fifthly, the intangible nature of a corporate brand, which is more abstract than a product brand as it cannot be experienced through a product of service (Ind, 1997) and finally, the increased focus of brand management on organizational and cultural aspects (Balmer, 2001a).

Despite all of these extensive theoretical considerations and contributions to the understanding of corporate brands, researchers and practitioners have fallen short on developing a consistent definition of it (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012), which has been criticized earlier by Ind (1997) as well. A potential reason for this might be the complexity and richness of corporate brands (Aaker, 2004; Ind, 1997). In order to solve this, Abratt and Kleyn (2012, p.1053) defined a corporate brand as the ''... interface between the organization's stakeholders and its identity.'', which

sets the understanding of corporate brands throughout this work. This illustrates that all organizations have a corporate brand, regardless of a conscious management or communication of it (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012). Moreover, this definition allows the derivation of a consequential definition of corporate brand management, as the purposeful management of the interface between an organization and its stakeholders.

As such corporate brand management is considered as beneficial for corporations in several dimensions, similar to the benefits of brands in general (Elving et al., 2013; Keller, 2003): It differentiates and protects the own corporation against competitors (Aaker, 2004; Balmer, 2001a; Roper & Fill, 2012), adds value in stakeholders' perception of a corporation (Balmer, 2001), increases the financial efficiency of brand management and communications (Aaker, 2004; Roper & Fill, 2012) and thus, is considered to positively impact the financial performance of corporations in general (Balmer, 2001; Roper & Fill, 2012). A further benefit, that is central for the work at hand, is the consideration of the corporate brand as a supporting asset in the attraction of talents (Balmer, 2001a; Balmer & Gray, 2003; Roper & Fill, 2012; Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen, 2013). This is another example of how the rise of corporate brands has shifted the attention of brand researchers and practitioners towards the management of prospective employees' and thus, talents' perception of a corporation, which so far has only been associated with the discipline of human resources. This correlates with previous calls from several other researchers who argue for a stronger mutual recognition and collaboration of brand management and human resources (Cable & Turban, 2001; Edwards, 2017; Moroko and Uncles, 2008; Mosley, 2007). While corporate brand management marks a first step towards an intensified combination of brand management and human resources theories and practices, employer brand management can be considered as a further and even more definite step (Foster & Punjaisri, 2010). It evolves as a subordinated discipline to corporate brand management with a particular focus on influencing the brand perception of prospective employees.

3.2 Employer Brand Management

The foundational idea of employer brand management is that corporations in their role as employers can also be considered as brands (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). Subordinated to corporate brand management, employer brand management aims to influence the perception and subsequent attractiveness of a corporation as an employer in the minds of prospective employees with the objective of recruiting greater employees with less efforts (Martin et al., 2005; Roper & Fill, 2012). Thus, it can be considered as a direct response of corporations to the critical shortages of workforces, which as outlined before are often thematized in the context of the war for talents (Edwards, 2017; Elving et al., 2013; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Moreover, it can be described as a direct response to the general importance of employees as a stakeholder group of corporate brands (Foster & Punjaisri, 2010).

Similar to corporate brand management, also employer brand management - often denoted as employer branding - has been defined in a variety of distinct ways (Mosley, 2012; Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen, 2013). However, there are two definitions that are applied across a variety of works: the definition of Ambler and Barrow (2016, p.20), who defined employer branding

as the ''The package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company.'', can be considered as the foundational definition of the concept. More recently Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, p.117) defined it as the ''... process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity...''. At a later point in their work they added the ''... promotion of a unique and attractive image.'' (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, p.502) to their definition. In this context it is essential to distinguish employer branding from 'internal branding'. Till date scholars have not found a consensus concerning the differences between both terms (Theurer et al., 2018). In order to ensure consistency and clarity, we will follow the majority of scholars and understand employer branding as focused on external, prospective employees and talents while internal branding is focused on existing employees (Foster & Punjaisri, 2010; Theurer et al., 2018). Reviewed in their sum, these definitions and the distinction towards internal branding indicate that employer branding is about the management of two fundamental building blocks: Firstly, the brand identity and its communication towards prospective employees that are in the hand of the corporation. Secondly, the resulting perception and image of the brand in the minds of prospective employees.

These two building blocks are also reflected in the ''Employer Brand Value Chain Model'' developed by Theurer et al. (2018) based on an extensive review of 170 articles and book chapters in the field of employer branding. Following the concept of value chain models this model expands the previous definitions through an illustration of the consequences of the interaction of corporations with prospective employees on the performance of corporations (Theurer et al., 2018). To ensure focus, the elements of the model that are relevant to the research question at hand are specifically highlighted.
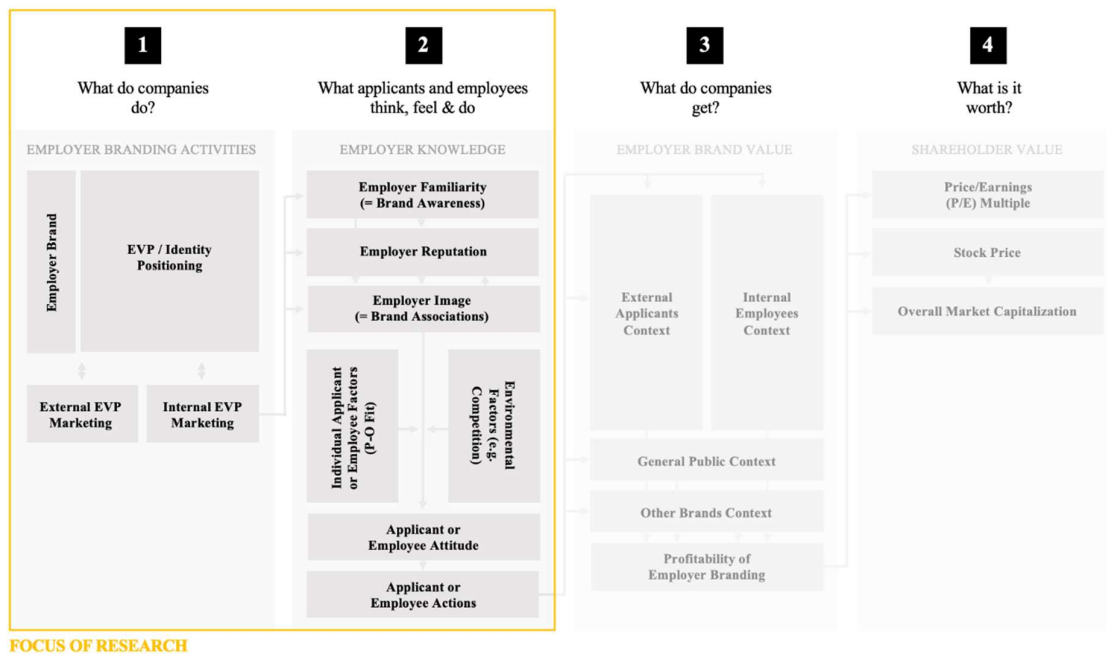

Figure 1. Employer Brand Value Chain. Adapted from Theurer et al. (2018). Displays how employer brand management influences employer branding activities, employer knowledge, employer brand value, and consequently shareholder value for corporations.

From an overarching perspective, Theurer et al. (2018) argue that the value chain of employer brand management can be distinguished into four stages. On the first stage corporations set up their employer brand, including its identity, Employer Value Proposition (EVP) and marketing, which matches with the first of the two building blocks outlined before. On the second stage follows the perception of the employer brand by employees and their subsequent actions, which marks the second building block that has been outlined before. The third stage then marks the impact of the brand perception and prospective employee actions on the performance of the corporation. Finally, on the fourth stage this performance is translated into the financial value for the corporation (Theurer et al., 2018). When excluding the impact of the employer brand perception on the performance and financials of a corporation, which are less relevant for the research problem under investigation, it becomes evident that two building blocks are fundamental to the work at hand: the perception of a brand is manifested in the employer brand knowledge of prospective employees on the one side and influenced through the employer branding activities on the other side. However, a detailed view into those two building blocks in the model of Theurer et al. (2018) illustrates that both are constituted by several theoretical elements from which some directly link to the research at hand. Fortunately, as Theurer et al. (2018) assert as well, most of these constituting fields have been investigated in several existing studies, which will be examined throughout the following chapters and subsequently concluded in an analytical framework that guides the research at hand.

Before that it is essential to conclude the review of employer brand management by noting that the concept as such is generally considered as multidimensional as it draws upon the terminology and ideas of various disciplines, centered around brand management and human resources (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2010; Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen, 2013). This multidisciplinary nature of employer branding has been investigated in several studies, which conclude that most of existing brand theories can be applied to the specific field of employer brand management (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Cable & Turban, 2001; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Theurer et al., 2018). According to these studies the main reason for that is the comparable nature of general brand management and employer brand management, that Cable and Turban (2001, p.120-121) illustrate on a more metaphorical level: ''... organizational images are analogous to brands, that particular jobs are analogous to specific products, and that job seekers are analogous to consumers''. Unfortunately neither the theories existing in the field of brand management nor the knowledge around perceived innovativeness from the perspective of talents should be considered as complete, which marks the relevance of the thesis which is focused on the field of employer brand management. Thus, while focusing on theories from the field of employer brand management, where existent, we complement the following examination of the further theoretical building blocks of this work with existing brand and corporate brand management theories, if relevant and applicable. An additional reason for that are the findings of Wilden, Gudergan and Lings (2010), who argue that the employer brand and its perception are influenced by other brands of a corporation as well - including the corporate brand, which sets its context.

3.3 Brand Knowledge of Talents

As we aim to understand the perceived innovativeness of employer brands from the perspective of talents, it is essential to understand the foundation of their perception and evaluations of employer brands. Any form of consideration or evaluation of a brand presumes that talents know the specific brand. This form of knowledge is called ''brand knowledge'' and is based on all information and thus, the meaning that is stored in the mind of people related to a certain brand (Keller, 2003; Cable & Turban, 2001). Brand knowledge encompasses two separate foundational constructs, the 'brand familiarity' and the 'brand image', which together compose the 'equity' of a brand (Keller, 1993; Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2009). In addition to that, Cable and Turban (2001) add that those constructs are also closely linked to the idea of ''brand reputation'', which will be discussed later as well.

Brand familiarity, which is also designated as the awareness of a brand, marks the salience of a brand in the mind and perception of people and thus, also talents. This salience depends on the quantity of associations linked to the brand under consideration. If talents are unfamiliar with a certain brand their mind will not have any image of the brand. Therefore, brand familiarity is considered as an antecedent to the further dimensions of brand knowledge (Cable & Turban, 2001; Theurer et al., 2018). As with all other constructs outlined in this chapter, brand familiarity is also particularly applied in the context of employer brand management, where it is called 'employer familiarity' (Theurer et al., 2018).

In the opposite to brand familiarity, brand image misses a definitional consensus, although it is a frequently used construct in brand research and practice (Dobni & Zinkhan, 1990; Lee, James & Kim, 2014). In order to ensure coherence, we follow the widespread understanding of Keller (1993), who defines brand image as the ''... perceptions about a brand as reflected by the brand associations held in consumer memory.'' (Keller, 1993 p.3) These associations reflect specific attributes, that people such as talents link to a certain brand (Lievens, Van Hoye & Anseel, 2007; Slaughter & Greguras, 2009; Theurer et al., 2018). Those brand attributes are often referred to as brand characteristics (Edwards, 2010), benefits (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), beliefs (Low & Lamb, 2000) or traits (Theurer et al., 2018). Common examples of such are moderness, tradition, responsibility, diversity, or innovativeness, which is the brand attribute under investigation in this work. According to several overlapping theories those brand attributes can be distinguished into two different categories: functional attributes such as the salary or location in the case of an employer brand, and symbolic attributes such as prestige or sincerity (Low & Lamb, 2000; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2010; Theurer et al., 2018). An example of a coherent theory that arises from the field of employer brand management is the ''Instrumental-Symbolic Framework'', developed by Lievens and Highhouse (2003), which asserts that brand image attributes can be subdivided into instrumental (equal to functional) and symbolic attributes. A comparable theory from the field of human resources dates back to 1968 when Behling et al. (1968, cited in Tom, 1971) presented their ''Objective and Subjective Factor Theory''. According to their Objective Factor Theory the evaluation of an employer is based on objective and thus, functional factors. In opposition to that the Subjective Factor Theory contains the assumption that employees' evaluations of potential

employers are based on subjective and thus, emotional factors (Behling et al., 1968 cited in Tom, 1971).

All investigated theories conclude that in practice a combination of both categories, functional and symbolic brand attributes, constitutes the image of an employer brand (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Theurer et al., 2018). Depending on the attributes associated with a certain brand, people are able to evaluate a brand as more or less attractive. Past research has shown that the attraction towards an employer brand increases when it is associated with attributes that fulfill certain needs or desires of prospective employees and/or match their individual personality. This phenomenon is referred to as ''Person-Organization-Fit'' (Kristof, 1996; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter et al., 2004). As there is a bidirectional relationship between the image of a brand and its reputation, a positive brand image can also be considered as beneficial for a brand's overall reputation (Cable & Turban, 2001; Roper & Fill, 2012). In this context, recent studies uncovered that especially symbolic attributes possess a great importance in the evaluation of an employer brand's image (Lievens, Van Hoye & Anseel, 2007; Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen, 2013). Due to the lack of research in the field it cannot be clearly determined if innovativeness should be considered as a functional, symbolic or combined factor at this point. The research at hand aims to gain insights on this open question.

Taken together the brand familiarity and image constitute the ''equity'' of a brand (Keller, 2008), which is often considered as the main target figure of brand management as it has been proven to unlock several benefits for corporations, such as a greater effectiveness of brand communications or an increased resistance of stakeholders towards competitive communications (Aaker, 1996; French & Smith, 2013; Theurer et al., 2018). According to several researchers the concept of brand equity has been defined in various distinctive ways as well (Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010; French & Smith, 2013). We follow the observation of Keller (2008) and other researchers (Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2010; French & Smith, 2013; Beig & Nika, 2019) that the definition of brand equity can be distinguished into two different perspectives, from which only one is relevant to the work at hand (Beig & Nika, 2019; Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010): Firm-based brand equity (FFBE) and consumer-based brand equity (CBBE). While the primary is defined from a corporate perspective as the financial value that a brand generates for a corporation, the latter defines brand equity from a consumer perspective as the association based impression and thus, familiarity and image of a brand in consumers' minds (Keller, 2008; Christodoulides & de Chernatony, 2010). As the work at hand focuses on the external perception of brands' innovativeness instead of its influence on corporations' financial performance the second perspective marks the focal point of the following examination.

As its initial terminology indicates the traditional conceptualization of consumer-based brand equity focuses on the brand equity for consumers. Focusing on the field of employer branding and talents as the target group under investigation in this work, a subsequent application of this concept could of course be questioned. However, the research of Wilden, Gudergan and Lings (2010) indicates that the concept of consumer-based brand equity can also be translated into the context of employer brands, where it can be denoted as employee-based brand equity (EBBE). This links to an earlier concept that evolves in the field of human resources, namely

''employer attractiveness''. Similar to EBBE this concept reflects the impression of corporations' benefits and thus, attractiveness in prospective employees' minds (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). An often-cited contribution to this concept has been developed by Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005) in the form of the ''EmpAt'' scale, which several existing works in the field of employer brand management are built upon (Alnıaçık & Alnıaçık, 2012; Bonaiuto et al., 2013; Edwards, 2010; Santiago, 2019; Moroko and Uncles, 2008; Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen, 2013; Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017). It intends to measure the attractiveness of an employer across 25 items, that can be structured into five overall value dimensions: economic, social, interest, application, and development. Particularly interesting for the research at hand is that Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005) conceptualize the dimension of interest value mainly based on the idea of innovativeness, even though its meaning is not further specified.

Both concepts should be considered as relevant to this thesis. The concept of employee based brand equity (EBBE) is relevant to be considered due to the depth and profoundness of knowledge existing around the broader concept in the field of brand management and its origin in cognitive psychology as well as human associative memory (Keller, 1993; Christodoulides & De Chernatony, 2009; French & Smith, 2013). The concept of employer attractiveness, which the EmpAt scale of Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005) draws upon, is relevant to consider based on its prominence in the more specific field of employer brand management, which is the focus of the work at hand. What unites both concepts and makes them further relevant to this research is their focal point - the brand perception of prospective employees and thus, talents.

The main element that constitutes talents' brand perception and as outlined before also the image, familiarity and equity of a brand are associations (Aaker, 1996; Brandt et al., 2011; Keller, 2003). In general, associations represent informational links between two nodes or items such as attributes, feelings or emotions in the memory of humans (Krishnan, 1996; Murdock, 1982; Yasin, Noor & Mohamad, 2007). As such, they reflect how the memory of humans and thus, also the memory of talents is structured. Typically, this structure is depicted in the form of a network, which is derived from the idea of the ''Associative Network Model'', which was introduced by Anderson (1980). This foundational work originating from the field of cognitive psychology has been applied in the context of brand management as well, with a particular focus on so-called ''brand associations'' (French & Smith, 2013; John et al., 2006; Krishnan, 1996). In the context of corporate brand management those are denoted as ''corporate associations'', which are defined as ''... all brand-related thoughts, feelings, perceptions, images, experiences, beliefs, attitudes that become linked to the brand node.'' (Kotler & Keller, 2006, p.745). Corporate associations can be further detailed into three overall categories in the form of attributes, benefits and attitudes (Keller, 1993). In this context, innovativeness is frequently used as an example of a brand association (Yasin, Noor & Mohamad, 2007), which in accordance with the understanding of Keller (1993) could be assigned to the category of attributes.

As the major share of brand management research, we follow the understanding of Kotler and Keller (2006) and understand brand associations as all kinds of thoughts linking to brand

attributes, beliefs or attitudes which people might memorize when considering a specific brand. Therefore, brand associations in people's memories can indicate the meaning of specific brands to people, the meaning of its specific attributes such as innovativeness, and the sources of these meanings. As in the case of previous concepts, Kotler and Keller's (2006) conceptualization of brand associations has been investigated and confirmed as valuable in the specific context of employer brand management (Rampl, 2014). Consequently, it can be applied to talents as well, which makes brand associations a focal point of the research at hand.

Since brand associations are not only considered as a focal point in this work, but also as an essential aspect in the creation of strong brands in general (Aaker, 1991; Cheng-Hsui, 2001; Keller, 2003; Schmitt, Zarantonello & Brakus, 2009; Shamim & Mohsin, 2013), a great amount of past research has focused on developing a greater understanding of the nature of brand associations. Following the findings of these researches, brand associations can be specified across several dimensions, including their quantity (Krishnan, 1996; Cheng-Hsui, 2001), their presence in memory (French & Smith, 2013), their sentiment (Krishnan, 1996; Mosley, 2012), their uniqueness (Krishnan, 1996) and their structure (Burmann et al., 2017; French & Smith, 2013; John et al., 2006). According to those findings brands are strong if they are based on a greater number of associations, from which each association is salient, unique, positive and closely linked to the other ones. Most important for the work at hand, which does aim to understand both, the meaning and the sources of employer brands' perceived innovativeness, is however the dimension of origin and thus, the source of the association. Here, Burmann et al. (2017) distinguish between semantic associations and associations in the wider sense. While the primary involves all associations that have been triggered through stimuli, that are within the control of corporations (e.g. brand communication), the latter comprises all associations that have been triggered through stimuli, which relate to the respective brand, but are external to the corporations' control (e.g. word of mouth) (Burmann et al., 2017). Consequently, brand associations in general can origin through a broad range of perceptual sources, from which some offer the potential to be influenced by corporations (Burmann et al., 2017; Keller, 2003; Yasin, Noor & Mohamad, 2007). Before examining those in more detail and thus, switching the perspective from talents to corporations, it is worth concluding the main notions of this chapter, which focuses on the external perspective of talents.

The brand knowledge of talents is based on multiple elements, from which each has a specific role in the perception of a brand. Together the brand familiarity and the functional and symbolic attributes that form the image of a brand constitute a brand's employee-based equity. This equity not only indicates a brand's attractiveness but also guides talents' behavior towards that brand. However, in its sum, all of those elements take place in talents' minds and are based on informational links in the form of brand associations, which evolve from all attributes, benefits and attitudes that talents might associate in their memories with a certain brand. In this context, innovativeness can be considered as a certain brand attribute, which can influence talents' brand image and equity and if so, is located in talents' brand associations. This location and its link to other associated attributes might reveal new knowledge into what innovativeness means to talents and from which sources and thus, stimuli such brand perceptions originate.

3.4 Brand Stimuli

Influencing the brand knowledge and thus, associations of talents to gain a better image, a greater equity and a positive reputation, which results in favorable behaviors (e.g. application) towards the corporation, can be considered as brand management's central objective in the competition for prospective employees (Keller, 2003; Mosley, 2012). In order to succeed, a corporation's brand management needs to understand how brand knowledge and thus, associations are created and what tools it has at hand to trigger and influence this process.

As outlined prior, the development of brand knowledge depends on the information (e.g. in the form of attributes or benefits) that are associated with a brand in individuals' minds. The establishment of brand-related information requires the previous perception of such information (Alba, Hutchinson & Lynch, 1991; Cable & Turban, 2001; Foroudi et al., 2018). This perception of brand-related information can take place in various forms. Keller (2003, p.597) asserts that ''... any potential encounter with a brand – marketing initiated or not – can change the mental representation of the brand and the kinds of information that can appear in consumer memory.''. This view underlines that the establishment of brand associations is not limited to a certain dimension or source of perception, but instead relies on people's perception of the totality of brand-related information sources, which is confirmed in several further researches (Burmann et al., 2017; Lemmink, Schuijf & Streukens, 2003; Pavitra, 2018). There are different terminologies that aim to capture this totality of brand-related information sources. We will follow the term 'brand stimuli' that is applied in several researches in the field (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012; Burmann et al., 2017; Schmitt, Zarantonello & Brakus, 2009). Such a brand stimuli can be defined as any form of brand-associated information source (e.g. employees or brand communication) that forms the brand knowledge in the minds of stakeholders such as talents and is therefore the source of brand's perception (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012). Consequently, it is the perception of streaking and favorable brand stimuli and its subsequent integration in talents' memory that forms successful brands (Burmann et al., 2017).

Reflecting on this influence of brand stimuli on the perception of brands, it is not surprising that the discipline of brand management aspires to gain control over these. This applies in the context of the attraction of talents as well (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2009). Defining the extent to which brand management can control relevant brand stimuli in the field of talents and thus, is able to influence talents' brand perception, requires an overview of all possible brand stimuli in the respective field. A valuable contribution to this has been developed by Cable and Turban (2001), who explored the potential sources of prospective employees' employer brand knowledge. As their following map (Figure 2) implies there is a broad range of potential stimuli that can affect talents' brand knowledge and thus, perception. Those range from products and services over career fairs to corporation artifacts (Cable & Turban, 2001). Throughout subsequent research in the field, further potential stimuli have been examined, including word of mouth and sponsorships (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2009), social media (Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen, 2013), labor market intermediaries such as headhunters (Theurer et al., 2018) as well as conferences and top management interviews (Pavitra, 2018). Comparing and advancing this

range in case of certain gaps in the focused context of the brand attribute innovativeness is a further focal point of this work.
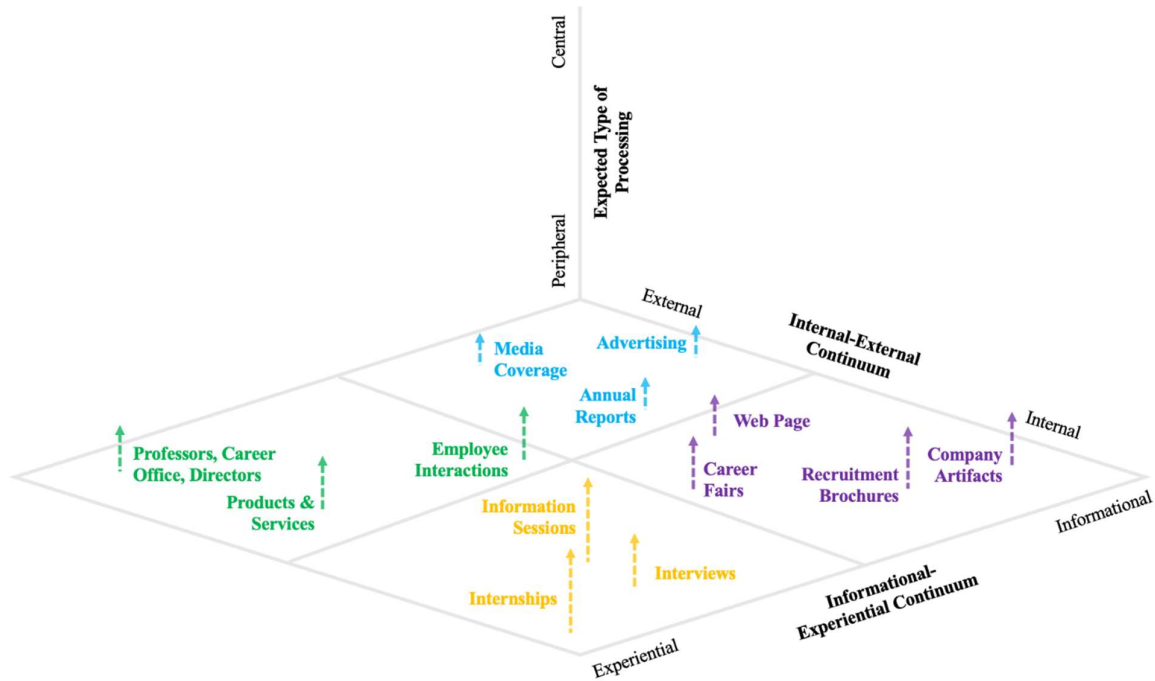
Figure 2. Sources of Employer Knowledge. Adapted from Cable and Turban (2001). Displays different types of employer brand stimuli across three continuums.

Besides the overview on the range of potential brand stimuli, the developed map of Cable and Turban (2001) offers a further valuable contribution, the distinction of stimuli along three different dimensions. Firstly, the expected type of processing, which defines the impact of the sources on mental perception processes. Secondly, the informational-experiential continuum, which describes the type of interaction with the stimuli, ranging from more formal forms of experiences to more experiential forms of experiences. Thirdly, the internal-external continuum, which defines if the stimuli are internal to and thus, controllable for the corporation or external and thus, independent to the corporation (Cable and Turban, 2001). This last dimension indicates that there are several stimuli in the context of talent attraction that are beyond the control of corporations (e.g. professors, word of mouth or media coverage). Thus, brand stimuli do not only compromise sources of brand related information that are in the hands of corporations, but also those that are in the hand of other entities (e.g. media or universities). This implies the relevance to add a third overall perspective, which is not about talents or corporations but other entities that also generate brand stimuli that might influence talents' brand knowledge. In relation to Van Hoye and Lievens (2009) these sources of information that are beyond the control of corporations are denoted as independent stimuli, while the stimuli that are under control of corporations are denoted as controllable brand stimuli. This marks an expansion of Abratt and Kleyn's (2012) initial notion of brand stimuli as we acknowledge the observations of Cable and Turban (2001) as well as Van Hoye and Lievens (2009) and consider both categories as important to consider within the context of brand stimuli.

Within the context of brand stimuli it is furthermore worth mentioning the observations of Fisher et al. (1979), who observed that independent stimuli are perceived as more reliable and thus, persuasive than controllable sources of brand related information. Similar observations have also been made in more recent studies on the topic (Dabirian, Kietzmann & Diba, 2016; Van Hoye & Lievens, 2005). Besides that it is important to consider that the distinction between these two categories of brand stimuli is not a matter of black and white, but instead interrelated as there are more controllable brand stimuli that might have an impact on more independent brand stimuli. An example of this would be the impact of campus career fairs on the opinion of professors (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2009). Together with the share of controllable brand stimuli this illustrates the influence that brand managers might have on the brand knowledge of talents. At the same time this indicates the responsibility of brand managers to understand the right ways to select and form the brand stimuli that are in their control.

When considering brand stimuli it is furthermore essential to acknowledge that, due to the information overload and processing filter in people's perception, not every brand stimuli is able to change people's perception to the same extent, if at all (Burmann et al., 2017). In relation to this, Cable and Turban (2001) found out that the impact of brand stimuli is higher in case of talents that are less familiar with a certain brand and lower in the opposite case. Besides that, Keller (2008) argued that the nature of the stimuli and information influences the ease with which people progress information in their perception. According to his findings, corporations need to deliver vivid, simple, and concrete information to increase the impact of their stimuli on people's perception (Keller, 2008). In a similar manner Berthon, Pitt & Campbell (2009) mention the simpleness, memoralizability and steadiness of brand stimuli as critical factors. Finally, the clarity and consistency of brand stimuli are considered as essential (Wilden, Gudergan & Lings, 2010). In order to ensure these factors across the variety of stimuli that a corporation creates, brand managers develop guiding principles in form of brand identities and employer value propositions (EVPs) (Burmann et al., 2017; Theurer et al., 2018), which mark the last element of the theoretical framework of this work.

Before examining these in more detail, it is important to scrutinize a final theoretical contribution to the understanding of brand stimuli and their impact on brand knowledge: the ''Critical Contact Theory'', which is a second valuable contribution from Behling et al. (1968, cited in Tom, 1971). According to their theory, talents in general face difficulties in evaluating the attributes offered by a corporation to a full extent as their contact with and consequently, insight into the corporation is limited. Therefore, talents base their evaluation of an employer on the few brand stimuli they can perceive and attributes they know, while other aspects such as the working climate or leadership style remain unclear until the potential start of employment. This theoretical view has been further emphasized through the works of several other researchers. For example, Ind (1997, p.4) states that ''... unless we work for a company, we rarely know much about its history, strategy, values and culture. We glean information from its communication, its people and its products and we make judgments.''. On a similar note Wilden, Gudergan and Lings (2010) describe this phenomenon as information asymmetry between the employer and prospective employee. Furthermore, they assert that prospective employees are more likely to choose a corporation they possess more knowledge about as it is

perceived as less riskful (Wilden, Gudergan & Lings, 2010). This illustrates the relevance of brand-related information sources for prospective employees and thus, talents. At the same time, it underlines the importance for corporations to manage their brand stimuli right as the extent of information that talents perceive is limited, which implies the importance of having each brand stimuli in the right shape.

3.5 Employer Value Proposition

To assure that brand stimuli convey the intended information in an effective and efficient manner, brand managers require a point of reference that defines the attributes and benefits that corporations want prospective employees like talents to associate with them. This is the purpose of the employer value proposition (EVP), which in the form of a narrative or model manifests how corporations would like to be perceived by its target group of prospective employees (Mosley, 2012; Theurer et al., 2018). As such it aims to create a balance between what the organisation is found to be and what it desires to be. In the development of an EVP brand managers define certain qualities in form of attributes or benefits that a corporation intends to be associated with in order to maximize its attractiveness for prospective employees and thus, talents (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Edwards, 2010). Finally, those qualities in the form of attributes and benefits guide corporations' controllable brand stimuli (Mosley, 2012; Theurer et al., 2018). Consequently, the role of the employer value proposition, sometimes denoted as "employer brand proposition" (Mosley, 2012), is comparable to the 'brand identity' concept in general brand management or the ''corporate identity'' concept in the context of corporate brand management, which both also define how a brand aims to be perceived by its target groups (Roper & Fill, 2012). A further term that is often used in parallel is ''organizational identity'' which defines the internal self-perception of a corporation (Theurer et al., 2018). This illustrates the key difference between the concepts: While the organizational identity is guided by corporations' legacy, the previous forms of identity, including the EVP, reflect a reversed approach, they are defined in order to guide corporations and their respective actions (Keller & Richey, 2006). Here, the organizational identity can serve as an inspiration (Balmer, 2001b). Besides that the definition of an EVP involves brand managers' conscious decision and choice of certain brand attributes that a corporation aims to be perceived for (Dacin & Brown, 2002). Those attributes, which are also denoted as personality traits or values (Balmer & Gray, 2003; Keller & Richey, 2006) are then used to guide a corporation's actions, including its brand stimuli such as products, services, environments, or communications. This makes the EVP to the main point of reference in employer brand management (Mosley, 2012; Theurer et al., 2018).

In this context innovativeness is as outlined before considered as a crucial brand attribute for the attraction of talents (Berthon, Pitt & Campbell, 2009; Bonaiuto et al., 2013; Mosley, 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that a large share of brands emphasizes the term as a prominent attribute in the definition or communication of their brands, as illustrated in the introduction of this work. Several researchers point out the main challenge of this approach: attributes such as innovativeness are essential to enrich brands and their EVPs, but their specific meaning is also subjective and depends on the perception, interpretation and understanding of the target

audience (Alba, Hutchinson & Lynch, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 2003). This leads to the phenomenon that the meaning of brands and their stimuli is often perceived and understood differently than initially intended by brand managers (Burmann et al., 2017; Dacin & Brown, 2002; Kates & Goh, 2003). These differences of brands' meaning have been conceptualized by Berthon, Pitt and Campbell (2009) in the form of their ''Meaning Gap Theory'' (Figure 3). In their theory the researchers (2009) defined two gaps that exist in terms of how brands are perceived by different entities. The first gap is located between the brand owner in the form of the corporation and its stakeholders. The second gap appears between the different stakeholder groups of a certain brand.
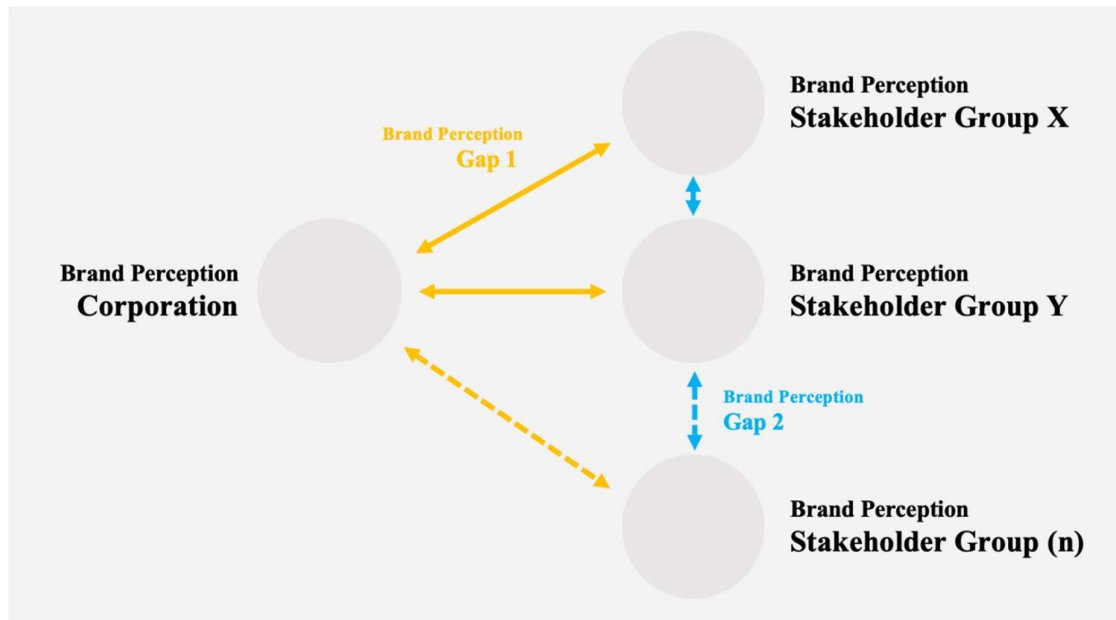
Figure 3. Meaning Gap Theory. Adapted from Berthon, Pitt and Campbell (2009). Displays the meaning gaps in brand perception that occur between stakeholder groups.

Also Berthon, Pitt and Campbell (2009) assume that the differences in the meanings associated with brands result from stakeholders' interpretations of brand communications, which constitute one specific form of brand stimuli. In order to solve these gaps and lead brands to success, corporations need to become more knowledgeable in the meanings that external stakeholders such as talents associate with brands (Kates & Goh, 2003; Wilson et al., 2014). This links to the purpose of the research at hand, which aims to better understand the meaning, sources and role of the brand attribute innovativeness from the perspective of talents. Before outlining the methodological approach through which we aim to fulfill this work's purpose in more detail, it is worth compiling the theoretical building blocks outlined throughout the previous chapter into an analytical framework, which sets the guiding frame for the research at hand.

3.6 Analytical Framework

In conclusion, the meaning, sources and role of brands' innovativeness can be investigated from three different perspectives: firstly, the perspective of talents, in which minds the

perception of brands' innovativeness is located. Secondly, the perspective of corporations and their corporate and employer brand management, which aim to influence talents' brand perception through controllable brand stimuli. Thirdly, the perspective of other entities, which are considered as a further source of talents' brand perception, resulting from brand stimuli that are independent to the respective corporation. These three perspectives constitute the building blocks of the following analytical framework (Figure 4), which takes its inspiration from other popular corporate and employer brand management models, such as the examined ''Employer Brand Value Chain'' of Theurer et al. (2018) and Keller's (2008) renowned ''Brand Equity Value Chain''.
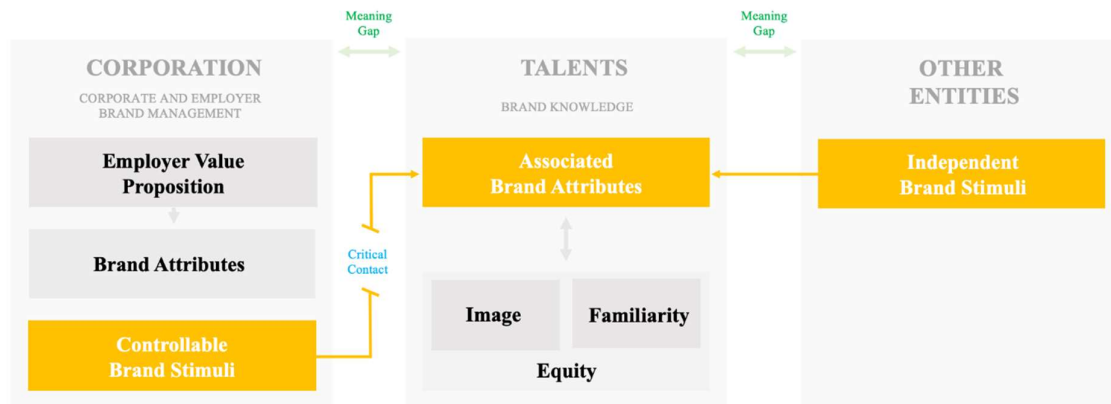
Figure 4. Analytical Framework. Displays the elements and perspectives that constitute the analytical framework that guided the research.

The perspective of talents marks the focus of this thesis. From the research examined throughout this chapter we derive that the meaning of innovativeness is located within the brand associations of talents. These associations result from two different sources. The first source are brand stimuli that are under the control of corporations. Derived from corporations' EVPs, those stimuli aim to convey certain brand attributes that corporations aim to be associated with, attributes such as innovativeness. The second source is constituted in the shape of brand stimuli that are independent to respective corporations. Those are generated by all other forms of entities (e.g. professors, families or other students) that can impact talents' brand perception. Evolving from the perception of those two kinds of stimuli brand associations form the image of brands. Combined with the familiarity of brands this image constitutes what is known as brand equity, or more specifically employee based brand equity (EBBE). In consequence, understanding the meanings and sources of brand attributes such as innovativeness is of great importance for brand managers. Serving this importance is the purpose of the thesis at hand.

4. Methodology

A substantial and contributing response to a research question depends on an appropriate methodological foundation. Throughout the following chapter we provide an overview of the methodology that we followed to be able respond to our research question in such manner. First of all, the philosophical underpinnings of our research are outlined in more detail to help the reader better understand our view and understanding of the world that we are investigating. Based on that, the overarching design of the research and method of data collection are presented. The latter compiles explanations of the sampling strategy as well as the typology and procedure of the selected method. Subsequently, we outline the approach that has been chosen to analyze the empirical data generated throughout the research. Finally, we present detailed considerations around the quality of the research.

4.1 Research Philosophy

Before embarking on the journey of designing and conducting research it is of importance to get an understanding of the philosophical underpinnings (Easterby-Smith, 2018). Without this understanding it becomes an arduous task to keep a reflexive role as researchers in understanding how our choices affect the outcomes of the research. This is by no means an argumentative chapter since there is no right or wrong way to decide what constitutes 'truth' or 'knowledge' (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Instead it is an explanation of our paradigmatic beliefs and by presenting them we intend to show how we look at the world and how we understand it.

The thesis seeks to explore the meaning, sources, and role of employer brands' innovativeness in the perception of talents. Noting that the relevance of innovativeness in the attraction of talents has been asserted but with the fundamental flaw that the definition of the term has been left to managers and academics, the meaning of innovativeness from the perspective of talents is yet to be explored. The definitions leveraged when determining the importance of innovativeness has largely been inferred from quantitative research or literature reviews. Therefore, we argue that the complexity and multiplicity of innovativeness have been overlooked. The subjectivity that guides all experiences needs to be inquired into to understand the experiences that constitute the different, subjective realities (Levers, 2013). Furthermore, it is uncertain if the traditional brand stimuli that are presented as sources of perception within employer branding are applicable in the context of innovativeness from the talents' perspective. Consequently, by adding the talent perspective, an additional essential perspective will be added and expand existing views on the topic. From an ontological standpoint, a relativistic stance is utilized against perceived innovativeness and thus, innovativeness can be understood in a great many ways depending on the person interpreting since there can exist many different truths (Easterby-Smith, 2018). This relativistic stance is furthermore encouraged by the objectivism and positivism that seem to have guided past research on the role of innovativeness to talents.

Where ontology is dealing with the general assumptions about the nature of reality and existence and in extension what can be known about it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Easterby-Smith,

2018), epistemology is about the theory of knowledge, or what can be considered as acceptable knowledge within a given research field (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Continuing on the same thought process as earlier, the existing knowledge within the fragmented research field of perceived innovativeness indicates that the positivistic objectivism that has guided the research is inadequate and has resulted in a futile notion that innovativeness can be objectively defined and measured (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Instead we propose that the understanding should be reached together, thus positioning us as researchers as co-creators of the knowledge generated alongside the talents whose understanding of the concept is the matter of interest (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Reality according to us is therefore not objective and external, but instead socially constructed and given meaning by the people that experience it and we as researchers cannot position ourselves externally of it (Easterby-Smith, 2018). Thus, the approach is interpretative in its very nature. Acknowledging that perceived innovativeness is a subjective matter, a research design that allowed us to capture insights into the constituents and sources of talents' perception of employer brands' innovativeness and inquire its assumed importance was required.

4.2 Research Design

This thesis seeks to answer the question of what it is that makes employer brands perceived as innovative from the perspective of talents and what role such perception has in their attraction to potential employers. Pairing our philosophical assumptions as outlined in the previous section with the basic premise that qualitative methods are well suited when the motif is to get an extended and more profound understanding of a particular concept (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018) we chose a qualitative approach. The choice can however be interpreted as a reaction against the extensive amounts of quantitative research that has foregone this thesis within the field which has resulted in a taken for granted stance against innovativeness. The past research which has emphasized the importance of innovativeness for talents has partly missed out on the opportunity of going deeper into why it is important to them due to the quantitative design. No room has been left for asking follow-up questions and probing deeper into the rationale behind due to the nature of quantitative research. Capturing what talents associate with innovativeness in the context of a potential employer requires a research design that allows for closeness, depth, and flexibility - qualities that have been ascribed to qualitative research design (Bryman & Bell, 2013). During the pilot-research that was conducted leading up to this thesis, these notions were affirmed and led us to the conviction that a qualitative approach was the most suitable.

Due to the proposed multiplicity of the concept an abductive relationship between theory and empirics was considered to be appropriate. The abductive approach has been described as a combination of the inductive and deductive approach. In the deductive approach the researcher starts from theory and from that develops hypotheses that are subsequently tested, then they are either accepted or rejected, thus it is often associated with quantitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Our research is in consequence partly deductive in the sense that we realized that a taken for granted stance existed in the perceived innovativeness literature. In the inductive approach the researcher instead starts from observations or other forms of results to then

develop theory, the theory is thus the result of the performed research activities (Bryman & Bell, 2013). This approach is often associated with qualitative research. The inductive approach reflects upon our thesis in the sense that we aim to explore what it is that makes employer brands perceived as innovative from the perspective of talents and to our knowledge this has not been done before. Thus, room for new theoretical considerations was ensured.

Tavory and Timmermans (2014) note that neither the inductive nor the deductive approach are especially creative since they usually do not end up producing new theories. They instead argue that to develop new theory, one has to free oneself from existing notions to create new narratives about the phenomenon that is being researched. Abduction is therefore best used when the experienced does not neatly fit into existing boxes of theory, or to speak metaphorically: to realize what does not fit into existing boxes one has to have an extensive and broad knowledge base of what the boxes actually are, thus "... an in-depth familiarity with a broad variety of existing theories..." (Tavory & Timmermans, 2014, p.5) is essential. The literature review on perceived innovativeness, employer brand management and corporate brand management resulted in the analytical framework (Figure 4) that is presented in the theoretical framework. The framework was used as guidance during the research and due to its broader focus, allowed us to maintain the required openness in our research. Furthermore, the abductive process is iterative in nature, going back and forth between data analysis and theory which reflects back to the notion of being creative and seeing what does not fit into existing boxes (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). This applied procedure of analyzing will be elaborated upon in the analysis chapter.

Scrutinizing the topic of perceived innovativeness and its emphasis on the subjective assessment of whether or not the reviewed is innovative, a qualitative approach and more specifically interviews felt logical to leverage as the method of inquiring. The conducted pilot research affirmed this and is in line with the abductive approach that guided the research at hand. Our rationale behind the chosen method will be further elaborated upon in the following chapter.

4.3 Method of Data Collection

The first step that was conducted in the data collection was the decision about sampling strategy, here a purposive sampling strategy was considered to be the most appropriate. After the decision regarding sampling was made, we debated which method was the most appropriate to collect the data needed to fulfil the purpose of the thesis. Interviews were chosen due to the possibility to collect rich descriptions from participants.

4.3.1 Sample & Sampling Strategy

Depending on the perspective taken, talents can be understood in disparate ways and it can mean different things to different people (Edwards, 2017). Where a subject-oriented perspective sees talents as particular people who can be defined or identified as talents, the object-oriented mindset sees talents as specific characteristics that people can have (Gallardo-Gallardo, Dries & González-Cruz, 2013). In this thesis talents are seen from the subject-

oriented viewpoint. We define talents as business or technology students that are currently conducting their study on either a graduate-, postgraduate or PhD level with the aim to start working within the next 18 months. Scrutinizing the way that innovativeness is defined, used and communicated we argue that some kind of consistency in the understanding of the topic should be expected and thus, two different fields of study should not lead to any greater differences in understanding. Furthermore, the sampling intended to encapsulate groups of talents that have an educational area that is closely connected to innovativeness while simultaneously having separate views and approaches, to the topic both within education as well as upcoming professional life. Even if they are assumed to understand it in similar ways, different views and approaches can be had. Thus, a purposive sampling method was leveraged with theoretically informed interviewees.

A purposive sampling method is a non-probability sampling method where specific criteria for inclusion are set up and only those that live up to the criteria are eligible for participation (Easterby-Smith, 2018; Etikan, 2016). Two criterions were utilized, firstly the individual was required to currently study either a technology- or business-related program on a graduate, postgraduate or PhD level. Secondly, the individuals were required to have the aim to start their professional career within the upcoming 18-months. Only the individuals that fulfilled both criteria were eligible for participation in the interviews. The recruiting of respondents was exercised via social media (e.g. LinkedIn and Facebook) in the initial phase, where potential respondents were identified and provided with a brief summary of the research and requested for their willingness to participate. In the case of a positive response, we questioned them in more detail about their field of study and their application horizon to ensure that they fulfilled the criteria of inclusion.

In addition, the purposive sampling method is considered as appropriate when the aim is not to achieve statistically generalizable results (Etikan, 2016). Since this was not the aim no limitations regarding nationality, gender or age were made. The final sample included fifteen individuals that study business related programs and eight individuals that study technology related programs at an array of universities[2]. The totality of universities are located in countries that are ranked as the top ten most innovative countries according to the Global Innovation Index (Hutt, 2019). The index is based on seven 'pillars' which include: institutions, human capital and research, infrastructure, market sophistication, business sophistication, knowledge and technology outputs, and lastly creative outputs (WIP, Cornell University & INSEAD, 2019). Where the five first mentioned pillars are considered as the enablers, the latter are the results of innovative activities. These criteria ensured that the sample focused on talents from educational backgrounds that are characterized by a high level of knowledge, education and economic orientation and thus, characteristics that are essential to the substantial nature of

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[2] The University of Cambridge (UK), The University of Oxford (UK), Imperial College London (UK), Marburg University (Germany), University of Southern Denmark (Denmark), Lund University (Sweden), WHU – Otto Beisheim School of Management (Germany), The Technical University of Munich (Germany), Reutlingen University ESB Business School (Germany), Chalmers University of Technology (Sweden), Gothenburg University (Sweden), The FOM University of Applied Sciences for Economics and Management (Germany), Swiss Federal Institute of Technology Lausanne (Switzerland)

talents. Besides that, the talents had different national backgrounds, including British, American, Austrian, German, Dutch, Belarusian, Swedish, Polish. This led to a diverse sample in the sense of differing nationalities and universities which allowed us to inquire into a multiplicity of perspectives. The participants are presented in Table 2 where information about their age, previous and current education, and our allocation of them into the overarching group can be found. The focus should however not be on the number of participants. Furthermore, the universities and nationalities pertaining to specific talents are not enclosed to ensure their anonymity.

Table 2. List of Interviewees. Presents information about age, previous and current education, and assigned group of educational background.

Name	Age	Previous Education	Current Education	Group
Ale	25	Electrical Engineering (MEng)	Environmental and Energy Engineering (PhD)	Technology
Cara	25	Marketing and Art History (BBA)	Marketing and Brand Management (M.Sc.)	Business
Elsa	23	International Business (BBA)	Marketing and Brand Management (M.Sc.)	Business
Farina	22	Management (B.Sc.)	International Business Administration (M.Sc.)	Business
Frans	26	Mechanical Engineering (B.Sc.)	Industrial Ecology (M.Sc.)	Technology
Frida	22	Communication and Media (B.Sc.)	Marketing and Brand Management (M.Sc.)	Business
Gaston	24	Business Administration (BBA)	Innovation and Industrial Management (M.Sc.)	Business
Harry	21	-	Computer Science (B.A.)	Technology
Jelena	26	Communication and Multimedia Design (B.Sc.)	International Business Development (M.Sc.)	Business
Jens	25	Mathematics (M.Sc.)	Computer Science (M.Sc.)	Technology
Jonas	28	Marketing Management (B.A.Sc.)	Data Science (B.Sc.)	Technology
Kenan	23	Business Administration (BBA)	Logistics and Transport Management (M.Sc.)	Business
Lena	25	International Cultural and Business Studies (B.A.)	Consumer Science (M.Sc.)	Business
Lola	26	Strategic Management (B.Sc.)	Marketing and Brand Management (M.Sc.)	Business
Marvin	25	Brand Management (B.A.)	Entrepreneurship (M.Sc.)	Business
Mitch	22	-	Chemical Engineering (MEng)	Technology
Nikolina	22	-	Engineering Science (M.Sc.)	Technology
Osman	26	Business Administration (BBA)	Digital Leadership (M.Sc.)	Business
Petra	23	Hospitality Management (BBA)	Marketing and Brand Management (M.Sc.)	Business
Sdenek	28	-	Business, Management and Marketing (B.Sc.)	Business
Sebastian	23	Business Administration (BBA)	Marketing and Brand Management (M.Sc.)	Business
Tom	24	Engineering Science (B.Sc.)	Civil Engineering (M.Sc.)	Technology
Viktor	26	Business Administration (BBA)	Accounting (M.Sc.)	Business

A discussion that is often raised in relation to the sample is the size thereof. In qualitative research it is not a matter of numbers in the sense of reaching a statistically generalizable sample but rather of theoretical generalizability (Kvale, 1992). Thus, we followed the 'data saturation' rule, which proposes that the data gathering should be continued until nothing new is found (Marshall et al., 2013). Naturally, this might raise questions regarding bias and transparency in terms of how one should know when saturation has been reached. This is a problematic issue that to our knowledge has not yet been answered since there are no formal guidelines on how to reach saturation (Marshall et al., 2013). We argue that by showcasing our sample combined with a detailed review of the contents of the interviews in the findings chapter we answer these potential questions. We do not want to proclaim that nothing radically new would have been discovered if we had continued interviewing talents after the 23rd interview. However, we collectively agreed that we had gathered enough data that encapsulated a diverse range of perspectives to answer our research question. Furthermore, the practical limitation of available time was apparent, which is a common limitation for qualitative research that impacts the size of the sample (Marshall et al., 2013).

4.3.2 Typology of Interviews

After the decision was made that a qualitative methodology was to be leveraged and the sample had been decided, we contemplated the method for data collection. We early realized that due to the complex understanding in academia we needed a method that allowed for in-depth probing and thick descriptions. Thus, we chose to conduct interviews after careful consideration surrounding the different methods available to collect the necessary data. An interview is simply a conversation based on a specific topic and it is considered to be the most commonly used method when conducting qualitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2013), worth noting even if that was not the guiding reason for our choice.

Instead, the qualitative interview offers a variety of advantages in relation to quantitative research. Charmaz (2006) withholds that interviewing is a flexible and emergent technique that allows for immediate pursuit of topics, ideas and issues that emerge during the interview situation. Kvale (1992) argues that the qualitative interview is the essential way to explore and understand how respondents experience and see their world as it can serve as an entry point to their lives. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2006) are on a similar line as Kvale and Charmaz but even withhold that the qualitative interview is necessary when the research is seeking to understand the respondents' decisions or the reason behind their attitudes and opinions. Rowley (2012, p.262) notes that the qualitative interview is suitable when the research question centers around understanding "… experiences, opinions, attitudes, values and processes.". Consequently, the qualitative interview can act as an entrance to the mediated world of the interviewees as it provides them with the opportunity to in their own words explain and depict their choices, experiences, and opinions (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). Taken together, the interview as a method was considered to be the most suitable as our objective is to develop a deeper understanding as to what it is that makes employer brands perceived as innovative from the perspective of talents. It is however worth noting that one should not idolize the interview situation by presuming that the interviewee is a competent and morally governed truth-teller

(Alvesson, 2003). The interview situation is indeed "… a socially and linguistically complex situation." as expressed by Alvesson (2003, p.14). We therefore had to take a critical stance against what was being said by asking for elaborations and by searching for potential inconsistencies in the answers received.

There are diverse ways in how to conduct the interviews where the structure and degree of formality of it are often used to define the type of interview (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2006; Rowley, 2012). On the one hand one can conduct so called structured interviews that are formal and where all questions and their order are determined beforehand. These are sometimes referred to as "talking questionnaires" and are arguably not a qualitative method but rather a quantitative (Alvesson, 2003). Due to the nature and close connection to quantitative research we early decided that this type of interview would not allow for the freedom that we considered to be required when exploring perceived innovativeness and was thus removed from the consideration set. On the far end of the other side there are unstructured or so-called in-depth interviews. Unstructured interviews are informal, used to explore a general topic of interest, and no or close to none pre-determined questions are asked (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2006). This type of interview often takes the shape of a regular conversation that is centered around certain themes (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Due to the abstract nature of innovativeness we were concerned that this would lead to too much freedom for the interviewees and thus, the interview would divert from employer brands and result in a too broad spectrum of themes.

In between the structured and the unstructured interview lies the semi-structured interview. In a semi-structured interview an interview guide consisting of a handful of well-articulated questions is leveraged to guide the interview. Some questions might however be excluded from interview to interview and the order might vary (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2006). The interviewee is free to formulate his or her answers in his or her own way while still being guided by the interviewer that dictates the direction of the interview (Bryman & Bell, 2013). We chose the semi-structured interview for our research since it gave the interviewees, what we consider to be, sufficient freedom in their formulation of answers while still offering us a means of control in guiding the interview. Furthermore, the semi-structured interview gave us the possibility to 'probe', which is also referred to as laddering up and down (Easterby-Smith, 2018), and to ask follow-up questions that we considered to be of interest. Reynolds and Guttman (1988) argue that laddering techniques are unique to the semi-structured interview and that they are used to understand how the interviewees see their world. Consequently, the semi-structured interview structure was in line with the adopted interpretive epistemology, where the point of interest was to understand the meaning, sources, and role that talents ascribe to employer brands' innovativeness (Saunder, Lewis, Thornhill, 2006). Thus, the semi-structured interview allowed us to collect rich descriptions from the talents.

Central to the semi-structured interview is the creation of an interview guide, also referred to as a topic guide (Bryman & Bell, 2013). This guide usually contains a framework of topics that is intended to be covered with associated questions, furthermore the order and wording of the questions can vary from a predefined order to a more flexible one (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018; Bryman & Bell, 2013). No matter how the interview guide is structured or followed, it should

serve the purpose of guiding the conversation around the subject of interest while still allowing a certain degree of flexibility (Bryman & Bell, 2013). We decided that a loose structure was the best fitting to keep a momentum in the interviews. Thus, we allowed the respondents to continue on topics that we might have intended to discuss at later stages of the interview.

When creating the interview guide (Appendix A) there are some matters that were essential to consider. Firstly, some sense of sequence amongst the questions is needed so that they are easy to follow and follow some sort of pattern, even though one should be prepared to change the sequence (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Secondly, academic jargon, overly complex language and theoretical concepts should be avoided when formulating the questions (Rowley, 2012; Easterby-smith, 2018). As an example, we chose to use the words corporation or potential employer instead of employer brand to avoid discipline specific language. Lastly, as with both quantitative and qualitative research overall, leading questions should be avoided (Easterby-Smith, 2018). As mentioned earlier, probing, and laddering techniques are a central feature of semi-structured interviews. These types of techniques and questions were used extensively during the interviews but are not stated in the attached interview guide.

4.3.3 Procedure of Interviews

As the world in general, the data gathering phase and thesis in overall was affected by the current COVID-19 virus. To handle the spread of the virus appropriately, countries around the world decided to enforce lockdowns of different degrees. Some decided on total movement control, others established restrictions based on time and in most countries only the most essential societal functions remained open. These circumstances forced us as researchers to adapt. Reflecting on the health risks of personal interviews for the participants, we decided to conduct all interviews online via the digital video conferencing solution WebEx Meetings. Traditionally face-to-face interviewing, that is traditional interviewing where the interviewer and interviewee are sitting in the same room, has been declared as the 'gold-standard' of interviewing (Nehls, Smith & Schneider, 2015). Remote interviews have been looked at with skepticism and have been considered as the second choice (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Conducting interviews online rather than face-to-face thus has some implications that are worth discussing. Most of the literature surrounding remote online interviewing are using Skype as the exemplary software used. We argue that the positive as well as potentially negative sides of the specific software and method overall are applicable to WebEx Meetings as well, reflecting upon their similarities.

Besides that, the current technological development that has paved the way for digital video communication cast doubts on the assumption that it should be seen as a second-hand alternative. It is true that on an overall societal level the usage of digital software may exclude certain people that do not have the required technological competence or the required internet connection (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). Scrutinizing our sample this however becomes a non-issue when acknowledging that all participants are part of a generation that grew up with digital software. Furthermore, arguments have been raised that remote interviewing lacks the depth and non-verbal communication of a traditional interview (Easterby-Smith, 2018). This is indeed a potential issue but can be looked at as the 'pressure of presence' decreases (Weller,

2017). Consequently, the interviewee might feel more at ease and formulate their answers more freely. Weller (2017) even argues that a remote interview can facilitate a greater emotional connection between the interviewer and the interviewee. Moreover, the importance of nonverbal communication is not to be neglected since it can serve as an indicator for the interviewee's experience of addressing a specific subject. We would argue that innovativeness is not a sensitive subject that would give rise to feelings of insecurity or other negative emotions, but to not overlook the risk we paid specific attention to the tone of voice in the interviews where we did not have access to video. However, a clear majority of the interviews were supported by video.

We chose to use WebEx Meetings over other video conferencing softwares for primarily two reasons. Firstly, it allowed us to simply send an access-link to the interviewees so that they did not have to install any specific software. Thus, reducing any potential issues with access and making the interview experience smoother for the interviewees. Secondly, it allowed us to utilize a built-in recording function that generated high quality audio files that could later be used for transcription. Furthermore, conducting online interviews granted us two more general possibilities. Firstly, it allowed us to conduct interviews with persons living at disparate places as online interviews are not confined by geographical proximity. Secondly, conducting online interviews allowed us as researchers to both be present during the interviews which would otherwise not have been possible due to us living at different geographical locations.

On the day of the interviews we sent an access link to a WebEx meeting to the interviewee, which also served as a confirmation that the interviewee remembered the interview. Once we had welcomed the interviewee to the interview, we briefly presented ourselves, the aim, as well as the topic of our research. Furthermore, we asked for consent to record the interview, informed the interviewee that participation was completely voluntary and anonymous, that only we as researchers would have access to the material and finally, that they could end the interview at any given time and withdraw from participation. However, we did not demand a written consent from the interviewees. Before we started the interviews we also informed the interviewee about the structure of the interview and that there were no right or wrong answers to the questions, emphasizing that we wanted to hear their personal thoughts surrounding the topic. As noted, all interviews were recorded after that the interviewee had authorized us to do so. By recording the interview, we were able to focus more clearly on what was being said, formulate follow up questions and thus, be more attentive.

We have highlighted throughout the thesis that innovativeness is a concept which is, first of all, subject to a diverse range of definitions depending on the context and secondly, abstract in its nature. Thus, one could assume that we would provide the interviewees with a definition or a specific frame of innovativeness. As noted, we choose not to follow this assumption. We reasoned that by allowing the talents to think and argue freely around the concept we would capture the full range of associations that are connected to the term and shape what they perceive as an innovative employer brand. Additionally, it could be argued that the choice of interview technique might only reflect the talents' initial associations to innovativeness. We argue the reverse as the choice to conduct semi-structured interviews enabled us to probe deep

and utilize laddering techniques in order to capture thick descriptions of innovativeness (Supphellen, 2000). However, arguments to use visual techniques, as have been leveraged in similar research (Keller, 1993; Shams, Alpert & Brown, 2015), can be presented but we discarded the option due to one primary reason. We argue that visualizations would lead participants into brand-specific thought processes and thus, initial thoughts surrounding employer brand innovativeness in general would get lost. Furthermore, we considered innovativeness to be too abstract to visualize in a certain way. Based on the latter argument we moreover neither choose to use any sensory techniques, such as smelling, tasting, or hearing innovativeness.

The interviews ranged from 30 to 50 minutes. During the interviews both of the researchers were present. One took a leading role asking the questions from the interview guide and guiding the conversation whereas the other took notes, asked follow up questions and validated that all of the questions in the interview-guide were asked. While the literature on interviewing seems to assume that the interview situation is something that exists between one interviewer and one interviewee, we argue that the outlined positive aspects of being two interviewers outweighs potential negative aspects. All of the interviews were concluded by us asking if the interviewee wanted to add anything to the topic that had not been touched upon. Moreover, we once again reminded the interviewee that if they had any questions regarding the research they were free to contact us at any given time. Directly after each interview we discussed the interview and shared what we considered to be important or thought-provoking with each other.

Lastly all interviews were conducted in English even if it is not the mother-tongue of neither of the researchers nor the majority of interviewed talents. The choice of speaking English enabled us to analyze the interviews without translating them and thus risks of misinterpretations were minimized. However, by speaking English we might have hindered the interviewees' ability to articulate their full range of associations. By embracing the silence that naturally occurs during interviews and allowing the interviewees to take their time to think thoroughly we tried to reduce this risk.

4.4 Procedure of Analysis

Throughout the realization of the interviews all material was, as noted, recorded for transcription to enable a thorough analysis. A transcription is the result of the process of transcribing which is reproduction of what is being said in a written form (Saunders, Lewis, Thornhill, 2006). Due to the importance of capturing the totality of what is being said during the interview and how it is being said while still being focused on the interviewee Bryman and Bell (2013) propose that recording and consequently transcribing the interview is essential. However, transcribing is a time-consuming process and thus, the decision was made to utilize the audio-to-text software Otter.Ai to make the process more efficient. The software utilizes machine-learning to transcribe audio into text in the format of an editable transcript. Within 12 hours of conducting the interviews we re-listened to the interview and adjusted the minor errors that had occurred in the automated process by comparing it with the initial audio recording. Furthermore, this allowed us to continuously analyze the contents, localize emerging themes

and adapt forthcoming interviews accordingly (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Since English was not the native language for a majority of the respondents, grammatical errors and incoherent sentences occurred. To minimize our interference with the data we chose to not adjust these flaws at an initial stage (Patel & Davidson, 2019). Due to the interviews being transcribed in their totality the transcribed results equated to 304 single-spaced pages, which is to be seen as the data gathered for the subsequent analysis.

As already noted, an abductive approach was employed throughout the research and more specifically in the analysis. Consequently, we went back and forth between the gathered material, the analytical framework and existing research as an iterative process (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The analysis should be seen as the transformative process in which the generated empirical data (e.g. the interview transcripts) is transformed into findings, results, and consequently theoretical knowledge (Lofland, 2006). Producing theoretical knowledge is thus the purpose and mission of the analysis, but to transform the generated data into theoretical knowledge, Rennstam & Wästerfors (2018) argue that three problems need to be overcome, namely: chaos, representation, and authority. To achieve that, we followed the analytical work process of sorting, reducing, and arguing (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

Since the data does not appear out of nowhere neatly presented in a structured manner, it first needs to be sorted and thus ascribed to different categories or themes in order to be contextualized. This is done by the process of coding, which includes the structuring of data through the usage of labels or codes (Rennstamm & Wästerfors, 2018; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). The coding can be described as being carried out in two separate ways. Firstly, we looked for attributes and stimuli that the interviewees brought up when talking about innovative employer brands and what it is that makes them perceived as innovative from their perspective. In this process color coding was leveraged, as proposed by Ryan and Bernard (2003). The attributes were aggregated into six overarching dimensions and compiled into a structured collection of attributes (Appendix B). When attributes were used in conjunction they were placed together in the graphical overview of the collection of attributes. Furthermore, certain brand specific analogies and metaphors were aggregated into generalized terms, as an example "Elon Musk " was interpreted as "CEO". Secondly, we once again revisited the transcripts and broadened the scope by not focusing on the attributes and stimuli specifically. We instead scrutinized the material for noticeable repetitions, similarities and differences from within the material but also in relation to existent theories. During this process several different codes were utilized and these were constantly changed and reevaluated throughout, which is common for qualitative analysis (Bryman & Bell, 2011). As the process of coding went on different themes emerged and as they were identified we continuously revisited them under the light of existing theory (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). The identified themes were categorized into separate folders with representative quotes and thus, allowed us to gain an overview and identify relationships between themes (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). This process of categorization could also be explained with the cutting and sorting metaphor utilized by Ryan and Bernard (2003). As themes were identified we continuously returned to older transcripts to see if further support were to be found there as well. Thus, we spent an extensive amount of time familiarizing us with the data throughout the first analysis step.

Due to the large amounts of themes that emerged from the data throughout the first step of analysis we had to reduce the data. Therefore, we applied metacoding to consolidate them by looking for similarities (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018; Ryan & Bernard, 2003). After this process the amount of themes was still excessive and hence, we made the decision to exclude some of them. In general not all themes are equally important (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), but the problem of representation is still a dilemma (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). In the quest for credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman & Bell, 2013) we would like to emphasize that it would have been ideal to present all of our findings. However, this was not possible within the scope of our work. Therefore, we further scrutinized the themes through the usage of three overall criteria: significance, importance, and theoretical advancement that we derived from Dubois and Gadde's (2002) abductive guidelines in systematic combining. Although certain themes and findings were decided to be excluded from the thesis the implications of them are still considered in a holistic manner (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018).

The final step of analysis, as outlined by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018), is constituted by arguing. Theorizing can be considered as a unique form of argumentation (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018), which we argue can be seen throughout the entirety of the thesis. By thematizing the empirical material, constantly comparing and searching for explanations within existing as well as non-existing theory and reducing the empirical material, we theorized and showed our understanding of perceived innovativeness. Theory to us is therefore developing an understanding rather than an explanation of a phenomenon (Charmaz, 2006). This understanding is presented throughout the succeeding chapters.

4.5 Quality of Research

Qualitative research offers the researcher a great extent of interpretative freedom. If conducted properly the freedom can be used to creatively improve the value of qualitative research, but it can also result in a deterioration of the research quality if the opposite is the case. Consequently, it is paramount to reflexively consider the implications of choices made throughout the research. While validity, reliability and generalizability are the guiding criteria for the quality of quantitative research (Bryman & Bell, 2011), there is an extensive academic discourse on their applicability to measure the quality of qualitative research (Kvale, 1992; Ryan & Bernard, 2003; Silverman, 2005). We follow Guba and Lincoln's (1994) logic that the above-mentioned criteria assume that there is one singular and absolute picture of societal reality. Instead we follow their proposition that trustworthiness and authenticity should be the guiding criteria to assess the value of qualitative research since there can exist different valid descriptions of the reality. Within trustworthiness four sub-criteria are used: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman & Bell, 2013). These are examined at first and thereafter the authenticity concept is explored.

Credibility, similar to internal validity, refers to how credible the researchers' descriptions of the different realities that are assumed to exist are (Bryman & Bell, 2013). To conduct credible research the researchers therefore have to follow guidelines concerning how to conduct ethical

research as well as validate the proposed results with the participants. To validate that our interpretations of the respondents' answers were correct we continuously asked affirmative questions during the interviews. Furthermore, we contacted each interviewee and confided them their aliases so that they could further validate our interpretations of their statements.

Transferability, similar to external validity, refers to whether or not the results can be transferred from one group to a broader spectrum of groups (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Where quantitative research is aiming for statistically generalizable results, that has never been our objective. Instead we are aiming for theoretical generalizability and thick descriptions of a phenomenon, namely perceived innovativeness. By conducting individual interviews surrounding one single phenomenon with promised anonymity the interviewees were able to speak freely around the topic. Furthermore, the research should be understood within its specific context as with qualitative research in general (Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001).

Dependability, similar to the quantitative term reliability, is reached when the authors provide an exhaustive description of each step of the research process (Bryman & Bell, 2013). This is accomplished through the thorough description of the methodological choices made, which we conclude throughout this chapter. Guba and Lincoln propose that a colleague could act as an "auditor" to scrutinize the research and the results drawn from it (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Bryman and Bell (2013) however assert that this type of procedure is uncommon due to the time investment needed. Due to the dual authorship and close communication with our supervisor we propose that dependability has been reached by other means that the ones suggested.

Lastly, Guba and Lincoln (1994) propose confirmability as the last criteria for the trustworthiness of a research. Bryman and Bell (2013) state that confirmability refers to how objective, unbiased and honest the researcher has remained throughout the research, with the knowledge that qualitative research can never reach total objectivity. Regarding objectivity and bias we follow the thoughts of Kvale (1992, p.7) that the terms in the context of doing research should be understood as "… doing good, solid research.". Thus, no research, qualitative or quantitative, is in essence objective and unbiased. However, we refrained from asking leading questions and instead opted for open questions, where the interviewee could reason freely. Naturally we guided the conversation and chose when to ask follow up questions but this should be seen as the strength of qualitative research and not as a usage of leading questions searching for specific answers. Furthermore, the extensive usage of quotes throughout the results chapter should not merely be seen as a stylistic tool, but rather to increase the transparency of the research results.

The usage of quotes from the interviews, the collection of associated attributes (Appendix B), and interview guide (Appendix A) further add to the authenticity of the research, which is the second overarching criteria proposed by Guba and Lincoln (1994) to assess the quality of research. Authenticity is closely connected to the credibility criteria in trustworthiness (Whittemore, Chase & Mandle, 2001) and thus, involves the provision of a fair picture of the opinions and views of the interviewees (Bryman & Bell, 2013). Consequently, by reasoning

around and explaining our methodological choices paired with the transparent presentation, we argue that the research should be considered authentic.

Regarding ethical consideration the guidelines postulated by the Swedish Research Council (2019) and consequently the All European Academies publication "The European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity", have been followed meticulously. The interviewees have been informed about the aim of the research, we have sought informed consent, all information about them have been treated with confidentiality and the information gathered have solely been used for the purpose of the thesis. Thus, the principles of reliability, honesty, respect, and accountability have guided the research. Through the provided discussion of these criterias and methodological choices we aim to provide the reader with a more transparent and assured view into the quality of the research, the findings and analysis, where the two latter are presented in the following chapter.

5. Findings & Analysis

A substantial range of findings, themes and analytical considerations evolved from the data collection. As those link to different dimensions of the research question, they are divided into three overarching sections. Each of these sections contains an examination of the investigated themes as well as subsequent analytical considerations that we draw from those themes on a more theoretical level and in relation to existing research in the field. In the first section (5.1), the findings and analytical considerations on the general meaning and thus, constituents of employer brands' innovativeness in the perception of talents are examined. In the second section (5.2) the evolution of talents' knowledge around and evaluation of brands' innovativeness are outlined and discussed. In the third and final section (5.3) a selection of findings and analytical considerations that point towards the relevance of an adjusted perspective on the role of innovativeness in talents' evaluation of employer brands is scrutinized.

5.1 Meaning of Innovativeness

In this first section of the findings and analysis the general meaning of employer brands' innovativeness to talents is examined and discussed. This meaning is explored through talents' own definitions of the term in a first step as well as the attributes that talents associate with innovative employer brands in general in a second step. In opposition to the following section this general meaning of innovativeness to talents is not considered to be tied to the evolution or sources of respective brand knowledge of individual talents but instead reflects an overarching and aggregated meaning of the term. In a final step the presented findings will be set into relation to the existing theoretical discourse.

5.1.1 Talents' Definition of Innovativeness

In totality what innovativeness means for talents seems to be highly fragmented and multidimensional. When the talents were asked to define what innovativeness in the context of a corporation is, an array of areas was touched upon within the definitions. At first glance no similarities were to be seen. While some spoke about innovativeness as a quality, others spoke about it as an inherent capability or even about doing things differently than what others are doing. On the one hand a functional approach to innovativeness can be seen in the provided definitions and on the other a more symbolic approach can be noted. Here symbolic should be understood as a combined approach of something that is emotional and intangible. Starting with the prior viewpoint, change is a functional descriptor that shares the multidimensionality of innovativeness in the sense that the change needed to be innovative is described in multifaceted ways.

> *"I think it's making things different than others. Not just different but this disruptive different. Coming up with something others didn't think about." (Jelena, International Business Development Student)*

Jelena stated that the corporation does not only need to come up with something different than others, but it has to be done in a disruptive manner as well, and no one has even thought about

it prior. But the change associated with the definitional meaning of innovativeness can also be about the desire and ability to change in accordance to what people want, as it was expressed by Harry, when he was asked to define innovativeness:

> *"I guess it's for me, it's the ability and the desire to change based on what people want and not." (Harry, Computer Science Student).*

To know what "people want and not" might be somewhat of a cue to the complexity of the topic. It is no simple matter to know what people want or not, because then all marketers would be voided of their professional occupation. The definition provided connects closely to what Jelena expressed about coming up with something that others have not thought of prior and it almost seems like an impossible task. Probing into the minds of consumers and predicting what they want matches with how Marvin defined innovativeness when asked to:

> *"Building or creating new products or services for consumers that they actually want. So the customers, they really need to want it." (Marvin, Entrepreneurship Student)*

Scrutinizing the complexity in knowing and predicting what the customers really want, as expressed by Marvin, once more points toward the partly impossible task of predicting the future. Although Marvin is a business student within the area of entrepreneurship, the optimism in his answer is obvious and he is clearly not restricted by any sort of business logic. While these initial definitions have all touched upon predicting and foreseeing some type of future and providing something, be it a product or a service, to the market, others emphasized collaborations between the corporation and other corporations to create something that does not necessarily need to be new.

> *"I think, daring to fail. It's a big part of it and learning from past experiences and merging it with external experiences and information. So we have all these assets and capabilities in our organization, how can we make use of them and how can we use others' capabilities, other organizations' capabilities in conjunction with ours and make something great out of it." (Osman, Digital Leadership Student)*

In Osman's explanation the focus is not on the newness of the product but rather how it is created and the processes behind the scene. However, the essence is still similar to the above-mentioned definitions. Innovativeness for these talents is a functional attribute that leads to the creation of either a product or service. In contrast to this functional viewpoint, a symbolic approach to innovativeness can also be noted in the provided definitions as mentioned earlier. Having an open mind is an example thereof:

> *"Being open minded and hearing everybody out and having a lot of perspective on things, allowing a lot of perspectives on things." (Jonas, Data Science Student)*

> *"[…] innovativeness means that you have kind of an open mind, that you are open for new ideas and new approaches. I think that's mainly it because otherwise you get stuck in the same routines." (Tom, Civil Engineering Student)*

Tom still touched upon innovativeness in the terms of "new", but he described it in a symbolic way when he talked about having "an open mind" and being open to ideas and new approaches. While Jonas did not explain what the result would be if you do not have an open mind, Tom

stated that if you do not have these capabilities, you will get stuck in routines. According to Tom that would consequently inhibit innovation and prevent the corporation from being innovative as a whole. Sebastian defined innovativeness in a similar, yet different, way when he stated that:

> *"[…] innovativeness for me is something or someone that doesn't see boundaries. Someone that knows that even though something works it doesn't mean that it is the best." (Sebastian, Marketing and Brand Management Student)*

What can be seen in Sebastian's definition is some sort of inner will and knowledge to continuously improve, which encapsulates the entire organization. Through the different definitions the pattern of either using a symbolic or a functional approach is noted. Regarding the functional approach, emphasis is put on changing the organization, producing new products and inherent capabilities while the symbolic approach is more concerned with having an open mind and an inner will to continuously learn. Although these provided definitions seem to follow a logic at first glance, they should be considered as the results of direct requests to define innovativeness. They are in spirit simplifications of their thoughts as they were formulated at the very end of the interviews. Consequently, the multidimensional meaning associated with employer brands' innovativeness is further examined throughout the next section.

5.1.2 Multidimensional Attributes associated with Innovativeness

When the talents were asked to describe what it is that makes an employer brand innovative to them, 844 different attributes associated with employer brands' innovativeness across six different dimensions were revealed. These are further signs of the complexity and multiplicity that comes with innovativeness. The identified dimensions that influence the employer brand's perceived innovativeness from a talent's perspective can be distinguished into organization, resources, activities, environments, markets as well as products and services. A graphical depiction can be found in Appendix B.

Organization

According to the interviewed talents an innovative employer brand is based on an organization that has certain "skills", it should be able to project, collaborate, collect information, break rules for the good, bring social good, systemize change, quickly adapt, differentiate, predict, and continuously learn and refine. The organization should moreover "be" in a certain way to be perceived as innovative: ambitious, attentive, creative, curious, intelligent, future oriented, flashy, fun, humble, talkative, trustworthy, customer-oriented and non-traditional. These describing attributes are merely a small selection of how the talents described an innovative organization from an overarching perspective. A certain mindset appears to be a central organizational attribute that the talents ascribed to an innovative employer brand and it shows similarities to what can be described as a cultural factor. However, the way that the specific mindset is depicted was diverse between the talents.

> *''I think innovativeness is a lot about the mindset, about being open to new ideas, about trying to push new ideas forward, about listening to other people's voices about making good decision and being able*

to have a realistic view on whether this idea can prosper.'' (Lena, Consumer and Business Science Student)

The statement from Lena reflects back to how Osman, Jonas and Sebastian defined innovativeness and their different views on openness. They all look at innovativeness as something that one cannot achieve alone and individually, but rather a collaborative effort is needed where several individuals, parts of the organization or several organizations come together and collectively push something forward. The mindset required to be perceived as innovative can also be described in a way that it almost appears to be a result from the financial strength of the firm.

> *"Well, I feel like maybe they have a bit of like the Silicon Valley mindset, even just like what you see in a lot of big tech companies that they have so much money, so many resources to differentiate themselves [...] you don't necessarily need to be a company that started or is currently located in Silicon Valley to have what I'm referring to, but it's basically this startup new wave tech feeling of just companies with a ton of money and companies who are, I don't know for better or for worse, having employees make their careers their life. So that employees are constantly thinking about how they can move the company forward. And, you know, it's not like you go home at 5pm and you're totally off the clock.'' (Cara, Marketing & Brand Management Student)*

Cara explained her idea of an innovative organizational mindset with the Silicon Valley metaphor. Here she did not refer to the geographical location but rather the result from the funding paired with employees that are willing to make their careers their life and are constantly thinking about how to move the corporation forward. What can be sensed in her statement is that to Cara the funding serves as an enabler for innovative behavior and that behavior transcends the regular nine-to-five work environment. In contrast to Cara's reasoning some respondents described the mindset of the organization as being "chill" or "relaxed". The contrasting ways of describing what it is that specifically results in perceived innovativeness appears throughout different dimensions and is discussed in detail within the following analytical considerations. The mindset was described by others as being curious, willing to take risks, explorative, and daring to fail. The latter ways of describing could be summed up as a mindset that needs to be fearless in terms of failing, trying and sometimes even as breaking rules in a good way. Being fearless for Lola is almost being reckless by not thinking about the consequences:

> *"And they're not super traditional. And I think that, that's good. Fearlessness is quite different from, for example, when I worked at [company X], it's super traditional and they wouldn't dare to do anything. Because they also have this reputation to withhold.'' (Lola, Marketing & Brand Management Student)*

This fearlessness can potentially be seen as an extension or complete incorporation of the being open to new ideas rationale that was introduced previously. It appears as if it is not sufficient to only individually be open to new ideas, but it is paramount to have it as a holistic organizational approach, where the organization allows employees to pursue those ideas and in extension put them into practice. Thus, it could be seen as a cultural factor for an innovative organization to be fearless, which matches with talents' notion of the culture as being forgiving, open and allowing freedom. Another dimension of innovativeness within the organization involves the people that work there, the employees. Those were described as open minded,

motivated, full of ideas and young. What clearly stands out is the importance of age, or more specifically old people as a potential barrier to perceived innovativeness as made clear by the following answers:

> *"Well, I would say, the age of the people working there, if there are a lot of older people, like as shitty as that sounds, I think the more innovative companies have a ton of young people, the less innovative companies have a ton of old people who are trying to figure out what the young people do these days"* *(Cara, Marketing and Brand Management Student)*

> *"I mean, they're definitely obviously old people who are innovative as well, but I would say, statistically, in general, older people are not that innovative, because they are not used to it. They had a totally different setting like, say 40 years ago. They didn't really need to be innovative as we need today, and I think that's also what's still in their mind. So they kind of stuck in like 30 years ago or so. And that's why they don't have to think of being super innovative as modern companies." (Marvin, Entrepreneurship Student)*

> *"Probably the age structure within a company. If you have a lot of old people, which is not necessarily bad because they have a lot of experience, but they are probably not too open to new ideas." (Tom, Civil Engineering Student)*

What can be seen is that older people are associated with not being open to new ideas, being stuck in old and non-innovative processes, and a fumbling way of trying to figure out what the younger and thus, more innovative people are doing. An apologetic approach in their reasoning can be sensed, but they all agree that albeit old people have other skills and qualities, innovativeness is most likely not one of them. In almost a dichotomous fashion the opposite to old - young was clearly stated as a sign of innovativeness both in the terms of the workforce overall, as Cara expressed, but also in terms of the leadership in the form of the management and the CEO. Not only is a younger CEO considered to be more innovative, but he or she should be hardworking, representative for the organization, passionate and philanthropic. The management overall should be accessible, supportive, and open to ideas to name a few of the describing attributes.

> *"I think management needs to take a lead and give a direction for the entire firm. But also it should be open to ideas that come from within the firm like from the employees. So there needs to be a good balance of straight leadership and leading the way forward but also being accessible to others.'' (Lena, Consumer and Business Science Student)*

Once more the notion of being open is mentioned but this time it was directly stated in the context of how the management should act towards the employees. By leading the way management has the possibility to change the direction and perception of the whole organization and naturally, the bigger the size of the organization the harder it gets to instigate change. However, as noted previously, from the talent's external perspective it is not only about the holistic view of the corporation and more visible aspects such as the CEO and the management that leads to a perception of innovativeness. It is also about the less visible aspects such as the processes within. These processes were described as being flexible, agile, routine breaking but also quite contradictory as systematic. In relation to the processes and concrete leadership of the corporation the hierarchical structure was similarly underlined. A flat, equal and potentially non-existent hierarchy was proposed as the most innovative, while a strongly

hierarchical organization where everyone sticks to themselves was depicted as the opposite to innovative. Closely related to leadership and the structure of the organization are the working conditions and the way of working. According to the interviewed talents the way of working in an innovative corporation is assumed to be exciting, constantly changing, agile, interdisciplinary but also self-responsible. Lena asserted the importance of being open to new ways of working for an innovative corporation.

> *''[...] the working conditions change a lot as everything changes. And now, especially with the new Corona situation, you see that everybody needs to be able to work from home and some firms that were able to manage doing that even before the crisis. So I think that's, that's a quite good indicator for being innovative or being open to new working models, like for example, if you're a young mom, but you can still continue your work because you're able to work part time, or you can work from home.'' (Lena, Consumer and Business Science Student)*

It is important to note that the current pandemic of COVID-19 might have influenced the importance placed upon the ways of working by the talents, but the topic should not be neglected and shunned for that sake. As highlighted in the quote the current pandemic has made it even clearer that an innovative corporation is one that quickly adapts to radical changes. But it can also take its shape in more ordinary examples such as with maternity leave or working with digital tools as opposed to pen and paper. The latter example seems to be a small and trivial example at first glance but potentially shows its importance to talents in two ways. Firstly, it appears as if the pen and paper-analogue is related to the dichotomy of young and old where old people are assumed to work in old and non-innovative ways. Secondly, it could be looked at as a tangible manifestation of a newer and thus, more innovative way of working.

Resources

In the perception of talents both the organization's way of working in specific but also the organisation as a whole require and are related to certain resources that are associated with innovative employer brands. These resources constitute a further dimension of attributes evolving from the statements of the interviewed talents, in which a spectrum of different kinds of resources, both tangible and intangible, have been mentioned. The tangible resources include technology, financials, and data. In order to be perceived as innovative the technological resources of a corporation should be modern, digital, fitting, be applied in practice and thus, support the work of the individual but also the output of the entire corporation. In that context the interviewed talents discussed both attributes relating to overarching technological developments (e.g. machine learning, quantum computing or artificial intelligence) but also to everyday operations (e.g. IT support). Moreover, considered in this context was the expansiveness of such technological resources, which links to the financial resources of a corporation. In the context of financial resources two aspects were considered as innovative, the quantity and the accessibility of the financial resources of a corporation. When investigating the specific context in which those are mentioned, it becomes evident that talents associate financial resources with innovativeness as an enabler for certain things, as illustrated in the statements of Sdenek, Petra and Cara:

"You know, money rules everything. If you have enough money to buy innovation, do it." (Sdenek, Business, Management & Marketing Student)

"I think it takes a lot of money to change your processes or to come up with a completely new business model or change your business model." (Petra, Marketing and Brand Management Student)

"[...] just what you see in a lot of big tech companies that they have so much money, so many resources to differentiate themselves. They're having all of these health and wellness initiatives, that kind of expanding the company into employees' life through having gyms on site and things like that." (Cara, Marketing and Brand Management Student)

While Sdenek associated financial resources as an enabler to acquire innovation, Petra considered them as a requirement to adapt the processes or organisation of a corporation. On another note Cara considered financials as a means to improve the working conditions in a corporation. Besides financials, data is perceived as an innovative resource as well, which again should be based on quantity and accessibility. The findings indicate that this might relate to knowledge as a further driving, but intangible resource. More specifically talents perceive corporations with knowledge about the market and its customers as innovative. Further intangible resources that were associated take shape in the form of ideas (IP) but also the general presence of the corporation, which conclude the resources associated by talents with innovative employer brands.

Activities

While the resources are constituted in the form of more static assets, talents' perception of innovativeness seems to be further influenced through corporations' activities, which define how the resources might be used in the short- and long-term. Thus, those activities refer to both the operational and strategic choices made by a corporation. On an overall level the activities were described as being clear and pointed but also as being guided and aligned towards a vision. Throughout the research different fields of activities emerged, relating to corporations' research and development, investments, brand, sales, business model and communication. From the findings we assume that the different fields of focus in terms of activities might tie back to the academic background of the talents as exemplified in the following quotes from Jonas, Sdenek and Frans:

"To make brain computer interfaces, for example, is really innovative. People are trying to get electrodes in your brain and measure the brain activity to then use patterns to control your devices with it. And there are also people who try to bring the information from the device into your brain via those patterns. We are probably 30 to 40 years away from that, but it's really interesting and really crazy. That stuff would work because it would also change the world as we know it." (Jonas, Data Science Student)

"An innovative company is a company who's able to adjust the business model or product to a very short time without harming the market share or the product or the company itself." (Sdenek, Business, Management & Marketing Student)

"I'm still having sort of a sustainability perspective, but perhaps the oil industry and airline industry, I would say that perhaps starting to find new ideas of how to conduct business but it's still pretty old fashioned in their way of how to conduct businesses [...] I mean, they could put far more money into

research on how you could find other energy sources, but they really haven't done that. So it's all about lack of efforts to find other solutions, I would say." (Frans, Industrial Ecology Student)

While Jonas, coming from a technological background, focused on activities that are related to research and development, Sdenek focused on the business model and thus, an aspect that links to his business focused background. Frans' focal point was sustainability when he was talking about industries that are not innovative which connects to his education within industrial ecology and mechanical engineering. This could indicate that the educational background of talents might affect their focus in the innovativeness related perception of employer brands. Furthermore, Jonas' statement indicates several of the attributes related to corporations' research and development that are perceived as innovative, ranging from a great impact, over a long-term focus to a high interest value of the research topics. Besides that, the research quantity and combination of internal and external thoughts are considered as innovative as well. Corporations' business models on the other hand should not only be fast to adjust, but also independent from financial, shareholder interests, able to shape markets, industries and trends, continuously growing, changing, evolving and fulfilling a social purpose while being sustainable. Moreover, considered as innovative is the expansion of business models into other areas of business as well as changes to the supply chain (e.g. adoptions, simplifications, or accelerations). In a contrasting way to the expansion of the business model into other areas and thus being diverse, Jens considered corporations that are active in niche areas as the most innovative. In close connection to the business model the investment and sales activities of corporations are relevant to the innovativeness perception as well. While the primary should focus on start-ups and venture capital, the latter should be based on multiple, new and digital channels. Additionally, associated is the pricing, which ranges from affordable to premium and thus, lacks clear insight due to the contrasting ways described.

The last field of activities that seems to influence talents' perception of innovative employer brands is their communication. What is considered to add to the perceived innovativeness in this field is as with other dimensions subjective and diverse. Furthermore, the importance placed upon the communication varies. For Frida Innocent's communication is what makes them the most innovative employer brand according to her:

> *"I think maybe Innocent. Like the smoothies, but that's mostly because of their communications because they are so different and like informal and humorous [...] They are just themselves, they are like a person, they are super human I would say. And that's just different from other companies." (Frida, Marketing and Brand Management Student)*

By having an informal and humorous communication the corporation is differentiating themselves from other companies and thus catches Frida's attention. Her field of study furthermore seems to influence her perception and focus on what constitutes an employer brand's innovativeness, as similar to the previously outlined quotes from Frans, Sdenek and Jonas. Furthermore, the communication of innovative employer brands was described as being fun, empowering, honest, clean, controversial, and visible. These ways of describing the communication thus seem to continue on the line of communicating in a way that allows the employer brand to stand out.

Environments

At first glance the environments of a corporation (e.g. the offices and retail spaces) seem to have a minor influence on the perception of innovativeness among talents but it seems as if they can enforce existing predispositions about employer brands' innovativeness. The retail spaces were described as positive, problem solving, accessible and different. The offices of an innovative corporation were described as digitized, trendy, and uncommon with futuristic and nice furniture. Furthermore, they are supposedly located in a nice neighborhood that is close to the city center. When Cara visited one of Google's offices her impression of them being innovative was strengthened although it according to her was done in a blunt way:

> *"And I think they were trying very hard to make their office very cool and trendy. Which, you know, signals innovativeness. And, I mean, they were in New York, they had a huge building, like beautiful balconies and rooftop terraces with plants and stuff. I think they're just really trying to show off the fact that like, look how cool we are. Look how much this cost. Are you impressed by us? That was kind of the vibe that I got." (Cara, Marketing and Brand Management Student)*

Even if Cara accused Google of having some sort of agenda and showing off, she still admitted that it did add to her perception of Google being innovative. Even though the tangible nature of the offices and retail-spaces would be assumed to lead to a strong influence on the perception of innovativeness, they rather seem to have a confirmatory role and enforce already existing perceptions.

Markets

A further field of associated attributes that evolved from the interviews are the markets in which corporations operate in. Albeit the spectrum of associated attributes in this field is quite limited, the ones mentioned are still interesting to review as those are more external to the control of a corporation. An example of such are the attributes associated with the industries in which corporations operate. While some talents described innovative corporations as operating in industries that are interesting, digital, and willing to change, others used concrete examples as in the case of Lena:

> *''[...] what comes to mind is probably the big tech companies. I often connect innovativeness to new technology. So it's probably something like Microsoft, Google, Apple. Yeah, some of the big ones I guess.'' (Lena, Consumer and Business Science Student)*

As illustrated in her statement Lena associates innovativeness with tech companies and thus, the industry of technology. Other industries that were mentioned are programming and gaming, which however could be considered as related to technology. Whether or not sustainability should be considered as an industry or a market is a discussion that we will not participate in due to it being beyond the scope and focal point of this thesis. What was made clear is that by being alert, possibilities of first mover advantage opens up.

> *"I think on those topics that are super new, like new and relevant. There is a lot of room for innovativeness. So that's why I connect them. Like if you think about something old and like, there's more. Yeah, sustainability is a hot topic and there is a lot that you can do, to tap into that problem." (Lola, Marketing & Brand Management Student).*

When Lola described sustainability as a hot topic she makes the inference that hot topics open up possibilities that can be leveraged to be on the forefront in new industries and trends and in the long run that creates a perception of innovativeness since they are the first there. A further association of talents with the markets in which corporations operate are constituted in the form of regulations, which should at best not be existent. Finally, the position of the market and competitors might influence talents' perception of employer brands' innovativeness as well. This underlines the point that the perception of employer brands' innovativeness might not only be negotiated between talents and employer brands, but also be influenced through external aspects, such as markets in general.

Products & Services

The up until now described dimensions and attributes are all related to a somewhat internal, organizational perspective that might be specific to the talent's external evaluation of a corporation as a potential employee. But there are also more tangible dimensions such as the products and services that influence their perception of innovativeness. A corporation's products and services are intuitively not something that should influence a potential employee's perception of whether or not the corporation is innovative but in the case of talents it is apparent that they do. To the talents an innovative corporation's products are described as being better than their competitors, trendsetting, modern, more efficient and sustainable than other products. Moreover, they should be of good quality, have an appealing and understandable interface and a widespread applicability. Additionally, they should be well designed, minimalistic, and stylish. These different descriptors were connected to attributes such as the products' features, packaging, quality, interface, applicability, and aesthetics. Interestingly the products do not have to be successful to be considered innovative as in the case of the Google Glasses:

> *''And I think we all can remember the glasses. I remember because it was way ahead of its time back then when it actually came out. And the fact that it didn't actually go as they have planned is a different story.'' (Sebastian, International Marketing and Brand Management Student)*

Even though the product never reached the consumer market it still adds to Google's innovativeness from Sebastian's perspective due to the glasses being ahead of their time. The products can also be more modest and inherently innovative as Farina described Apple's products, when she was asked for the reasons that make Apple the most innovative corporation according to her:

> *''I think that every single product that they produce is about innovation. It's really simple, I think, yes, innovation is all about being simple, being intuitive. I think that they're incredibly simple and incredibly intuitive. They make sense I would say.'' (Farina, International Business Student)*

Farina's description of why the products are innovative might seem simplistic at first when she described them as being simple and intuitive but it is the holistic perspective of all of their products that together adds up and what makes them innovative as a whole. Apple's products were in a similar manner described as being extensions of existing products and therefore they add to Apple's perceived innovativeness due to the simplicity. In a contrasting manner the

reason that other corporations were considered innovative was due to their radically new products.

5.1.3 Analytical Considerations

As noted throughout the preceding part of this chapter the way that talents define innovativeness and what makes an employer brand perceived as innovative is subjective and individual to the respective talent even if some patterns can be discerned. How talents perceive and define innovativeness is different from how it is defined in academia, which is supposedly natural due to the varying ways of defining it depending on the context. But the reason being might also be connected to the abstractness of the concept and the different backgrounds of the talents. Consumer perceived firm innovativeness has been defined as "… the consumer's perception of an enduring firm capability that results in novel, creative, and impactful ideas and solutions." (Kunz, Schmitt & Meyer, 2011, p.816). While this definition and description of corporations' capabilities originates from the consumer viewpoint, which is as shown not equal to the talents perspective, it is focused on the tangible output of corporations even if the importance of an holistic approach is emphasized in their study. Sommer, Heidenreich and Handrich's (2017, p.301) definition of perceived firm innovativeness tries to encapsulate the talent perspective: "… a company's ability to develop new ideas and to engage in creative processes which result in new products, services or technological processes.". Once more the gaze is focused on the output albeit the processes behind it are noted. While the former definition is sprung from consumers the latter does not have its origin in the investigation of talents but rather in previous research, even if it tries to answer the importance of innovativeness to them. This could lead to misguided assumptions regarding the meaning of innovativeness to talents. Besides that, the way that talents define innovativeness appears to be based on a combination of instrumental and symbolic attributes (Lievens & Highhouse, 2009). In coherence to that, it can be considered as related to Behling's et al. (1968, cited in Tom, 1971) Objective Factor and Subjective Factor Theory due to the mixture of functional and emotional factors. This further marks the broad scope and complexity of the attribute.

The understanding of innovativeness amongst talents seems to be fragmented and multidimensional. Talents associate a diverse number of attributes to the term and what it is that makes an employer brand perceived as innovative appears to be individual. However, somewhat as mirrored to the current and historical academic understanding of innovativeness (Courtright & Smudde, 2009; Garcia & Calantone, 2002; Schumpeter, 1934) change is noted as a central attribute. Change can take place within the business model, the products offered or the organizational processes behind and what ties them together is that the change is thought to lead to something new. However, it is believed by talents that change cannot be incurred without a specific mindset – a mindset that is driven by a willingness to change. The way that the talents describe the innovative mindset and the culture of an innovative employer brand corresponds closely to the way that Sommer, Heidenreich and Handrich (2017) describe an innovative culture.

While neither change nor the mindset are new dimensions to the discourse around the meaning of innovativeness, we found several dimensions of attributes that talents ascribe to innovative

employer brands that are not reflected in the current academic and managerial definitions: the influence of other employees' characteristics (e.g. age or cultural background), the importance of leadership (in the form of CEO and management), the working conditions in corporations (e.g. in form of tools, office structures or working rules and hours), the attitude and skill set of the corporation (with confidence, future orientation and risk affinity in focus) as well as the business model of the organization. Furthermore, the entering of new market areas, the financial strength and creativity of a corporation are mentioned as attributes associated with innovative corporations, which are not reflected in the existing definitions and thus, add further angles to existing definitions of the term. These different dimensions could be seen as additional arguments for the need of a holistic understanding of innovativeness as proposed by Kunz, Schmitt and Meyer (2011): simply because the corporation's products are perceived as innovative, the corporation as such does not have to be perceived as innovative. It could however also be seen as an underlying reason for the varying focal points in current academic definitions in the different fields, but if so, this would serve as an indicator that the definitions are neither perfected nor encapsulating. In addition to that, the multiple dimensions of meaning associated with employer brands' innovativeness indicate that the attention of talents reaches beyond traditional focal aspects of employer brand management such as culture (Theurer et al., 2018). Instead it involves aspects that are located within the broader scope of corporate brand management such as business models (Abratt & Kleyn, 2012; Roper & Fill, 2012).

Furthermore, this splintered focus on different organizational dimensions could be seen as signs of the first meaning gap as explained by Berthon, Pitt and Campbell (2009). It is apparent that talent associates more and different aspects with innovativeness than corporations or researchers looking at the term from the corporate perspective. This relates to observations of Dacin and Brown (2002) as well as Burmann et al. (2017), who stated that brand meaning is often perceived differently than initially intended by corporations' brand management. Besides that, there are signs of the second meaning gap as well, which is the meaning gap between different stakeholder groups. Within the stakeholder group of talents this takes place on two different levels. Firstly, there seems to exist a difference in meaning between talents as one stakeholder group and the general stakeholder group of consumers as the other, as investigated by Berthon, Pitt and Campbell (2009). Even though overlapping to some extent, talents seem to take more dimensions and attributes into consideration than what consumers do when assessing corporations' innovativeness.

Secondly, there are also differences in meaning within subordinated groups of talents such as business and technology students. Innovativeness is something that is inherently positive to both groups, but they emphasize different dimensions. The meaning gap theory does not claim to address meaning gaps within a single stakeholder group or even individuals. The findings indicate that such a gap might be existent and more important than supposed by Berthon, Pitt and Campbell (2009), by acknowledging the contrasting ways that talents describe specific dimensions and attributes of innovativeness. However, this does not have to be negative but could instead be seen as an emphasis of the importance of a deep understanding and acknowledgement of the existence of meaning gaps (Burmann et al., 2017; Kates & Goh, 2003; Wilson et al., 2014). Thus, arguments can be made to further emphasize this potential third

meaning gap when speaking about brand meaning. Furthermore, our research indicates that not only brands as a whole but also singular brand attributes, in this case innovativeness, might withhold meaning gaps. This relates to earlier observations on meaning disparities in the specific contexts of single words or phrases (Alba, Hutchinson & Lynch, 1991), symbols (Hatch & Schultz, 2003) and communication messages (Kates & Goh, 2003). The investigated meaning gaps in terms of the brand attribute innovativeness add a further dimension to those earlier observations and underline once again the fragmented and multidimensional meaning of innovativeness in the perception of talents, which has been discussed throughout this chapter.

5.2 Subjective Evaluation of Innovativeness

Throughout the first section a complex spectrum of several dimensions that constitute the general meaning of innovativeness from the perception of talents have been discussed. Aside from the general meaning of the attribute, the research also generated empirical findings that provide insights into the evolution of talents' brand knowledge and evaluations on an individual level. In more concrete terms, the findings offer insights into talents' sources of knowledge on a certain brand and its subsequent evaluation against the prior outlined attributes that are associated with innovativeness, which decides if the brand is perceived as innovative or not. Thus, in opposition to the previous, this section deals with the individual sources of talents' knowledge and evaluations of the innovativeness of specific employer brands rather than the terms' general meaning. As the findings of this section indicate, talents' brand knowledge and evaluations are subjective rather than objective, which marks the subjectivity of employer brands' perceived innovativeness from the perspective of talents in general. In coherence to the previous section, this section is also divided into two complementing parts. While the first part comprises four themes of empirical findings related to this section, the second part involves several analytical considerations that we draw from these findings around talents' subjective evaluation of employer brands' innovativeness in relation to existing theoretical knowledge.

5.2.1 Foundational Elements of Talents' Brand Evaluation

In the beginning of the interviews we confronted talents with a simple and straightforward task. We asked the participants to come up with the most innovative corporation on top of their mind. As a result, we obtained in total 27 different brands[3] and with them the opportunity to discuss brands that are not only known but also evaluated as innovative by the respective individual. Consequently, we asked them as a follow up question for the specific reasons that make those brands innovative from their perspective. All participants' answers showed three consistent patterns that can be identified in the following two exemplary answers of Ale and Tom as well.

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[3] The most innovative brands according to the interviewed participants: Google/Alphabet, Apple, Tesla, Spotify, N26, A.T. Kearney, Megafon, Amazon, Microsoft, Oatly, Innocent, Tom's, Tencent, Volocopter, Lilium, SpaceX, APX, BMWi Ventures, Nissan, Polestar, Zenuity, Mars Petcare, Dove, Mercedes Benz, North Consult, Sweco, Multiconsult.

''You see that they [Google] do a lot of projects that are next to their core business. So you have like the website but then they have like Alphabet has, like so many sub companies. They're really going into the startup scene. They're funding a lot of hackathons and all of those. So you see them around at these kinds of events. I was also taking part in a few. And yeah, there's just so many startups and so many different things that they're interested in.'' (Ale, Electrical Engineering Student)

''Actually it's how they [Sweco, North Consult & Multiconsult] use these different tools to define new standards in a field. As I said in building you usually have something on paper and they advertise themselves as not using papers in some projects anymore. But it is also that they look for young people and also once you start talking with them at career fairs or when you are invited to an interview they are actively asking for young people's knowledge in the field and they can help apply that and develop the company. So I think it's first of all that they use these innovations at all and then also that they are looking for new young people from an educational background to help them develop.'' (Tom, Civil Engineering Student)

First of all, even though discussing brands from complete different industries (software and construction) with completely different arguments for each brand's innovativeness, both of the participants used certain attributes associated with the respective brand (e.g. ''funding a lot of hackathons'' in the case of Ale or ''look for young people'' in the case of Tim).

Secondly, the answers indicate that those attributes used in the argumentation are based on the individual brand related knowledge of participants. For example, Ale argued for Google's innovativeness based on their diversity of projects, their interest in different fields and presence at technology events, which she experienced herself. On a different note Cara, a marketing and brand management student, argued for Google's innovativeness by emphasizing the widespread applicability and continuous development of their solutions, which she experienced at different stages of her life.

Finally, the two outlined statements indicate that the brand related knowledge and thus, brand associated attributes, resulting from the perception of certain brand related pieces of information or put simple, brand stimuli. In the case of Ale, the brand's products and events are indicated as such brand stimuli. In the case of Tom, the brand's advertisements, career fairs and interviews are mentioned as such. Across all participants a spectrum of 23 different brand stimuli have been identified, that might be influential in the consideration of brands' innovativeness, including personal interactions, social media, products, services, employee interactions, headhunters, interviews, annual reports, conferences, management appearances, website, career fairs, non-academic literature, advertisements, professors, case competitions, special interest events like hackathons, media, sponsorships, alumni networks, office environments and location, store environments, customer service. As the broad spectrum and nature of these potential stimuli implies, talents' brand knowledge can evolve from both sources of information that are more explicit in their nature (e.g. website), but also from such that are more implicit (e.g. hackathons). This is evident in the two outlined statements of Ale and Tom as well, who mentioned both more explicit sources of information (e.g. advertisements) but also more implicit ones (e.g. office environment) as sources of their brand knowledge. From the findings of the first chapter one could assume that implicit brand stimuli might tower over explicit ones. Moreover, the findings demonstrate that talents seem to have more or less negative attitudes towards certain stimuli. An example of the primary is the

skepticism that talents expressed in terms of brand stimuli that are under the control of corporations (e.g. advertisements or website) as exemplified in the following extract:

> *''I think if you're just looking at their own company sources of information from the company, that's perhaps not the most reliable thing. First off, I think I would like to meet them by myself and perhaps talk to them, I think that would be a better source." (Frans, Industrial Ecology Student)*

In his argumentation for the sources of information that he considers when looking for a potential future employer Frans stated that he perceives the direct contact with employees of a corporation as more reliable in comparison to their general sources of information. This view is shared by Harry, who expressed similar concerns in an more radical tone:

> *"I don't really like companies which call themselves innovative for the sake of having a buzzword on their website. If they're gonna be innovative, they need to kind of have some sort of like concrete actions behind that." (Harry, Computer Science Student)*

Furthermore, the statement of Harry implies that corporate sources of information are met with even more skepticism when there are no proof points (e.g. in the form of specific actions like a tangible illustration of a real change in the organisation) presented to the communicated attributes. An example of brand stimuli that is considered with a less negative attitude is word of mouth coming from professors, friends, colleagues or family members. The following example demonstrates the influence of such on the development of talents' brand knowledge:

> *''Some courses that I have now promote these things as innovative and as the future so to speak. I am probably a lot influenced by what my teachers think about these things but I can definitely see that it is being used in real life as well with great success. But I think what started my interest in the first place where my teachers or my courses where we talked about such things.'' (Tom, Civil Engineering Student)*

Speaking about the innovativeness of certain employers, Tom referred to his university professors as main influencers on his view of the field. This indicates that word of mouth, in the opposite to corporate sources of information, are perceived with a less skeptical attitude and thus, seem to be more likely to influence talents. This can be uncovered in a further example that will be discussed in the following chapter as well.

5.2.2 Limitations of Talents' Brand Knowledge

Despite the broad outlined spectrum of potential stimuli, which seems to influence talents' brand knowledge and evaluations, several talents expressed difficulties in obtaining the kind and extent of knowledge that is adequate enough to evaluate an employer brand. An example of such a statement comes from Sdenek, who expressed difficulties in evaluating the innovativeness of Tesla as an employer due to a lack of knowledge, despite describing Tesla as the most innovative brand from his perspective beforehand:

> *''I have no idea [...] because of the lack of information. So it's just the outer appearance for me which is letting the brand being innovative'' (Sdenek, Business, Management & Marketing Student)*

On the first sight, these difficulties could be considered as surprising. Not only because of the broad spectrum of stimuli that is available to talents in general, but also the nature of those

stimuli, from which several are directly accessible to talents when actively searched for (e.g. website, career fairs or annual reports). However, the findings throughout this work point towards two main reasons for such difficulties. Firstly, on a more individual level, some talents asserted that their knowledge might be limited due to their low level of active search for general information or interaction with a certain brand at an early stage of the recruitment process. This is exemplified in the following statement of Jonas, who expressed difficulties in considering potential employers just from the information provided on the website without interacting with them in person:

> *"You don't know really much about them. You've maybe heard the name and stuff, but you haven't visited them. So it's really, really hard to get to know the companies by other than through the websites. And it's hard to say if I want to work for anybody." (Jonas, Data Science Student)*

Also Ale argued that it is challenging for her to evaluate employer brands' innovativeness before actively searching for an employer:

> *''At least me I don't really know much about what specific companies actually do given that I haven't really started proper job searching. I've picked up things here and there and my head forms certain pictures.'' (Ale, Electrical Engineering Student)*

At the same time she admitted that her knowledge on certain brands at this early stage depends solely on brand related stimuli that she perceived in the past, without actively searching for those. Besides these reasons which take place on a more individual level, the findings also illustrate another reason that arises from a more general level. An example of this is the following statement of Elsa, who pointed towards more general barriers that she is facing when seeking for information and thus, knowledge to evaluate the innovativeness of a potential employer:

> *''Considering those potential employees you would be interested in, would there be anything specific that would come into mind where you would say that this is an innovative employer brand or corporation you want to work with?'' (Jan, Researcher)*

> *''I don't know that much about their company culture. So I don't know if I want to work there. I don't know how they work together.'' (Elsa, Marketing and Brand Management Student)*

The statement of Elsa indicates that certain information relevant to talents' in the evaluation of brands' innovativeness, are too intangible to access or locked behind closed doors and thus, are not accessible at all. This problem becomes further evident, when comparing the spectrum of stimuli that is available to talents with the attributes that make brands perceived as innovative in their perspective, which are detailed in chapter 5.1.2. Several of those attributes relevant to talents are either too intangible to assess without experiencing them (e.g. culture or mindset) or traditionally held back by corporations (e.g. ideas (IP) or hiring approach). This implies a certain barrier between employer brands' external and internal appearance or expressed in a metaphorical manner: front and back stage. While the front stage allows talents to access certain brand related information, the back stage is not accessible to them. From this distinction between front and backstage evolves a barrier, which hinders talents from obtaining all brand related information that is necessary to evaluate a brands' innovativeness. From statements

such as the following it can be inferred that talents are to a certain degree aware of that distinction:

''I don't know if I misheard you but you said that Google's way of working is innovative and then you shortly after said even though it might not be true or it isn't true.'' (Karl, Researcher)

''Yeah, it might. Not sure. But no, but that's like, you know, you don't really know. My intention was not to say that it's not true but you're not sure about it. That's it.'' (Gaston, Innovation and Industrial Management Student)

On a similar note Cara even accused corporations for actively managing their front and back stage through branding and media coverage to the disadvantage of talents.

''According to you, what is the most innovative corporation that comes to your mind in terms of innovativeness?'' (Karl, Researcher)

''I mean, just off the top of my head, I think of Apple and Google at the same time. And I don't think that that's necessarily true. I think that they've cultivated that perception. And that's part of their branding. [...] Yeah, so really, I have no basis for saying they're more innovative than a company like TetraPak or Spotify or something. It's just been how they've been branded in mainstream media.'' (Cara, Marketing and Brand Management Student)

The statement of Cara implies that she does not only assume an active management of the front stage of employer brands, but also expresses a certain skepticism towards this practice. However, none of the participants in the research mentioned a viable approach to gain insight into the back stage of employer brands prior to employment. An exception to this might be the outlined interaction with existing or past employees of an employer through word of mouth (e.g. direct interactions) or social media (e.g. Glassdoor) as the following statement from Gaston on his personal contacts and thus, insights into the backstage of Google illustrates:

''I have one friend in my class right now who used to work for Google. And I guess that also has some way you know, people justifying what we're reading and such, maybe makes me believe it [the information] more or maybe it's closer to like the source itself.'' (Gaston, Innovation and Industrial Management Student)

However, his statement also indicates that a certain portion of skepticism towards those personal insights remains, as they could lead to incorrect assumptions. This implies that knowing the right people might provide talents with certain glimpses into the backstage of employer brands, but is not (if possible at all) able to solve the lack of insights into employer brands in a fully reliable and sufficient manner. Consequently, the distinction between the front and back stage of employers, that was also acknowledged by talents, remains and thus, also the kind and extent of knowledge relevant and sufficient to evaluate their innovativeness. A further interesting finding in that context is how talents deal with this lack of knowledge in the evaluation of employer brands.

5.2.3 Brand Assumptions as a Supplement to Brand Knowledge

Based on the outlined lack of knowledge on certain attributes the closest assumption might be that talents base their evaluations only on the attributes that they possess knowledge about.

However, the findings of the research lead towards a different direction: instead of leaving them out, talents seem to infer assumptions about unknown attributes from attributes they know. An example of this inference of assumptions from knowledge can be seen in the following statement of Cara.

> *''If a big magazine does a profile on a CEO, who is known to be very innovative, then I will just perceive that all the companies, that all the employees of that company have some creative innovativeness because they've been chosen by HR to work there.'' (Cara, Marketing and Brand Management Student)*

Here, Cara stated that her knowledge and positive evaluation of the innovativeness of employees of a certain corporation is not based on objective information, but instead on a subjective assumption which she infers from her evaluation of the company's CEO and his or her potential influence on HR practices. A further example of that can be seen in her answers to the question, if she would consider Apple, which she mentioned as the most innovative corporation from her perspective, as an innovative employer:

> *''I don't know that much about the benefits they offer me in terms of benefits and how they treat their employees. Yeah, I have no idea. I would expect that of them. Since they have so much money and so many resources. I would be surprised if they're not treating their employees very top notch. I'm sure their corporate employees are treated very well. I'm not sure about the ones who work at the stores. But, if I would to assume, I would assume that it's a very good job and a top pay and you have nice benefits.'' (Cara, Marketing and Brand Management Student)*

This statement illustrates that, if a certain, known attribute of a brand is evaluated in a positive manner (e.g. financial resources), this positive evaluation might be transferred to other attributes, where accurate knowledge is missing (e.g. working conditions). This indicates that the brand knowledge of talents might be supplemented with inferred brand assumptions. In consequence, this could mean that the evaluation of employers' front stage might be transferred and multiplied to their backstage. The findings indicate that these inferred assumptions can lead to both, positive and negative evaluations of attributes associated with innovativeness. An example of the primary is the following statement of Sebastian, in which he inferred Amazon's present state of innovativeness from its past history:

> *''[...] they started off with a very simple product or a service more or less, which was selling books online. And they started to grow exponentially at least in the last few years. It feels like and I think that their innovativeness is more not necessarily product or technological, but more the mindset. At least it started off that way that they started to grow by taking shares online.'' (Sebastian, Marketing and Brand Management Student)*

The latter is exemplified in the following statement in which Harry inferred negative innovativeness attributes from the size of the corporation:

> *"I guess in my mind, the bigger the organization, the less easy it is for them to be innovative, because there's a lot of people in the organization who need to change in order to do that. So like other big companies like IBM, for instance, I'd also think of as less than negative just because of their size.'' (Harry, Computer Science Student)*

Thus, both Sebastian and Harry drew inferences from known attributes (e.g. history or size) about less or not known attributes (e.g. mindset or ability to change), resulting in either a more

positive or negative evaluation of the brands' innovativeness. Interestingly, at a later stage of the interview, Harry mentioned Microsoft, another multinational corporation with an immense headcount, as the most innovative corporation from his perspective. This might imply that talents are unaware of the inferences of assumptions they exercise in their minds. However, the following statement of Ale implies that talents are at least aware of the results of such:

> *''But I noticed that not about myself, but I have a picture of a company or something. I guess very black and white. For example, Innogy was on the white side and then you know, the energy utilities behind it on the black side. So that's just like it's kind of stuck in your head. And it's sometimes very hard for me to quantify why I would see it like this.'' (Ale, Electrical Engineering Student)*

Here, Ale asserted that her assumption might lead to critical effects on her evaluation of certain brands. At the same time, she expressed difficulties in accessing the origin of these assumptions. Thus, it can be assumed that talents are aware that they are not only evaluating brands based on knowledge but also inferred assumptions. However, they might not be aware of the concrete origin of such assumptions.

While the previous findings dealt with the evolution and nature of such brand assumptions, the findings of this research also indicate how these assumptions could be revised or diminished. As our findings indicate brand assumptions could be revised when experiencing opposing insights into employer brands. An example of such can be taken from the following statement of Frida, where she explained how her initial perception of Google, that was based on assumptions rather than knowledge, changed:

> *''I know people that work in Dublin at the head office and I've been there and it is just insane. Like all the benefits that they have, in the kitchen they have like a snack bar and a food drawer, and they have so many cuisines and they have a free gym, like all those things. But then if I talk to my friend it is a lot of pressure, she works in sales and it is just you constantly have to call people, call companies if they want to, put higher investments in their advertisement and it is super competitive with your colleagues and if you want to grow I mean you can, but then there is so much competition from your team.'' (Frida, Marketing and Brand Management Student)*

This statement illustrates that the insights she received from a friend opposed her initial assumptions of the working conditions that she inferred from the office environments. In addition to that the findings suggest that brand assumptions can not only be revised, but also diminished when talents become more knowledgeable in the field of the specific employer brand. This is illustrated in the statement of Gaston, who expressed that his positive evaluation of Spotify might be the result of missing knowledge in the field, opposing his brand evaluations in fields where he considers himself as more knowledgeable:

> *''When you read a lot of you know, everything and why would that be new in the industry and all that, it just makes it the new standard. I would maybe suggest though, that for example, you don't see it as innovative because you read so much about it. And it becomes everyday life and how you actually feel like it's working. That might be the case if I were to read about other similar companies to Spotify. So then I would just think that they're all very innovative and then maybe none of them are truly, if you understand what I mean.'' (Gaston, Innovation and Industrial Management Student)*

Thus, the acquisition of additional knowledge in a certain field, might reduce the room for subjective assumptions. Moreover, the statement implies that brand assumption might be able

to supplement missing brand knowledge in talents' minds and their evaluation of certain brands, but are not able to replace existing, more objective knowledge, if already existent. However, the existing knowledge of talents might not be as objective as someone might expect, as discussed in the following chapter.

5.2.4 Fictional Brand Knowledge

The third and final source of subjectivity in talents' evaluation of employer brands' innovativeness evolves from knowledge that is not based on facts, but fictions. Two examples of such are exemplified in the following statements:

> *''[...] they have, for example, at Google their free time, for example, where they let their employees use that time freely to develop something that is completely new, and not necessarily within the guidelines of what should be done.'' (Sebastian, Marketing and Brand Management Student)*

> *''And you can do whatever you want. You put aside, you know, hours every day to work on whatever you want. And to put that as some sort of strength as a company was for me, like, I've never heard of it before. And I think that that's what I see as somewhat innovative as well.'' (Gaston, Innovation and Industrial Management Student)*

Sebastian and Gaston both described a rule of Google, which dates back to 2007 and is supposed to allow employees to use one day per week or twenty percent of their time for their own projects, independent of their scheduled work. In opposition to that, there are several reports of former employees of Google, who assert that this rule is not existent anymore or even doubt that it has ever been in place at all (D'Onfro, 2015). Despite that this potential fiction is still part of talents' brand knowledge and used as an attribute that enhances the evaluation of the brand's innovativeness. In the opposite to the previously discussed front stage and brand assumption phenomenons, talents here do not seem to be aware of the doubtful or missing existence of such attributes. This is also illustrated in the following statement from Elsa, who argued for the innovativeness of Apple by stating that the corporation has been inventing or launching technologies as the laptop and touch screen as first.

> *''Apple kind of started with the first laptop and then they started with the first tap screen'' (Elsa, Marketing and Brand Management Student)*

However, historical facts cast doubts on these supposed truths. The first laptop was developed in 1980 by R2E Micral CCMC (Bellis, 2019). Similarly, the first touchscreen was already invented by the Royal Radar Establishment in 1968 and first launched into the market by Siemens in 1977 (Bellis, 2018). Thus, this can be considered as another example of a case in which fictions unconsciously have become part of the brand knowledge of talents, which thus might be less objective than expected. This adds a further source of subjectivity in the evaluation of brands' innovativeness. The origin and evolution of such fictions can, based on the findings of the research only be assumed. An extensive coverage in the media and the branding efforts of such corporations seem to have a certain impact, which however cannot be specified to a greater extent. More certain is however that those fictions would not be existent without the barrier between employer brands' front and back stage as insights behind the doors of the employer brand, would allow to uncover the doubtful or missing existence of fictional attributes. Furthermore, those fictions can be considered as the highest form of brand

assumption as the assumption here is not inferred from existent knowledge, but the knowledge here is an assumption itself. This does not only illustrate that the three outlined sources of subjectivity are closely related and even depend on each other, but also underline how these might affect the overall degree of subjectivity in talents' evaluation of employer brands' innovativeness.

5.2.5 Analytical Considerations

When elevating the perspective from the empirical view on the subjective evaluation of employer brands' innovativeness to a broader, theoretical view, several theoretical notions evolve that are important to set into context to existing theories.

First of all, the empirical findings illustrate that talents use attributes associated with certain brands in their argumentation for those brands' innovativeness. These attributes are located in their brand related knowledge, which evolves from the perception of brand related sources of information or put simply, brand stimuli. Thus, the findings are in line with the initial analytical framework developed in the second chapter of this work. Therefore, they are also in line with the theoretical views and models from which the analytical framework of this work is drawn from. In concrete these include the theories on the concepts of brand knowledge, brand attributes and brand stimuli, which have been presented in chapter 3 of this work, as well as the ''Employer Brand Value Chain'' of Theurer et al. (2018) and Keller's (2008) ''Brand Equity Value Chain''. However, based on the findings of this work we argue for an expansion of these models, which solely focus on the corporation with the inclusion of external sources of brand related information and thus, stimuli (e.g. media or professors). Those seem to have an essential role in the evolution of talents' brand knowledge and subsequent evaluation. From our perspective, this could enable a more realistic view on how brand equity develops in the case of talents and potentially prospective employees in general as well.

This becomes evident when considering the spectrum of potential brand stimuli identified throughout this research. We found 23 different brand stimuli, which seem to be able to influence the brand knowledge and thus, brand evaluations of talents. Those can be considered as a starting point to the request of Brexendorf and Keller (2017) for a more detailed investigation of viable ways for an enhancement of perceived brand innovativeness. The investigated spectrum of brand stimuli ranges over the experiential and informational as well as the external and internal continuum as outlined in the research of Cable and Turban (2001). Thus, the spectrum includes both controllable and independent brand stimuli (Lievens & Van Hoye, 2009). While several of those (e.g. websites, annual reports or word of mouth) are in line with previous research from Cable and Turban (2001), Lievens and Highhouse (2009), Sivertzen, Nilsen and Olafsen (2013), Theurer et al. (2018) and Pavitra (2018) the findings also enrich existing knowledge through the investigation of several new sources of brand stimuli. In detail these new sources of information include alumni networks, case competitions, office environments and location, store environments, biographies and special interest events such as hackathons. Besides that, certain stimuli examined in previous theories, including recruitment brochures (Cable & Turban, 2001) or sponsorships (Lievens & Highhouse, 2009), have not been mentioned by any of the participants in our research. This could imply that those are either

not relevant to innovativeness as a specific brand attribute, or not relevant anymore in the present or perceived subconsciously by talents. In addition to that, certain stimuli seem to differ in terms of the skepticism that talents have towards them and thus, also the potential influence on their evaluation. This finding is to a large extent in line with earlier research of Fisher et al. (1979), which also Cable and Turban (2001) refer to in their work. Fisher et al. (1979) showed that brand stimuli that are external to the control of the corporation (e.g. professors or friends) are perceived as more reliable. In complementation to their results, our findings suggest that this might not be the case for existing employees that talents reach out to when considering a potential future employer. Talents seem to approach those with a less skeptical attitude than traditional corporate sources (e.g. website or advertising) albeit these are part of the corporation as well. This links to the more overarching findings of Van Hoye and Lievens (2005), who argued that word of mouth is generally perceived as more reliable compared to corporate advertising, no matter if the person is part or not part of the corporation itself. Although their research findings underline the perceived reliability of word of mouth in general, their research misses a specification of the different word of mouth sources, despite their different characteristics. To a certain degree this is provided through the research of Dabirian, Kietzmann and Diba (2016), who asserted that friends and family members are perceived as the most reliable. However, their research did not consider all potential sources of word of mouth, ranging from existing employees to professors, which indicates a knowledge gap, which to our knowledge, has not been clarified till date.

Besides those more granular theoretical additions, the findings point towards a larger theoretical notion in the form of three general sources of subjectivity in talents' evaluation of employer brands' innovativeness or even employer brand attributes in general. The first source of subjectivity evolves from the restricted insights and thus, knowledge that talents face in terms of the attributes of an employer brand. This restriction is in line with the observations of Ind (1997) as well as Wilden, Gudergan and Lings (2010) on the challenges that prospective employees seem to face when gaining information about potential future employers as well as the ''Critical Contact Theory''. Despite intense technological progress (e.g. social media and internet as a whole) the latter still seems to be valid more than 50 years after the theory's development by Behling et al. (1968, cited in Tom, 1971). Through the findings of our research we have been able to identify two dimensions of reasons that influence this restricted insight into employer brands. Firstly, an individual dimension, which depends on the search activities of talents and secondly, a general dimension, which depends on the extent of insight that the employer brand allows for talents. The latter implies a barrier that corporations are able to establish, which divides their external appearance (frontstage) from their actual internal nature (backstage). This distinction implies that talents might not be able to gain an understanding of the entirety of employers' attributes as they might consciously or unconsciously be held back by employers or are too intangible to know without experiencing them. Furthermore, based on the findings we argue that this front stage might be maintained until talents enter the corporation as employees.

On the first sight this might seem to be a contradiction to Moroko and Uncles (2008), who argued that such a distinction between an employer brand's front and backstage is not existent.

However, their theoretical considerations have been focused on existing employees, but excluded potential employees. Based on the findings we argue that such distinction however seems to be existent in the case of talents or in a broader sense, potential employees. In their theoretical argumentation Moroko and Uncles (2008) asserted that the stimuli and thus, information provided by the employer brand need to be in line with what the employer actually delivers and thus, accurate. Instead, we argue that the outlined distinction allows corporations to actively manage their front stage to influence the knowledge that talents gain from their employer brand. As part of that corporations seem to be able to emphasize or avoid certain attributes in their external appearance or, as we will discuss further down, even be able to establish certain attributes in the external appearance that are not or only rarely existent. This would be a further argument for the theoretical foundation of the outlined distinction between employer and internal branding, where the primary is considered to be focused on potential employees and the latter on existing employees (Foster & Punjaisri, 2010; Theurer et al., 2018). Based on that we infer that employer branding focuses on the management of the frontstage, while internal branding instead focuses on the backstage management of an employer brand. Derived from the spectrum of attributes relevant to employer brands' innovativeness outlined before, we assume that some aspects are easier to be actively managed on the frontstage than others, which are traditionally or logically more evident in the external appearance of corporations (e.g. products or leadership). Moreover, the findings indicate that talents are aware of, but also skeptical towards employers' attempts to manage their front stage to influence talents' brand knowledge and thus, evaluation. As the opinion of insiders (e.g. present or past employees), which constitutes the only option to gain a glimpse into the backstage, is met with a certain degree of skepticism, it is less surprising that several corporations that are considered to actively manage their front stage (e.g. Google or Apple) are still considered as part of the most innovative corporations in the perception of talents. Albeit this evaluation might be based on limited and subjective rather than extensive and objective knowledge.

A further source of subjectivity evolves from the compensation of missing brand knowledge with assumptions that are inferred from existing brand knowledge. This source is based on the observation that the evaluation of certain unknown attributes associated with employer brands' innovativeness might not be based on brand knowledge, but brand assumptions. To our knowledge this observation has not been made in previous theoretical works on brand or employer brand knowledge, despite its potential relevance in the evaluation of brands. The theoretical notion of brand assumptions involves two central considerations. Firstly, talents' evaluation of employer brands' innovativeness might not only be based on knowledge derived from the perception of brand stimuli, but also from assumptions that are inferred from their existing brand knowledge, which would further enhance the subjectivity of such brand evaluations. Secondly, as part of these inferences of assumptions the evaluation of known attributes seems to be transferred to assumed attributes. In consequence, an employer brand that is associated by talents with a few known, positive attributes could still be perceived as innovative as the negative but unknown attributes of the employer brand are mistakenly assumed to be positive as well. This would mean that the positive or negative evaluation of certain known attributes would spill over to unknown attributes. Such effects seem not to be theoretically considered in the context of employer brand management till date. In the farther

context of brand partnerships McCracken (1989) made a relatable investigation, when he observed the transfer of the evaluation of certain brand attributes from one brand or person to another brand or person in the case of brand partnerships. The findings of our research indicate that such transfer of meaning might also take place within a singular brand, when certain attributes are associated with each other but different levels of knowledge around them exist. Besides that we assume, based on our findings, that the inference of assumptions and transfer of evaluation can take place both within and outside of the awareness of talents. As these brand assumptions and transferred evaluations are results of processes in talents' minds, we conclude that not only corporations but also talents themselves contribute to the subjectivity of their employer brand evaluation.

This subjectivity might be further enhanced through the third and final source of subjectivity in the form of fictions that can constitute talents' brand knowledge. As we outlined parts of the knowledge of talents might not be based on facts, but fictions that unconsciously become part of the knowledge of talents and thus, the foundation of their brand evaluations. To our knowledge extensive and explicit theoretical discussions of such fictional attributes associated with employer brands or brands in general are missing till date. This might be reasoned with the common understanding that brands cannot claim something without an evidence to it as this would result in an inauthentic perception of the brand. However, we could not find any indications that the participants do cast doubt on the fictional attributes associated with certain brands, although available facts might oppose them. In concrete terms, we suggest that there might be fictional brand attributes that are believed to a similar extent by talents as brand attributes that are based on facts, if they are not knowledgeable about the evidence that would cast doubts on these fictional attributes. Unfortunately, the findings do not contain further insights into the potential sources (e.g. corporate actions or processes in peoples' minds) or the nature (e.g. reasons to believe) of those. However, we assume that the theoreticized front stage of employer brands, which restricts insights into certain employer brand attributes, might benefit this phenomenon. Besides that, we derive a call for a greater investigation of these fictional brand attributes from the findings, as those seem to point towards a phenomenon that is uninvestigated but also relevant to the subjectivity in talents' evaluation of brands' innovativeness.

5.3 Role of Innovativeness

Throughout the previous chapters we discussed the meaning and sources of employer brands' innovativeness in the perception of talents. Besides those, the research indicated a further field of themes. This field evolves around the role and importance of innovativeness for talents in terms of the attractiveness of an employer and the potential reasons behind this importance. All of the 23 talents that we have interviewed throughout the research considered innovativeness as a relevant attribute or factor in the evaluation of potential future employers. This large share might lead to the assumption that innovativeness is one of the most or even the most important attribute to talents in the consideration and choice of future employers. In contrast to this assumption, we found four themes in the findings of the research, which indicate that the role

of innovativeness might be different and less influential than the quantity of mentions implies. These are discussed throughout the following chapters.

5.3.1 Influence of Innovativeness on Employer Attractiveness

First of all, the findings indicate a danger for precision when mistaking the number of mentions of a brand attribute across a group of participants as the only indicator for the importance of an attribute on the individual evaluation of an employer brands' attractiveness or equity. As addressed before, innovativeness has been mentioned by all 23 interviewed talents as an attribute that is considered in the evaluation of potential future employers. However, only a few talents mentioned it as an initial association on the question for the most important attributes when considering a potential future employer, although all of them were told beforehand that the research deals with innovativeness. Instead a large share of talents' initial associations on the question for the most important attributes when considering a future employer dealt with other attributes, which are exemplified in the following statements of Frans, Viktor and Gaston.

> *''Yeah, to be able to learn new things. That they can put me in a position where I'm able to grow and learn new things. I think it's the main thing I'm looking for.'' (Frans, Industrial Ecology Student)*

> *''lt should have a great culture and a company that I share the values with, where there is a great opportunity for you to grow and learn. That would be my focus areas.'' (Viktor, Accounting Student)*

> *''The most important thing is that you're somewhat a part of the company in a bigger sense than just, you know, more than a cog in the wheel. That you feel like what you do and how you think actually has an impact on both of the work you provide, and also how the company is somewhat a chance. I think that is the absolute most important thing.'' (Gaston, Innovation and Industrial Management)*

While all of the three responses articulated possibilities to learn, grow and make an impact as central aspects when considering a potential future employer, none of those initial responses included innovativeness as such. Instead the findings indicate that innovativeness is more of a foundational attribute for employer brands' attractiveness or equity, which is generally considered by talents but might have less impact on the entire individual evaluation of attractiveness than expected. This became evident when we asked the same talents in the follow up question if innovativeness is an important attribute for them, if not previously already mentioned.

> *''I would say yes, perhaps not the most important thing but of course, nonetheless important'' (Frans, Industrial Ecology Student)*

> *''For me, it shouldn't be the thing I rank highest. As I said before I'm quite conservative, so I like it when it is more predictable. And sometimes innovative companies are more like tech focused and I don't think my capabilities will be the best fit there, but of course also conservative companies can adapt to new innovative technologies, they don't necessarily have to quit.'' (Viktor, Accounting Student)*

> *"I would say it's somewhat of attracting but not the first thing that comes to my head." (Gaston, Innovation and Industrial Management Student)*

All three talents expressed skepticism and concerns in terms of the larger importance of innovativeness, but all of them agreed that it is an attribute that to a certain degree has a role in

their evaluation of an employer or as Gaston formulated it, is ''... somewhat of attracting''. These statements indicate that, as outlined in the beginning, innovativeness seems to be a foundational attribute, which talents agree upon to a certain degree. However, at the same time the findings suggest that innovativeness might not be a substantive factor that has a dominant proportional share of influence on talents' evaluations of potential future employers. Therefore, the pure quantity of mentions of attributes across talents should not be considered as a direct indicator of its proportional share in the evaluation of employers' attractiveness.

5.3.2 Skepticism on Long-Run Attractiveness of Innovativeness

A second finding that points towards the relevance of reconsidering previous assumptions on the role and importance of innovativeness for talents arises from the skepticism that talents expressed towards the consequences of working for innovative corporations in the long run. These seem to evolve from two different aspects. The first aspect deals with the personal responsibilities that talents associate with working for these kinds of corporations. An example of such a responsibility is illustrated in the following statement:

> ''Because I feel like Google and Apple are very, it's super driven, which is super cool for some time, but I'm not sure if that's really what I would want to do as a job.'' (Ale, Electrical Engineering Student)

While Ale expressed a feeling of attraction to the drive of corporations such as Google or Apple, which she considered as the most innovative corporations, she argued that this drive might also result in a responsibility that contradicts her idea of an attractive employer. A similar notion can be found in the following statement of Mitch, when he described his attraction to startups, which he generally perceives as innovative:

> ''So there's an element of do you want to work in a startup who can make this difference, which would be quite appealing, but also, generally speaking, that requires a lot more man hours for you to actually be able to push this thing through and make sure you're thinking to the best of your abilities. But also, you have to risk at the same time that if you're really successful startup in general, it means you get bought out by a bigger company and your idea is taken.'' (Mitch, Chemical Engineering Student)

Similar to Ale, Mitch expressed a certain appeal to the idea of working for innovative corporations, such as startups, but also asserted that this is linked to the consequence of working more hours than usual. Thus, also for Mitch the individual responsibilities related to working for innovative corporations create a degree of skepticism that might induce him to reconsider the appeal of such corporations as a potential future employer. Besides that, Mitch's statement indicates the second aspect from which talents' skepticism towards the consequences of working for an innovative corporation might evolve: the potential transience of innovation in the long-term. According to him a startup as a potential employer in case of successful innovations is likely to be acquired by a larger corporation, which would result in a loss of control over the innovation to the larger corporation, which seems to mismatch his idea of working for an innovative corporation. This shows that Mitch believes that a high level of innovativeness might be difficult to maintain over a longer period of time, which decreases the attractiveness of such corporations already in the present. Thus, the transience of innovation could be a further aspect of skepticism, especially in the context of start-ups. Consequently, together with the perceived individual responsibilities, this finding implies that working for

such corporations for talents might be more appealing in the short than long run. This could be considered as a further theme, which might contrast previous assumptions on the role and importance of innovativeness, especially when putting it into a time related perspective.

5.3.3 Wide Nature of the Term

From the earlier discussed spectrum of attributes that talents associate with innovativeness evolves a further theme. This theme indicates that as the term is almost infinite in its meaning, it might at the same time be meaningless, for example as a precise descriptor or evaluative dimension of a corporation as it could mean all but nothing.

When reviewing the broad spectrum of attributes, it becomes evident that the attributes that talents associated with innovativeness to a large extent overlap with attributes that might also be used in the description of successful, rewarding or promising corporations (e.g. market leading, ahead, superior, impactful, meaningful, ambitious, future-oriented, trendsetting, impressive or customer-focused), which in turn might point towards the earlier elaborated upon aspects that talents seem to consider as the most important, such as the possibilities to learn, grow and make an impact. Due to the overlap of attributes it might be less surprising that talents considered innovativeness as somewhat important when being asked about it. This overlap with other concepts of attraction cannot only be found in the attributes examined throughout the entirety of interviews, but also in the definitions of innovativeness that we asked talents to come up with on their own. An example of this is the following definition of Lola:

> *''Innovativeness is modern, fun, open like it's just inclusive. And I think that everyone is not in the same location, falling into the same templates and like not trying to put everyone in a mold and create some kind of ultimate worker. It's like looking for the individuals.'' (Lola, Marketing and Brand Management Student)*

As the statement illustrates, Lola defined the innovativeness of employer brands through attributes like open, fun, diverse, modern, caring and tolerant and thus, attributes that could be used in order to describe an overall attractive employer as well. Based on that it might again be less surprising that she asserted that innovativeness is a factor in her evaluation of potential future employers. This becomes even clearer when taking an oppositional perspective, as illustrated in the following extract from the interview with Lena:

> *''[...] if you're not innovative at all, you probably aren't in the market for long.'' (Lena, Consumer and Business Science Student)*

From her understanding a corporation that would not be innovative would not be successful and thus, become irrelevant for the market but also as a potential employer. Therefore it seems to be only consequential that Lena considered innovativeness as an important factor as well:

> *''I think what makes a good company is staying ahead and being innovative. If you are not innovative today, I think you can't be among the great firms tomorrow.'' (Lena, Consumer and Business Science Student)*

This implies that asking talents for the importance of innovativeness might lead to imprecise results that could mean all but nothing and thus, might mislead assumptions drawn from it. Therefore, we consider this theme as a further indicator that shows the relevance of

reconsidering the role and importance of innovativeness drawn from talents' quantitative number of mentions.

5.3.4 Reasons behind Importance

Finally, the findings of our research imply that talents do not strive for innovativeness as such, but for what it actually means for their potential employment. This is illustrated in the responses we received from interviewed talents, such as the following statement of Frans, when we asked them for the drivers and thus, reasons for the importance of the attribute when considering a potential future employer:

> *''[...] because it's going to be more exciting for me as an employee to be part of a innovative company where exciting things are going on." (Frans, Industrial Ecology Student)*

The statement of Frans indicates that for him the innovativeness of employers is a means to excitement and thus, a more fundamental need that he strives for in terms of his potential future employers. This role of innovativeness as a means to the fulfillment of a more fundamental need can also be uncovered in the following statement of Tom, even though he strived for almost the opposite:

> *''I think it also has to do with job security, because I don't think you can succeed at the market neither the company nor the employee if you are not innovative.'' (Tom, Civil Engineering Student)*

While Frans mentioned excitement as the result of innovativeness, Tom argued that it serves his personal job security and thus, another more fundamental need than innovativeness. A further need that is considered by talents to be linked to innovativeness is indicated in the following extract from the interview with Sdenek:

> *''I don't really see a purpose of working for a brand which has plateaued already. So you have to drive innovation, even through line extensions or new business opportunities, new markets. If those factors aren't given, I don't see any sense to work on this brand.'' (Sdenek, Business, Management & Marketing Student)*

For Sdenek innovativeness seems not to be central as an enabler of excitement or security. Instead he strived for it to add purpose to his own work. While purpose might be a more abstract need, the findings also implies needs that are quite concrete in their nature as the following response from Jonas exemplifies:

> *''Right now I'm working in some psychiatry. And they have a lot of stones in the way to do your work. For example, when I go there, I have to use my own laptop. I can't use their internet, because they have so strict network settings and stuff like that, and their computers are from 1955 or something [...] You can't really work there because this stuff is really deprecated and yeah, it just annoys me to work with my own stuff, to use my mobile internet to work there and stuff like that. [...] I don't need to be in a virtual reality place or something like that. But to have a proper computer, proper internet, I don't know, a proper workplace is really beneficial.'' (Jonas, Data Science Student)*

In the opposite to previous statements, Jonas seems to desire innovativeness as a means towards convenience in his personal work. This indicates once again that innovativeness might not be an end in itself, but rather a means to an end. This end seems to take shape in the form of more fundamental human needs such as excitement, security, purpose or as illustrated in the last

example, convenience. As it relates to such fundamental needs, it again might be less surprising that talents consider innovativeness as a factor in the evaluation of employers' attractiveness. However, innovativeness as such seems not to be a need in itself. Additionally, the statements show that the reasons for the importance of innovativeness might not be universal, but individual to each talent. Consequently the findings around the reasons behind the assumed importance of the attribute do not only indicate that innovativeness might only be an enabler towards more fundamental needs, but also distinctive between talents, which implies again the relevance of a more detailed understanding of the role and importance of innovativeness for talents.

5.3.5 Analytical Considerations

The qualitative findings gained throughout our research illustrate that the role of innovativeness for talents might be different and less influential than popular assumptions in the theoretical and practical discourse in the field might suggest. In contrast to these assumptions, the four outlined themes indicate the need for a more detailed, reflective, and critical handling of the term and concept in both research practice and theoretical discussion. This becomes evident when setting the findings and themes into context to existing views and theories in the field.

First of all, the findings imply that innovativeness seems to be more of a foundational attribute rather than a dominant attribute in talents' evaluation and consideration of employer brands. While all interviewed talents considered employers' innovativeness as somewhat important, only a few mentioned it as part of the most important attributes and additionally, several talents mentioned concerns in terms of the larger importance of the attribute. This implies a nuanced perspective on the popular assumption that innovativeness is one of or even the most important attribute in the evaluation of employer brands. Such can for example be found in Mosley's (2012) theoretical work in which he asserts that innovativeness is the most important attribute for technology students and at least the 3rd most important attribute for business students. Mosley (2012) derives those assertions from managerial market research, which is based on quantitative counting but lacks an investigation of the proportional share and thus, quality of considered attributes on talents' employer brand evaluation. In contrast to that, the findings of our research show the importance of such a qualitative perspective and thus, indicate the need for a more critical and reflective treatment of such statements around the role of innovativeness - in opposition to unreflective repetitions and inferences of misleading implications from it.

Furthermore, the attributes that have been mentioned by talents instead as most important provide indications that the priorities and preference of talents might have changed in recent years as these attributes differ from the popular research results of Cable and Turban (2001) or Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005), in which the location, size and popularity of corporations have been examined as the most important dimensions of employer attractiveness. This implies the need for a revision, which is in line with the findings of Sommer, Heidenreich and Handrich (2017), who investigated several attributes that seem to be preferred over the ones examined in the research of Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005). Such a revision would potentially also generate new, more precise knowledge on the role of innovativeness in the perception of employer brands' attractiveness or equity. This however presupposes a consideration of both, the

reevaluation of the attribute across all talents as well as the influence of the attribute on individual talents' employer brand evaluations, as outlined before.

A further theme that became evident in the findings is that innovativeness seems to be more attractive to talents in the short rather than the long run. Aspects like the individual responsibilities that are associated with working for innovative corporations and the potential transience of innovativeness are recurring themes that seem to provoke concerns and skepticism in talents in terms of working for innovative corporations, especially over a longer period of time. Despite this potential influence, the time horizon has, to our knowledge, been neglected in existing studies in the field (Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017). We argue that this could result in another risk of overestimating the role of innovativeness in talents' evaluation of potential future employers. Moreover, the concerns and skepticism that have been expressed by talents on the role of innovativeness indicate that the large reliance on quantitative studies in the field, might have missed a full reflection of the conflict between appeal and skepticism that talents seem to face when considering employer brands' innovativeness. From our perspective this marks the value that qualitative investigations can add to the field.

The third theme that evolved from the findings implies that due to the broad spectrum of meaning that is associated with innovativeness, questions on its importance appear to be riskful and potentially misleading as they could mean all but nothing. This has been illustrated in the form of the spectrum and potential overlaps of attributes associated with innovativeness. Because of those it might only be consequential that talents consider it as somewhat important as the opposite could mean to work for an unsuccessful, unrewarding, and unpromising corporation and thus, the traditional opposite to an attractive employer. This could lead to the critical assumption that talents' consideration of innovativeness is nothing more than the avoidance of the opposite. Because of that we argue that the usage of the term as a descriptor of corporations or as an item in questionnaires or surveys might need to be reconsidered as it seems to lead to results that lack precision and thus, any foundation for implications. Instead we argue for the application of more precise terms and descriptions with less room for interpretations than innovativeness allows. Therefore methodological approaches that contain more extensive descriptions, as in the example of Sommer, Heidenreich and Handrich (2017) or Elving et al. (2013) seem to be more compatible than a sole reliance on the term, that is exercised in other researches (Berthon, Ewing & Hah, 2005; Bonaiuto et al., 2013). However, as outlined before, the broad spectrum of meaning outlined throughout the research indicates that also the conclusions drawn by Sommer, Heidenreich and Handrich (2017) might need to be reconsidered as they are based on a research that considers more specified dimensions to innovativeness, but still does not reflect on the full scope of the meaning of innovativeness to talents.

From the final theme that deals with the reasons behind the importance of innovativeness we derive that the attribute might not be an end in itself, but rather a means to different ends that take the shape of more fundamental needs. These findings are in line with earlier theoretical views evolving around the outlined P-O fit, which implies that talents are attracted to employer brands that either match with their personal attributes or as shown throughout the research fulfill certain needs on their side (Elving et al., 2013; Kristof, 1996; Lievens & Highhouse,

2003; Slaughter et al., 2004). At the same time our research expands the theoretical knowledge around the P-O fit as it outlines a range of needs that talents aim to fulfill through working for innovative employers, such as excitement, security, purpose, or convenience. Thus, when being considered from the perspective of talents, the term innovativeness, which is emphasized in theoretical and practical discourses, comes back to more fundamental needs in the end. Those might be fulfilled through other means than innovativeness as well. Besides that, those investigated needs indicate that innovativeness seems to serve employers' attractiveness in terms of more than just the interest value as outlined in the EmpAt scale by Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005), which a widespread of other studies relates to or is based upon (Alnıaçık & Alnıaçık, 2012; Bonaiuto et al., 2013; Edwards, 2010; Santiago, 2019; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen, 2013; Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017). As innovativeness is considered as a means to aspects such as job security and purpose it seems to also impact the perceived economic and social value of employers. If the overarching spectrum of attributes associated with innovativeness is taken into consideration, which includes several other attributes (e.g. customer-oriented, meaningful, confident, knowledgeable, or fearless), it might even have an impact on the application and development value of employers. This leads to either the need for a revision of the EmpAt scale as outlined or to the provision of another illustrative example of the broad and potentially misleading nature of the term innovativeness in general.

In consequence the themes outlined throughout this chapter demonstrate the relevance of a more advanced and reflexive handling of the term innovativeness in both research practice and theoretical discourses around aspects of perception. As outlined, we argue that this requires both, a more thorough and granular investigation of its meaning, role and importance to talents and a subsequent revision of popular assumptions around innovativeness.

6. Conclusions

With emphasis innovativeness has been proposed in the theoretical and practical discourses of brand management and human resources as an important attribute that talents aim for and employer brands should therefore establish in order to take a stance in the war for talents. Despite its prominent position in contemporary discourses, an extensive review of existing literature on the field points towards a lack of knowledge in terms of the meaning and sources of innovativeness in the perception of talents. While past research has crafted extensive knowledge around innovativeness considered from the perspective of corporations, less is known about it when considered from the external perspective of perception. This also applies to talents' perception of the attribute, despite its emphasized importance. Therefore, our thesis aimed to gain a profound understanding of what such perception means and from which sources it originates. In this context the thesis moreover aimed to further explore the role of employer brands' perceived innovativeness itself as a detailed and qualitative elaboration with talents themselves seemed to be missing. Based on that aim, we formulated and proposed the following research question which guided our research: ''What are the meaning, sources, and role of employer brands' innovativeness in the perception of talents?''. In order to answer this question, we chose a qualitative research approach as part of which we conducted 23 semi-structured interviews with talents from diverse backgrounds within the fields of technology and business. Based on the insights into the constituents and sources of talents' perception of employer brands' innovativeness gained from these interviews, we derived an answer to our research question, that consists of three complementing parts.

The first part of the answer is the investigated spectrum of 844 attributes that talents associate with brands' innovativeness, which constitutes what we consider as the meaning of innovativeness to talents. Based on the findings of the research we argue that its meaning is both multidimensional and fragmented. It is multidimensional as it is based on a wide range of functional and symbolic attributes, which are spread over six different dimensions (organisation, activities, resources, markets, environments as well as products and services) and involved several overarching themes such as change, newness, fearlessness, openness, youthfulness and trendiness. It is fragmented as it differs from prevalent theoretical and practical assumptions from the corporate perspective, from the meaning to other stakeholders such as customers and finally, also from individual to individual. The latter becomes visible through the several contrasting ways in which talents describe dimensions and attributes that constitute employer brand's innovativeness. Consequently, the first part of the answer is based on a complex rather than conclusive spectrum of attributes upon which employer brands' perceived innovativeness is based upon for talents and depends on for brands' management.

The second part of the answer is talents' individual evaluation of employer brands' innovativeness. We consider this evaluation as the foundational process behind talents' positive or negative perception of employer brands' innovativeness. From our findings we derive three central elements to this evaluation. Firstly, the attributes that are associated with the respective brand and evaluated against the in the previous part outlined spectrum of attributes that constitute brands' innovativeness in general. Secondly, the brand specific knowledge in which those associated attributes are stored, or not. Thirdly, brand related stimuli which talents might

perceive and subsequently, infer the attributes associated with the respective brand from. In terms of the latter we examined a range of potential stimuli that might be able to influence employer brands' perceived innovativeness, ranging from social media over word of mouth to career fairs. The entire range of brand stimuli shows that those are either implicit or explicit, controllable or independent to the corporation and finally, met with more or less skepticism by talents. This underlines the analytical framework developed throughout chapter 3.6. Besides that, we assert that talents' evaluation in overall seems to be subjective rather than objective. We based this argumentation on three potential interdependent sources of subjectivity that could influence talents evaluation. The first source results from the restricted insight that talents have into employer brands and their real attributes. The second source evolves from talents' compensation of missing brand knowledge through brand assumption inferred from existing knowledge. The third and final source of subjectivity in talents' brand evaluations results from brand knowledge that is based on fiction rather than facts. These sources of subjectivity could lead to the phenomenon that albeit employer brands do not have all attributes that constitute innovativeness, they might still be evaluated as innovative, or the other way around. In consequence, we argue that the innovativeness of employer brands in the perception of talents depends on two parts, a complex spectrum of attributes on a general level as well as talents' knowledge on and evaluation of brands on an individual level. The combination of those two parts seems to be to us what makes employer brands perceived as innovative from the perspective of talents.

The third part takes shape in the form of four arguments to reconsider the outlined emphasis on innovativeness as a central attribute that talents aim for and employer brands should therefore establish. First of all, the limited qualitative impact that talents assigned to innovativeness in terms of employers' attractiveness casts doubts on the popular assumptions around its importance, often solely drawn from the quantity of mentions. Moreover, the concerns that talents expressed in terms of the consequences of working for innovative employers in the long run, including the potential transience of innovativeness and related individual responsibilities, indicate that the attribute might lose its importance and thus impact, when considered over time. Additionally, the meaning of innovativeness to talents seems to overlap with other aspects of attractive employers, from which it appears to be commonsensical that talents consider innovativeness as somewhat important. Finally, talents seem to consider innovativeness not as an end, but rather a means to an end, which leads to a fulfillment of more fundamental human needs such as excitement, security, purpose, convenience. Based on these reasons we argue that the role of innovativeness might be different and less influential than emphasized in both theoretical and practical discourses in the field.

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

We propose five theoretical contributions that the research adds to the existing theoretical discourse in brand, employer brand and human resource management. First of all, the research reveals that the fragmented and multidimensional meaning of innovativeness for talents adds further perspectives to existing definitions thereof. While some of the examined associated attributes that constitute the meaning of innovativeness to talents are mirrored in previous

theories, there are several attributes that are neither reflected in theoretical views on innovativeness from a corporate perspective (Garcia & Calantone, 2002; Hult, Hurley & Knight, 2004; Lee & Colarelli O'Connor, 2003) nor on perceived innovativeness from the perspective of other stakeholders (Höflinger, Nagel & Sandner, 2018; Kunz, Schmitt & Meyer, 2011; Shams, Alpert & Brown, 2015). These emerge from aspects such as the people, leadership, skills, attitude, working conditions, financial resources as well as the business model and areas of the employers. Thus, our research does not only add new theoretical perspectives on the meaning of innovativeness, but also questions the precision of previous researches that are based on prevalent definitions (Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017). This demonstrates that the Meaning Gap Theory of Berthon, Pitt and Campbell (2009) is not just applicable to brands in total but to singular brand attributes such as innovativeness as well. At the same time our research points towards the relevance of adding a third gap to their theoretical model, which reflects upon the contrasts in meaning in between individuals that have been shown throughout the research. This might also affect other existing theories from brand management, marketing and human resources that suppose consistent meanings of attributes to all individuals within one segment or stakeholder group.

A further theoretical contribution that our research provides is the extended overview of stimuli that could have an influence on talents' perception of brands' innovativeness, which includes several stimuli that enrich the findings of prior studies on brand stimuli (Cable & Turban, 2001; Pavitra, 2018; Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen, 2013; Theurer et al., 2018; Van Hoye & Lievens, 2009) as those seem to be additional potential influences on prospective employees' employer brand perceptions. These include alumni networks, case competitions, office environments and location, store environments, special interest events such as hackathons and biographies.

Through the examination of three substantial sources of subjectivity on the employer brand knowledge of talents, we also contribute to the existing theoretical discourse in the field of brand knowledge, which sets the foundation for talents' brand attribute evaluations. Based on the restricted insights that talents face when evaluating potential employers, we theorize that employer brands can be specified into a front- and backstage with a barrier that distinguishes both stages and restricts talents' insights and thus, brand knowledge. This expands the initial view of Moroko and Uncles (2008) who argued that such distinction cannot be maintained in the case of employer brands. While their assumption pointed towards internal, existing employees, we argue that in the oppositional case of external, potential employees this barrier can be maintained and even actively managed. Based on talents' compensation of missing brand knowledge with inferred brand assumptions, we furthermore derive that talents' evaluation of brands might not only be based on attributes derived from the perception of brand stimuli, but also result from spillovers of evaluations from known to assumed attributes. This indicates that previous observations of McCracken (1989) might not be limited to the context of brand partnerships, but also be applicable to singular brands. Reflecting on talents' partial reliance on fictional instead of factual brand attributes, we moreover outline the theoretical notion of fictional brand attributes, which to our knowledge has not been investigated in more detail till date - despite its relevance in the context of brand knowledge.

In addition to that, the research contributes to present discourse on the brand attribute innovativeness through the provision of four arguments to reconsider the outlined emphasis on it in the theoretical and practical discourses of brand management and human resources. Based on these four reasons our research casts doubt on Mosley's (2012) considerations around the attribute's importance to talents, but also the popular EmpAt model of Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005). Both seem to lack precision in their theoretical arguments around the importance and role of innovativeness, which seems to be less influential and different than assumed. This imprecision results in the risk of misled implications drawn from it, especially in the case of subsequent research that is built on their views (Alnıaçık & Alnıaçık, 2012; Bonaiuto et al., 2013; Edwards, 2010; Santiago, 2019; Moroko and Uncles, 2008; Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen, 2013; Sommer, Heidenreich & Handrich, 2017).

Finally, the research contributes to the overall fields of brand, marketing and human resource theory as it blends together theoretical insights from all three fields and through that followed the requests of Cable and Turban (2001), Mosley (2007), Moroko and Uncles (2008), Brexendorf and Keller (2017) as well as Edwards (2017) and crafted an example of a stronger mutual recognition between disciplines and the value that such can add to the overarching understanding of a phenomenon - especially in the case of employer brand management.

6.2 Managerial Implications

Apart from its theoretical contributions, the research also leads to two alternative directions of managerial implications that we encourage readers to choose from, depending on their own stance. Without deciding between those two alternative directions managerial practice accepts the risk of maintaining its existing discursive position on the middle ground, which might be comfortable but appears to be unbeneficial to the purpose and effect of its own craft.

The first alternative is to forget about innovativeness in the context of perception and avoid its application in all talent facing activities - from managerial research over branding to marketing. This would require managerial practice to accept that the application of the term in market research seems to lead to imprecise results that could mean all but nothing and thus, lack the precision that is required to draw effective conclusions, implications and actions from it. Moreover, this would require managerial practice to more intensely reflect on the nature of the term which might inhibit the purpose of brand identities or EVPs, which aim to provide guidance for corporations. As the term innovativeness is fragmented and multidimensional in its meaning it might not be able to provide such guidance, but instead confusion. Furthermore, this would require managerial practice to become aware of the risk of emphasizing innovativeness in marketing and communication which talents observe with skepticism and therefore might lead to a perception of hypocrisy instead of authenticity, if the corporation is not equipped to live up to its multidimensional meaning to a full extent. Finally, this would mean that managerial practice reconsiders the prominent role that it assigned to innovativeness as a central attribute in the attraction of talents, which might reflect popular assumption but less the perception of those that they aim to attract.

The second alternative for managerial practice to choose from is to manage the perceived innovativeness of brands with more attention to the details of its complex nature. This means to accept that corporations' number of patents or newness of products are not the singular criteria against which talents evaluate corporations' innovativeness. Instead the research indicates the relevance of an extended knowledge and attention to the broad spectrum of attributes that need to be established in talents' brand knowledge in order to achieve such perception. This broad spectrum can be considered as both a challenge and an opportunity. It is a challenge as it requires employer brand management to think and work beyond its traditional borders through the involvement of and collaboration with the entire organisation to be able to influence talents' perception of aspects such as the corporations' products, resources or environments. This entails a transition from a discipline focused, vertical perspective to a corporation overarching, horizontal perspective. It can be considered as an opportunity as it illustrates the wide range of possibilities that corporations possess to impact talents' evaluation of brands' innovativeness. These range from more tangible (e.g. working with digital tools) to more intangible changes (e.g. creation of fearlessness culture) as well as from larger, holistic changes (e.g. change of hierarchical structure) to smaller, ad-hoc changes (e.g. integration of younger employees in recruitment process). In this context it is essential that brand management expands its capabilities from communications to actions in order to ensure authenticity and thus, persuasiveness. Besides that this second alternative also requires managerial practice to manage the front stage of employer brands more consciously: deciding on the right position between transparency and closure, emphasizing advantageous attributes, hiding less advantageous attributes, including attributes from which talents are likely to infer advantageous assumptions and finally, building an improved awareness and understanding for the potential evolution of fictional brand attributes. As the meaning of innovativeness as well as the front stage of employer brands depend on the perception of the individual, managerial practice also needs to become more aware of individual characteristics and differences between talents and act upon these, for example through more personalized marketing. Finally, this alternative would require corporations to investigate viable ways to gain a greater control of more independent brand stimuli as those seem to be a source of brand knowledge that talents considered as relatively influential and reliable. Following these implications might enable managerial practice to govern their research, branding and marketing in a way that is less pointed towards popular assumptions but the perception of talents.

From our perspective the substantial decision between both alternatives appears to be as difficult as necessary, as the research indicates that the middle ground between the alternatives, that is represented in the existing practical discourse, seems not to serve the precision, impact and thus, future relevance of the practices of market research, brand management and marketing.

6.3 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Based on the concluding thoughts, theoretical contributions and managerial implications summarized in the previous chapter we are confident that we contribute a substantial collection of new insights and thus, knowledge to the field and problem that our research question pointed

towards. However, we acknowledge that the research is subject to specific restrictions and limitations, which are essential to reflect upon to ensure an appropriate understanding and handling of the results and to outline starting points for future research.

First of all, facing the general nature of qualitative research as well as the characteristics and size of our sample, statistical generalizability should not be expected. While statistical generalizability of the research results can be considered as an interesting field for future quantitative and thus, validative research endeavors, our research instead aimed to achieve what is referred to as theoretical generalizability (Easterby-Smith, 2018). In concrete this means that we, based on empirical findings, aimed to generate a profound theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. However, we admit that also the theoretical generalizability of our research might be limited due to three reasons. The first reason is the limited diversity of the participants in terms of their geographical, educational and cultural background, which with exception of one case has been located in Europe. Reflecting on the opportunity that an increased diversity could lead to even more diverse responses we initially reached out to talents on a global scale. However, all of the participating talents conduct their studies at universities that are situated in countries characterized by a high level of knowledge, education, and economic orientation according to the Global Innovation Index (Hutt, 2019). Consequently, we consider them to adhere to the characteristics of talents. Nonetheless expanding the perspective by including a more global context, such as the Global South, could be considered a further starting point for future research. The second reason for the restricted theoretical generalizability is the limitation of the sample to talents from the disciplines of technology and business as it can be assumed that talents from other disciplines are part of the war for talents as well. However, as argued before we concentrated on those two as they allowed an observation of two groups with different educational backgrounds and future employment fields. The third reason is based on the previous work experience of participants, which might influence their perspective on employers' innovativeness. However, due to the employer's specific interest in talents with previous experience this might actually be a further aspect of ''being a talent''.

Moreover, our response is restricted as it does not provide detailed insights into the proportional share to which the associated attributes but also investigated brand stimuli influence talents' brand knowledge and evaluation. While the research provides first indications on their respective proportional share of impact, we admit that these indications are neither complete nor extensive enough for theorization. Therefore, future research on those, following a quantitative approach that is capable of investigating cause and effect relationships and building on a larger sample unit, could enrich our response to the research problem under investigation.

The final limitation to our research deals with the potential transience of its results. When critically reviewing the attributes that the interviewed talents associate with brands' innovativeness it becomes evident that some of the attributes refer to present technological developments (e.g. machine learning) or societal trends (e.g. digitalization). It could be assumed that those would not have been associated, when conducting the same research in the far past or future. Therefore, the spectrum of attributes and stimuli investigated might be

subject to a certain dynamic over time, which should be considered when building on the granular findings of our research. However, we argue that the more general analytical and theoretical considerations drawn from it are consistent over time as those are not tied to present developments or trends, but to the fundamental constituents and sources of talents' perception of brands' innovativeness.

Apart from the implications for future research that depart from the limitations of the research, there are several further avenues that seem to be worth investigating in the future. First of all, the research results imply that the current theoretical knowledge on the most important attributes for talents' evaluation of employer brands' attractiveness or equity seems to be imprecise and outdated. As the importance of attributes appears to be more complex and dynamic than assumed, an updated and precise investigation on those would ensure that future research in the field of employer brand management remains focused on what is essential. This would also result in a partial revision of the EmpAt scale proposed by Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005), which seems not to be capable of providing such guidance for future research. Furthermore, this could contribute to a clarification of the role of innovativeness to talents, which based on our research results seems far from existing. A subsequent addition to that, which has been raised as relevant by Theurer et al. (2018) and we would like to emphasize again, is a detailed investigation of the impact of certain attributes beyond employer attractiveness, including the behavior of talents or its impact on corporations performance. Additionally, the research implies that theoretical knowledge around the different types of word of mouth stimuli (e.g. professors, existing employees, family, friends) and their respective characteristics seems incomplete and fragmented, despite its apparently influential impact on talents' employer brand evaluations. A more detailed and profound investigation of those could add precision and allow the inference of more specific and reliable implications for employer brand management.

Besides that the theoretical considerations developed throughout this work point towards several interesting directions for future research: The theoretical notion of brand assumptions as a compensation for missing brand knowledge could be further sharpened through an investigation of the probability that inferences are drawn from certain attributes or stimuli as well as the concrete reasons for positive or negative evaluations of those brand assumptions. In addition to that, talents' reliance on fictional brand attributes appears to be a promising future research avenue as it might expand common assumptions on the capabilities of brand management. While the research has revealed their rare existence, we could not examine their origins. Thus, an investigation of their creation and requirements for persistence seems to be a further promising field for research, which concludes our examination of potential future research directions. Reflecting on those and the theoretical knowledge gained throughout the research, we are imbued with curiosity and excitement about the future direction that the discourse around perceived innovativeness, but also the overarching fields of brand, marketing and human resource theory is going to progress towards.

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Appendix A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Background

- What is your name?
- How old are you?
- What is your nationality?
- What is your current field of study?
- Is your current study a graduate or postgraduate program?
- Which university are you studying at?
- If applicable: What have you studied prior to your current education?
- When do you plan to apply for a professional job?
- What type/-s of job are you planning to apply for?
- Do you have any prior working experience?

Potential Future Employer

- When considering your future employer what factors are you looking for?
- When considering your future employer, is innovativeness an important factor?
  - If yes: Why is that?
  - If no: Why is that?
- Where do you look for information about a potential employer?
- What sources of information (e.g. social media, talking with friends, advertisements, products) would you say influences you the most?

Positive Associations

- What is the most innovative corporation (or corporations) that come to your mind?
- Have you previously worked for any of these corporations? (Continue if "no", otherwise choose another)
- What makes those corporations innovative from your perspective? (Starting with ... continuing with... finishing with...)
- Could you give us an example of any innovative experience with that corporation? What made it innovative?
- Would you like to work for any of those corporations?
- In general, how would you describe an innovative corporation?
- Why do you think some brands are more innovative than other corporation?
- Optional: Have you ever experienced that a corporation went from non-innovative to innovative? What happened? What changed?
- If you could think of an innovative corporation as a person, how would that person be?

Negative Associations

- What is the least innovative corporation (or corporations) that come to your mind?
- Have you previously worked for that corporation? (Continue if "no", otherwise choose another)
- What makes this corporation non-innovative from your perspective?
- What could that corporation/s do, so you would perceive them as innovative?
- Besides the aspects we already discussed, what else makes a corporation non-innovative from your perspective?
- If you could think of an non-innovative company as a person, how would that person be?

Concluding Questions

- How would you define innovativeness?
- Do you consider yourself to be innovative?
  - If yes: Can you give us an example of when you did something innovative?
  - If no: Why not?
- Are there any points we might have missed?
- How have you felt about speaking about the topic?

Appendix B

Collection of Associated Attributes

- **BOLD** = Overall Dimension of Attributes
- **Bold** = Subject Attributes
- Light = Describing Attributes

PRODUCTS & SERVICES

affecting everyone
being more
better
built from scratch
changing incrementally
changing market direction
changing perspectives
completed
continuous delivered
contributing
controversial
cool
copied later
different
digital
disruptive
easy
fast to adjust
fast working
fit together
fitted to reality
pioneering
simple
smart
smoother
status
exclusive
fitted to reality
flexible
ground breaking
impenetrable
impressive
integrated in daily life
intuitive
life improving
modern
more efficient
more sustainable

moving
new
not heard about
not necessarily new
not offered before
way paving
personalized
superior
surprising
trendsetting
useful
value adding
available
enabling
accessible
evoke feelings

Features	**Screen**	**Connectivity**	**Software**	**Internet of Things**
unexpected	big	online	updateable	
foldable	touch	constant	self improving	
		updates	gets updates	

Packaging
bold

Quality
high
developing
extended lifespan
improved

Energy Source
electric
renewable
other

Interface
good
easy to navigate
clean
different
comfortable
new

Applicability
widespread
affecting everyone

Aesthetics
minimalistic
sleek
clean
well designed
best
trendsetting
stylish
leading
adding new elements
futuristic
looking good

RESOURCES

many
more

Technology
focused
streamlined
new
using
digital
something that
doesn't exist in
society
revolutional
played with
modern
quality enhancing
expensive
applied

Financial
much
ton of
crazy proportions
enough
more
lot of
accessible

5G	**AI**	**Machine Learning**	**Quantum Computing**	**Block-chain**	**Computer Brain Interfaces**	**CRISPR**	**IT Support**	**Tools**
							have it	tailor made
							outsourced	implemented
								connected
								proper
								digital
								data driven
								new standard
								expensive
								different

RESOURCES

many
more

Data
huge collection
publicly available

Knowledge ─────┐
on market   **Insights**
on customers   much

Presence
known

Patents

Ideas (IP)
new
will shape society
mixed
clear

ACTIVITIES

challenging
pointed
direct
clear
search for new opportunities
customer oriented
industry restructuring
different
understanding targets
vision oriented
existing

R&D

data based	understanding goals	mixing intern. and extern. resources
willing to invest	aims to branch out	mixing intern. and extern. thoughts
cutting edge	30-40 years away	could change the world
crazy	a lot of	interesting

Investment ─────┐
willingness   **Venture Capital** ┐
start up focused independent   **Start Up Ecosystem**
                                     autonomous

Sales ─────┐
new   Pricing
online affordable
omnichannel premium
       more expensive
       low

Business Model ──────────────────────────────────┐

		Business Areas	**Supply Chain** ─┐	
shareholder independent	new	diverse	independent	**Delivery**
not financially focused	integrative	different	fast	drone
developing continuously	sustainable	integrative	complex	industry changing
not business as usual	drastic	new	owned	trying to change
vigilant to trends and society	changed	connected	changed	
customer focused	growing	many	making it easier	
fast to adjust	moving	cutting edge	increased performance	
industry defining	pivoting	niche	near by	
market creating	saving	do a lot	streamlined	
trend oriented	meaningful		cost efficient	
trendsetting	responsible			

Brand ─────┐

Positioning	**Branding**			
consistent	stylish	fresh	consistent	recently adapted
responsive	slick	cool	cohesive	

Communication ──────────────────────────────────────

good	targeted	personal	new approaches	stepping further
clear	holistic	different	word of mouth	makes clear how things can change
clean	new way	informal	representative	connected to younger generations
sleek	careless	consistent	controversial	
viral	focused	interesting	minimalistic	
fun	branded	humorous	not pretending	
visible	human	not scared	widely spread	
active	creative	educational	empowering	

ORGANISATION

able to look beyond
able to project
ahead
ambitious
analyses problems
attentive
big
breaking rules for the good
bringing social good
collaborative
collecting information
competing
competitive
constantly reassessing
continuously learning
continuously refining
creative
curious
customer oriented
differentiating
do what others can't
encouraged
engaging
experienced
extravagance
flashy
fun
future oriented
humble
implementing
intelligent
learning from the past
listening
look beyond
makes gutsy decisions
making great strides
making life easier
market leading
moving faster
nice
open
perseverant
persistent
philanthropic
progressive
predicting
proactive
quickly adapting
reactive
scanning
searching the environment
smart
social
systemizes change
talkative
trendsetting
trustworthy
trying to improve
untraditional
visionary
young

Mindset

analytical	critical	eager to learn	irrational	willing to adapt
assertive	curios	energetic	motivated	willing to work
attentive	daring to fail	enthusiastic	never satisfied	interested in many fields
challenging	design spirit	explorative	not afraid	looking outwardly
chill	determined	inspiring	passionate	thinks outside of the box
positive	Silicon Valley	take risks	trend focused	

Sustainability

stand out	doing something	**Ethical Standards**
impactful	changing situation	high
tapping into	making it feasible	
be more	wide perspective	
making a change		

History

tried things	grew exponentially
strategic switch	changed successfully
changed markets	started from nowhere

Working Conditions

pushing boarders
allow to grow
allows to contribute

Salary	**Benefits**	**Training**	**Education**	**Holidays**
rewarding	personalized	lot of opportunities	continuing	ensured
equal	parental	visiting conferences	inspiring	
share based		problem solving		
performance based		team building		
		creative		
		special		

Hiring

schemed
aims for best
willing to invest
automated
efficient
new

Way of Working

exciting	constantly changing	**Location**	**Working Hours**
flexible	cross functional	flexible	flexible
dynamic	deadline oriented	remote	free
open for new	don't work around	online	
project based	evaluate methodologies	home	
avoiding loops	interdisciplinary		
collaborative	less dependent		
quick	multi tasking		
agile	pushed to create results		
free	self responsible		
new	team oriented		

Culture

start up	hands on	listens to newcomers
playful	inviting	pushes for disruption
open	trying	allows freedom
reactive	driven	failure forgiving
proactive	pushing	focused on well-being
"you"	caring	allows space to think
embracing	developing	going above and beyond
family feeling	friendly	little bit crazy
learning	open minded	just go for it

Structure

Hierarchies	**Units**			
same level	collaborative	**Innovation Units**		
equal	working together	friendly	independent	no time limits
flat	take help of each other	dynamic	autonomous	embraces new ideas
		supported	newly staffed	embraces change
		separated	its own thing	financial resources
		exotic	explorative	aim for bigger goals
		active	entrepreneurial	
		cool	forward looking	
		flashy	different values	

Processes

flexible	systematic
agile	enable suggestions
clear	routine breaking
new	

Teams

working close	have a mediator
resourceful	collect ideas and actions
move around	well connected
implementing	have marketing understanding
small	

ORGANISATION

able to look beyond
able to project
ahead
ambitious
analyses problems
attentive
big
breaking rules for the good
bringing social good
collaborative
collecting information
competing
competitive
constantly reassessing
continuously learning
continuously refining
creative
curious
customer oriented
differentiating
do what others can't
encouraged
engaging
experienced
extravagance
flashy
fun
future oriented
humble
implementing
intelligent
learning from the past
listening
look beyond
makes gutsy decisions
making great strides
making life easier
market leading
moving faster
nice
open
perseverant
persistent
philanthropic
progressive
predicting
proactive
quickly adapting
reactive
scanning
searching the environment
smart
social
systemizes change
talkative
trendsetting
trustworthy
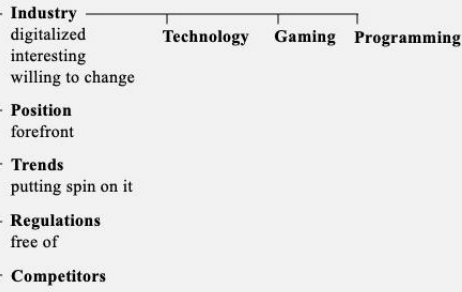trying to improve
untraditional
visionary
young

People

open minded
sharing
fewer
allrounder
always on
selected
better
more
listening
social
fun
goofy
passionate
encouraged
persistent
hard working
be themselves
dynamic
changing
flexible
best
providing input
free to expand
think freely
up to date
different
spiritful
motivated
networking
full of ideas
love their field
talk with others
able to talk up
make their careers their life
thinking how to move forward
doing their own thing
speaking their mind
required to be innovative
willing to work hard
strategy focused
learn from each other
doing more than expected
identify with corporation
look inwards and outwards
open for criticism
open to young people
open for feedback
think outside the box
knowledgeable

Age	Dresscode	Title	Equipment	Gender	Backgrounds
young	online	not used	robots	diverse	different
balanced	constant	Chief Human	tablets	equal	diverse
	updates	Engagement	laptops	good mix	cultural
		Officer			international
					educational

Leadership

proficient
known
active

CEO	Management
dropped out of college	experienced in innovative products
started the company	come from the outside
started from bottom	takes a lead
comes from the outside	accessible
communicates directly	gives direction
representative	open to ideas
breaks rules	straight
made it work	supportive
hardworking	
passionate	
challenging	
young	
friendly	
open minded	
philanthropic	
personal	
trying	

MARKETS

new

- **Industry**
  digitalized
  interesting
  willing to change

  Technology **Gaming** **Programming**

- **Position**
  forefront

- **Trends**
  putting spin on it

- **Regulations**
  free of

- **Competitors**

ENVIRONMENTS

communal

- **Offices**
  electronic
  digitized
  futuristic
  clean
  minimal
  cool
  trendy
  young
  playful
  open
  inviting

  uncommon
  different
  flexible
  interesting
  bright
  pleasant
  middle sized
  insane

  Location
  nice neighbourhood
  close to city centre
  urban

  Structure
  changing
  new
  open

  Facilities
  quite spaces
  mind spaces
  laboratories

  Canteen
  healthy
  beautiful
  vegetarian

  Furniture
  futuristic
  nice

  Foosball
  Ping Pong
  Standing Desks
  Two Monitors per Table

- **Retail**
  positive
  problem solving
  accessible
  different
  urban
  open

  Staff
  technically equipped
  young

  Online
  efficient
  quick
  easy

  Service
  reliable

  Setting
  different

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