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“All That Is Solid Melts Into Virtual Work”

A study of the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic on contemporary Employer Branding through the lens of Social Acceleration.

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Foreword

First of all, we would like to offer up a big thank you to our supervisor and sparring partner Howard Nothhaft for always inspiring us to critical thinking through unrelenting candour and insight. Every supervision session with you felt like a refreshing splash of cold water and it has been a true pleasure having you guide us.

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We would like to emphasize that our contribution to this thesis has been equal.

Lund, May 20, 2021



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Abstract

Impelled by the Covid-19 pandemic, the labour market is undergoing remarkable structural change towards increasingly digitized and remote forms of work. The purpose of this paper has been to study the social change in work norms instigated by the Covid-19 pandemic, with the aim of contributing to a more nuanced understanding of contemporary employer branding as a form of strategic communication in virtual and hybrid labour landscapes. By applying the theoretical framework of social acceleration, using a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, we conducted a discursive text analysis of the contemporary discourse related to work. To that end, we studied articles by thought-leaders in the established international business press together with articles from the HR blog of acclaimed employer brand Spotify, portraying the brand's current employer branding activities. In our analysis, discussing these two representations of the discourse of work, we found four main themes that we suggest define the contemporary labour landscape, with possible implications for contemporary employer branding: *spatial dissolution of work*, *detemporalization of work in virtual landscapes*, *dynamization of work culture and identity*, and *employee empowerment and decentralization of organizational control*. Summarily, we suggest that traditional employer branding appears overly static and employer-oriented in its view of the dynamics and cornerstones of employer-employee relationships, resulting in a risk of overlooking important societal undercurrents that shape the contemporary labour landscape. We posit that adopting a conceptualization of employer branding as an analytical framework for diagnosing contemporary work norms and for tuning into contemporary society has the potential to greatly add value to the field, allowing for organizations to shape employee-employer relationships that resonate with the times.

Keywords: employer branding, employer brand, social acceleration, strategic communication, Spotify employer brand, work norms, social change, virtual work, remote work, digital labour landscape, resonance, Covid-19

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Sammanfattning

De strukturella förändringar som karakteriserar vår tids arbetsmarknad har tydliggjorts ytterligare i och med Covid-19-pandemins inträde, där nya virtuella arbetsformer har kommit att bli det nya normala. Syftet med denna kandidatuppsats var att i ljuset av Covid-19-pandemin studera den pågående sociala förändringen i arbetsnormer, i syfte att bidra till en mer nyanserad bild av employer branding som en form av strategisk kommunikation i digitala och hybrida arbetslandskap. Mot teoretisk bakgrund av den sociologiska teorin om social acceleration samt genom kritisk diskursanalytisk metod (CDA) genomförde vi en analys av samtidens arbetsdiskurs. Vi studerade artiklar skrivna av ledande visionärer och avantgardister i erkända internationella affärsmagasin, tillsammans med artiklar från det vedertaget framgångsrika arbetsgivarvarumärket Spotify. Genom analys av dessa två separata skildringar av arbetsdiskursen identifierade vi fyra teman som, i vår tolkning, framstod som talande för vår tids arbetslandskap: *rumslig upplösning*, *asynkronisering av arbete*, *dynamisering av arbetskultur och arbetsidentitet* samt *medarbetarbemyndigande och decentralisering av organisationskontroll*. Sammantaget menar vi att den traditionella förståelsen för employer branding har anammat en tämligen statisk och arbetsgivarorienterad syn på relationen mellan arbetsgivare och arbetstagare, vilket riskerar att förbise underliggande samhälleliga faktorer som formar samtidens arbetslandskap. Vår slutsats är att de framväxande tendenser som omstrukturerar vår tids syn på arbete ställer nya krav på arbetsgivare att betrakta och praktisera employer branding inte primärt som ett sätt att driva organisatoriska mål, utan som en strategisk analysram för att förstå och synkronisera organisationen till att verka i samklang med rådande sociala strömningar. Genom en mer holistisk syn på employer branding menar vi att employer branding tillges nytt strategiskt värde och når större potential att bygga arbetsrelationer som resonerar med tidens anda.

Nyckelord: arbetsgivarvarumärke, arbetsgivarvarumärkning, employer branding, employer brand, Spotify employer branding, social acceleration, arbetsnormer, distansarbete, virtuellt arbete, digitala arbetslandskap, social förändring, Covid-19

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The Covid-19 pandemic has been a turning point for society both in social life and in organizational environments, forcing technological developments and digitization as well as a structural change. One perspective and theoretical concept that highlights and dissects such developments is that of social acceleration (SA) (Rosa, 2015). In understanding society as a construct of late modernity, German sociologist Hartmut Rosa provides a grand theory illustrating the characteristics of contemporary society following industrialization and modernization. Late modernity and SA, as described by Rosa, rests on the central concept that the advanced technological acceleration following industrialization has moved towards dissolution of pre-modern boundaries of time and space, resulting in a quickening of social change where social and cultural institutions move towards instability and flexibility, leaving society in a 'liquid' state of constant acceleration (Rosa, 2015).

During Covid-19, we watched as society ground to a halt, just long enough for it to accelerate again, this time at even greater velocity but in new directions. Pushed forward by the force majeure of Covid-19, society seems to be hurtling towards innovation, giving rise to countless new practices and phenomena, breaking previously recognized boundaries. One such area of social life that was, and currently is, forced to accelerate in unprecedented directions is that of the labour market. With a large portion of the world's workforce having to switch over to remote work, traditional physical and geographical impositions on the work-place are at the beginning stages of dissolution (Nagel, 2020). In a recent study of roughly 209 000 people in 190 countries conducted by Boston Consulting Group, 89% of respondents expected their jobs to be fully or partially remote after the pandemic (Strack, Kovács-Ondrejko, Baier, Antebi, Kavanagh, & López Gobernado, 2021). Both employers and employees can suddenly expect new challenges in the face of a possibly less centralized work-structure (Nielke, 2021). A general observation among scholars is that Covid-19 accelerated an event already on the horizon: a macro shift towards a digitized labour market (Nagel, 2020; Nielke, 2021).

In the midst of such a shifting labour landscape, one organizational practice that will likely be needing to reevaluate established as well as current practices is that of employer

branding. Employer branding as a concept is the conscious practice of attracting, motivating and retaining staff (Küpper, Klein & Völckner, 2021). In theory, employer branding can be conceptualized as a sub-field overlapping the closely related areas of human resources management, marketing and communications (Barbaros, 2020). Incontestably, the shift towards an increasingly virtual labour landscape sets new demands on employers to adapt employer branding activities accordingly, and creates new challenges in how to attract, motivate and retain staff in virtual work environments.

One company that seems to be emblematic of the contemporary state of employer branding in late modernity is Spotify. Over the last few years, Spotify has continuously topped charts of ‘most attractive employers’ in Sweden (Andersson in Dagens Nyheter, 2021; Ramnewall in Dagens Industri, 2020) and in the United States (Universum Global, 2021) and as such Spotify is a brand that enjoys great success in building and manifesting their employer brand. On the labour market, Spotify seems to be prominent in quickly finding new work practices that respond to the expectations and demands of contemporary society. Together with the assertion that business environments reflect broader social tendencies (Veleva, 2017), we suggest that Spotify can provide a reflection of the norms of work, mirroring macro-level structural changes in labour on micro-level employer branding practices. In February 2021, the tech giant launched their new Working From Anywhere-policy (WFA) (Spotify, 2021), presenting a new ‘normal’ where Spotify employees are now permanently given the choice to work remotely, even post Covid-19, proving the company’s ability to remain at the forefront in organizational structure. Beyond these more general observations and laurels: wherein lies the heart of the success of Spotify’s employer brand? Should we understand the success of Spotify as an employer as a result of impeccably executed practices and strategies of employer branding? Or are there underlying social tendencies revealed during the Covid-19 pandemic that could provide a deeper understanding of contemporary social norms related to labour and employer-employee relationships that have strategic implications for employer branding?

1.2 Purpose and research problem

The purpose of this study is to through social acceleration theory (Rosa, 2015) seek understanding of current trends regarding norms of work apparent in the shift to remote work spurred by the Covid-19 pandemic, and from there to discuss the implications on

contemporary employer branding to unlock a more holistic approach to employer branding. In light of recent and apparent socio-structural shifts in the labour market during Covid-19, we suggest that SA as a grand sociological theory could be highly beneficial in providing just such a contextual understanding of society, as SA provides a holistic understanding of the driving forces in contemporary society. Combining our theoretical perspective with studying current norms of work and how Spotify's employer brand relates to these norms, we hope to illuminate the social undercurrents related to work necessary for contemporary employer branding to understand.

The research gap we intend to address is one of lacking research on the changing role and practice of employer branding following the societal macro shift towards more virtual and less traditional forms of full time, long-term employment (Cappelli & Keller, 2013). Cappelli and Keller identified this shift towards temporary employees, 'gig work' and virtual officing as presenting challenges for employer branding already in 2013. Scholars have noted that traditional concepts of employer branding largely overlook new forms of employment, noting that there is limited research that explores how employer-employee relationships have changed with the shift to a digital landscape, calling for new and more holistic approaches to employer branding with extended stakeholder models (Yu, Dineen, Allen & Klotz, 2021). Furthermore, in our view, there is a possible gap in the field of employer branding where we have detected a general tendency for 'best practice'-reasoning. Alvesson & Spicer (2016) problematize the common fascination with 'best practice' in modern organizations, which refer to dominating approaches to organizational practice that largely define the view of how a procedure should be conducted, seen as the "best way there currently is". Critique aimed at 'best practice' largely concerns the potential risk for possible preconceived notions regarding what is to be expected from such practices, which may result in professionals overlooking important contextual aspects of organizational success, and ultimately yield a simplified view of the complexity and interconnectivity of organizational reality (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016). We propose that one way to nuance the understanding of employer branding and to go beyond ideas of 'best practice' is to approach employer branding from a strategic communications angle. Zerfass, Verčič, Nothhaft & Page-Werder's (2018) conceptualize strategic communication as a frame of analysis for strategic issues and conversations in society with the potential for both furthering and hindering the success of a focal organization. In this study, working with this definition means we treat employer branding as

a sub-field to strategic communication and as such, as a frame of analysis for identifying conversations and trends in society that might be of strategic significance to the focal organization *as an employer*.

Addressing the research gap and the scope of this study, our stance is that employer branding is most broadly applicable to and developed by cutting-edge organizations that have an apparent need for (and the resources to) retain top-talent innovators and knowledge workers. This study and its research material will thus be focused on organizations and employers in innovation and knowledge sectors that employ knowledge workers who have the possibility to carry out their work remotely. We wish to emphasize that the focus of this study and the direction of the research material will not be to provide insight on employer branding practices related to other sectors on the labour market, such as work that requires physical presence.

1.3 Research questions

RQ1: How can we understand the norms defining the current labour landscape from a perspective of social acceleration?

RQ2: How do Spotify's employer branding activities relate to norms defining the current labour landscape?

RQ3: What are some of the possible implications of current work norms on contemporary employer branding?

2. Literature review

In this section we have searched for previous research pertaining to concepts of: employer branding in contemporary labour landscapes, employer branding in a digital context, studies regarding digitization of the labour market and the future of work as well as previous academic research on Spotify and Spotify's employer brand, HR activities or marketing. Concerning Spotify we have not found any previous academic research yielding information relevant to this study.

2.1 The future of work – current state of research

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the process of digitization has been observed as *the fourth industrial revolution* (I4.0), illustrating the shift towards a society in which digital and ‘real’ worlds are seamlessly interconnected; a revolution involving the connectivity of all human and mechanical actors (Eberhard, Podio, Alonso, Radovica, Avotiona, Peisenience, Caamaño Sendon, Gonzales Lozano & Solé-Pla, 2017). In the discussion of the current state of digitization, it has been argued that the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed digitization in all areas of human activity more profoundly than any previous event (Nagel 2020). In an observation building on Rosa (2015), Nagel (2020) has discussed that Covid-19 likely did spur an adaptation to new digital practices quicker than would have otherwise occurred, indicating that changes in workplace practices have possibly supported a general social acceleration. In parallel, the macro-structural transformation of digitization on industries and business models accounts for an ongoing change in skills required, as well as for a shorter shelf-life of employees’ skill sets (Eberhard et al., 2017).

Scholars across diverse fields argue that the nature of work has changed during the 21st century (Barley, Bechky & Milliken, 2017; Ahuja, Nikolova & Clegg, 2020; Eberhard et al., 2017). On a macro level, shifts in the labour market can be explained through apparent shifts in social, political and economic mega trends, such as urbanization, globalization and digitization (Eberhard et al., 2017). In recent discussions of contemporary structural shifts on the labour market, one concept that has gained increasing attention is that of the *gig economy* and its implications on the labour landscape and the development of new communication technologies, where the macroeconomic shift towards the gig economy is giving rise to new

forms of employment (Eberhard et al., 2017). The gig economy has been conceptualized as a “structural shift in the workings of advanced post-industrial societies” (De Ruyter & Brown, 2019), characterized by short-term, in-demand forms of employment, facilitated by the use of new technologies. The Covid-19 pandemic, which forced the shift to virtual forms of labour, has been said to have further pushed the ongoing shift towards the gig economy (Herrera, Justie, Koonse & Waheed, 2020). From the perspective of workers, the gig economy has been said to result in both new possibilities as well as precarities for workers on the labour market: on the one hand, De Ruyter & Brown (2019) mention increased flexibility, efficiency and freedom of choice in labour as upsides of the gig economy; on the other, Herrera et al. (2020) mention an increased lack of control, decreased stability and less income predictability.

On current socio-cultural changes of labour and workplaces, Ahuja et al. (2020) provide a discussion of the implications of technological and structural changes to labour that challenge the concept of identity work in late modern labour markets. One historical explanation of the socio-cultural changes of labour draws on the so-called gradual “death of the organization man” since the 1990s – the abandon of bureaucracy, life-long employment and stable career paths (Bennett, 1990) and the decline of corporate jobs during the 21st century (Davis, 2016), giving rise to a rapidly changing labour landscape characterized by opportunity, ongoing changes of career paths and unstable work identities (Ahuja et al., 2020). As such, from a late modern perspective, the stable notions of identity in modernity are increasingly being replaced by a fluid, fragmented and ever-changing identity process of workers navigating this shifting organizational environment (Ahuja et al., 2020). From an organizational and managerial perspective, Veleva (2017) has observed that the liquefaction of social structures and of collective values in late modernity poses a challenge to organizational identity shaping and contemporary leadership as the fragmentation of collective values dissolves traditional reference frames which destabilizes existing organizational notions and structures of employer-employee relationships.

2.2 Contemporary employer branding

Contemporary employer branding as theory and practice has been discussed as the aggregated activities in HR and marketing departments, connected to both fostering, promoting and communicating an employer's positive attributes (Barbaros, 2020). In discussing previous employer branding literature, Barbaros (2020) problematizes the division between separate

areas often related to employer branding such as company culture and image, and emphasizes a need for a more holistic understanding of employer branding. The current dominating view in employer branding conceptualizes the practice as the process of building and fostering a strong employer brand, with the purpose of attracting the right set of employees and ensuring that employees strongly identify with their employer (Nielke, 2021). In a similar vein, Shabanabi & Kesavaraj (2019) provide a conceptual literature survey of employer branding, showing that the most common understanding is that of employer branding as a long term HR strategy to gain competitive advantage, concluding that the future direction of employer branding as a field should focus more on the employee perspective.

In the current state of employer branding, we have found scarce research from sociological perspectives. Scholars underline the need for more contextual understanding of the employee in employer branding literature (Nielke, 2021; Yu, Dineen, Allen & Klotz, 2021). In a doctoral dissertation on employer branding in the IT-industry, Dabirian (2020, p. 10) problematizes previous tendencies in employer branding literature towards a one-sided view of employer branding, and calls for a more holistic perspective of employer branding as “a multifaceted phenomenon that is not only shaped by what employers believe or want to be true about their firms but also what outsiders (e.g., potential employees) expect from firms and by actual employees’ experience-based accounts of workplace conditions”. Furthermore, it has been observed that a digital adaptation of employer branding is crucial in mid-to post-Covid-19 labour landscapes wherein organizations need to adapt to new realities where *“everything is becoming more digital and agile, but also more volatile”* (Nielke, 2019). In conclusion, from our review of contemporary employer branding research, we see a consensus regarding the need for more nuanced and less managerial, organization-first research in employer branding. There is an apparent need for evolution in the field; the most recent research has put into stark contrast that contemporary employer branding is understood as somewhat static and organization-centred in its approaches and needs to adapt in order to maintain relevance as an organizational practice, not least following recent labour landscape changes towards more virtual forms of work.

3. Theoretical framework

In this study, we have chosen to outline our research with the grand theoretical concept of social acceleration (SA) presented by German contemporary sociologist Hartmut Rosa, complemented by his theoretical concept of resonance. We will also outline the central founding concepts that define employer branding as a theoretical field.

3.1 Social acceleration theory

3.1.1 The modernity concept – from ‘solid’ to ‘liquid’

In applying Hartmut Rosa’s theory of SA and late modernity as our theoretical framework, we feel the need to account for Rosa’s distinction of ‘late modernity’ from ‘classical modernity’. Rosa (2003) explains classical modernity as characterized by *individualization*, *rationalization*, *differentiation* and *domestication* of nature. As Weber (1947) states, classical modernity is built on movement towards solidity, defined by society’s continuous movement towards social, cultural and economic institutionalization. The main difference between classical modernity and late modernity lies in the underlying forces instigating change in society (Rosa, 2003). In early or classical modernity, processes of acceleration were driven by *progress* and ‘the promise of acceleration’ whereas in late modernity processes of acceleration are seen as a ‘necessity’ and ‘unavoidable adjustment’ (Rosa, 2003). This shift in mentality Rosa (2015) explains as the ‘slippery slope’ phenomenon, as in late modernity, the only available response to deal with increasing acceleration in society is to accelerate the pace of life even further. In distinguishing late modernity from classical modernity, Rosa (2015, p. 217) cites Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman and his metaphor of late modernity’s apparent *liquidity*, contrasting Weber’s observation of the perceived solidity of classical modernity. In explaining liquid modernity, Bauman (in Rosa, 2015, p. 217) describes an end to structures and institutions that resist change through time until they are rendered irrelevant. In understanding something as solid, as enduring, time ceases to have importance, Bauman means, however if we understand something as liquid, then the aspect of time, the question “*what is it now?*” becomes vital.

3.1.2 Three dimensions of social acceleration

German sociologist Hartmut Rosa interprets late modern society through the grand theoretical concept of social acceleration (SA). To Rosa, SA provides a lens through which society and societal phenomena can be understood, based in three central elements, describing three different processes in constant acceleration: (1) *technical acceleration*, (2) *acceleration of social change* and (3) *acceleration of the pace of life* (Rosa, 2015).

Technical acceleration relates to the acceleration of goal-directed processes of transportation, communication and production (Rosa, 2015). This translates to the idea that any technological process is perpetually striving towards increasing its functionality in relation to its end-goal. Central to this form of acceleration is “the *shrinkage*” or *compression* of space”, as the human experience of space, to a great extent, is “a function of the length of time it takes to traverse it” (Rosa, 2015, p. 72). This relationship between time and space can be illustrated in how we answer questions such as “how far is it from x to y?” where the answer is often given in a unit of time: “thirty minutes by train”. One of the first examples of technical acceleration in modernity can be traced back to the industrial revolution, where the invention of the steam engine makes up a pioneering step in our ability to traverse natural limitations of time and space. Rosa (2015) explains this as ‘instrumental domestication of nature’ and it is one of the core characteristics of classical modernity.

The second form of acceleration, *acceleration of social change*, is described by Rosa (2015) as relating to the increasing tempo of change and the decreasing stability of social and cultural practices, patterns and institutions. What makes out the foundation of the acceleration of social change is the continuous pattern of change apparent in the constant cyclical relationship between collapse and rebirth of the present in relation to social and cultural structures, experienced by humans as the *contraction of the present*. This can be understood as a contraction of the experience of present reality constituted in the ‘now’ that exists in-between what can no longer be considered valid (the past) and what has yet to enter into validity (the future). The realms of acceleration of social change are based around social, economic, political and cultural structures. An example of social change given by Rosa is how change previously took place over the space of several generations, a change which at the time was largely imperceptible to the individual; for example, sons would inherit their profession from their father in a long line of succession. Stepping into classical modernity we can perceive a social change and acceleration wherein the individual increasingly chooses

their own profession. With the transition into late modernity social change has become mostly intergenerational: more people hold jobs for different employers in the space of one lifetime, of one generation. A related discussion within Rosa's framework of the acceleration of social change is characterized by Rosa's discussion of Koselleck (in Rosa, 2015, p. 76): "*what is still valid within one geographical or social realm has already lost its validity in another*", meaning that the overarching acceleration of social change consists of an amalgamation of instances of SA across the social spectrum, moving at different velocities and at different stages of change happening simultaneously. What we can perceive in one area of society is not necessarily applicable to *all* of society.

The third dimension of SA is the *acceleration of the pace of life*. Rosa (2015) defines this acceleration through two components: an *objective* and a *subjective* component. The objective component can be understood through the empirically observed *condensation of episodes of action* in contemporary life: mealtimes and sleep-time, time spent communicating with family and time in-between different episodes of action are all examples of actions that have been empirically measured and that are increasingly shortened in late modern society. Additionally, actions are increasingly performed simultaneously, further condensing time required. In observing these objective occurrences, the subjective component of an accelerated pace of life comes into view. Rosa points to how studies have determined that feelings of stress surrounding being pressed for time are increasingly prevalent, fuelling a compulsion to accelerate one's pace of life further in order to deal with the issue. This constant acceleration results in the sense that time itself is going by faster. In part, the two previous forms of acceleration work as impelling forces in increasing pace of life, wherein technological innovations allow for shortening of episodes of action and social change accelerates expectations on the individual. In a sense, this shortening of episodes of action decelerates pace of life and frees up time, however, as a direct result, we are compelled to fill that time. The options of what to fill that time with increase exponentially with increased social and technological acceleration and suddenly time freed up is no longer sufficient to allow for all possibilities, and a sense of scarcity of time ensues. In defining the acceleration of pace of life, it is important to note that the *shortening* of single episodes of time do not characterize this phenomenon; the lynch-pin of the phenomenon is the increase in episodes of action per time unit. The sense of acceleration in pace of life is a result of the increasing sense that more actions need to be accomplished in a given unit of time, for instance "one

day”.

The three dimensions of SA exist in a constant cyclical relationship, with the different forms of acceleration occurring in parallel as well as spurring each other on. One might understand these processes as a single process; the separation is mainly an analytical framework, in order for us to better be able to study and understand SA (Rosa, 2015).

3.1.3 The late modern concept of identity

Rosa states that temporal structures of society and of subjective experience make up a structural coupling and as such an important portion of SA is the understanding of late modern identity-shaping (Rosa, 2015). In conceptualizing identity, Rosa describes that self-relations are intrinsically connected to one’s past, present and future as integral parts in a narrative understanding of the self wherefore time becomes an indispensable factor for self-identification. In exemplifying this, Rosa again discusses the intergenerational tempo of contemporary society as clearly influencing subjects’ relation to previous identity markers where occupation, area of residence and political convictions can theoretically change many times within the confines of a lifetime: the entire idea of *I am* (a baker, a New Yorker, a conservative) becomes temporary following a shrinkage of the present; I am becomes I *currently* am. Furthering this argument, Rosa questions whether these relationships actually cease to be *I am* and instead turn into *I work*, *I live*, and *I vote*, as an ‘I am’ suggests “a stability that cannot be made good” (Rosa, 2015, p. 147). Rosa suggests that late modernity incurs a shrinkage of identity wherein the punctuality (on an axis of time) of identity takes on an instrumental attitude to roles and relationships, and that SA gives rise to a dynamization of the self. An increased individualization following SA has transformed relationships to the self and the world and ultimately, in late modernity, effects a detemporalized *situational* definition of identity.

3.1.4 Temporal aspects of social acceleration

In defining time in late modernity, specifically as it relates to space, Rosa rests on the conceptualization that no moment of acceleration of spatial change in modernity can be understood without its temporal aspect (Rosa, 2015). This means that in explaining any spatial transformation, time as relating to that transformation will be the ultimate indicator of acceleration. As such, Rosa writes, space is a dependent variable and hence spatial change

denotes temporal change. For Rosa, time is the focal point of globalization and modernization in late modernity. Discussing the intrinsically entangled concepts of time and space, Rosa (2015, p. 219) draws on historical examples laid out by Bauman to further his point. Bauman talks about the shift from classical modernity to late modernity wherein nomadism and the intrinsic spatiotemporal unboundedness of nomadic lifestyles was once a marker of backwardness when put in contrast to the urbanization and the settled nature and stability that characterizes classical modernity. This has been turned on its head in late modernity, where being bound to physical space is becoming synonymous with lacking time sovereignty. Nomadism is becoming a marker of emancipation from spatial and temporal structures previously dictated by labour: what is now considered backwards is lacking the *option* of nomadism (Rosa, 2015, p. 219).

3.1.5 Resonance – an extension of social acceleration

Rosa's concept of resonance builds on the theory of SA and its implication on humans (Rosa, 2019). Rosa posits that humans are largely in disintegration with the temporal aspects of our lives, leading to a sense of *alienation*. Alienation happens as the result of a permanent need for optimization in late modern society, where the constant dynamic stabilization maintaining our institutional status quo leads to an increased pace of life. This increase drives us to approach life and temporal structures in a mode of aggression; we attack our every-day life (time itself) in order to master and control time. This is the foundation of our sense of temporal disintegration, of running upwards in a down-ward escalator. Alienation is a distortion of the mode of being in the world, of being in time (Rosa, 2019). We ask ourselves "What are we doing here? Why are we here?". This failure to appropriate the world and our temporal existence leaves us in a world that does not speak to us and we experience a loss of meaning and of direction.

What is needed to respond to alienation, Rosa means, is a non-alienated way of re-integrating our connection to time in order to grasp and restructure our institutional fabric. Rosa's response is *resonance*; the antithesis of alienation. In contrast to alienation, a resonant mode of being in the world is a *non-aggressive* way of relating to society and time, and is defined by Rosa as "a form of world-relation, in which subject and world meet and transform each other" (Rosa, 2016, p. 298). Resonance can only happen in non-pretentious interactions between subject and object and leaves the participating parties gently transformed; the

perception of the world will be slightly altered in resonating parties' subjective experience of reality, giving rise to an identity and meaning shaping process. However, we cannot choose the transformation that will take place, nor that it will take place; resonance cannot be controlled or engineered. That being said, there are conditions that allow, and in turn that disallow for the occurrence of resonance. One of these is time; resonance cannot happen in an environment of stress. Consequently, fear also disallows for resonance. In applying discussions of resonance, Rosa means, we can reach a critique of the conditions for resonance in our everyday lives, our social lives and our institutional lives. What is required is a space to operate and relate freely and fearlessly to the world. Herein lies some of Rosa's critique of late modern workplace conditions: goal-driven, directed and time-managed work conditions disallow for resonance, and in turn for creativity and meaning. What is necessary in order to identify disintegration of time and alienation are questions such as "Where are we put in aggression with time?" and "Where does society and our circumstances not allow for resonance?".

3.2 Employer branding

3.2.1 The fundamentals of employer branding

Employer branding as a concept was first introduced by Ambler & Barrow (1996) defined as "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company". In a later conceptualization, employer branding refers to "the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors" (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). From an organizational perspective, employer branding has been conceptualized as a strategy for organizational survival and for increased potential profitability (Parment, Dyre & Lutz, 2017). Employer branding focuses on current and potential employees as a form of human capital, with employer branding portrayed as a strategy of skilful investment in human capital (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In early employer branding theory, the dominant view was of the *employer brand* as separate and distinguishable from the *corporate brand*, where the former was conceptualized as the internal marketing aspects of a firm's marketing activities (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Regarding the marketing aspect of employer branding, early conceptualizations focused on

the *intangible* facets of employer branding, such as marketing organizational culture, values, management styles and opportunities for employee learning, development and recognition (Newell & Dopson, 1996; Hendry & Jenkins, 1997). Contemporary conceptualizations of employer branding take a more holistic view of branding activities, building on the idea of the ‘one brand’ (Parment et al., 2017). In this view, digitization has blurred the lines between internal and external aspects of the corporate brand, requiring all branding activities to be based on a collective branding strategy, where collaboration between internal HR and external marketing activities is seen as increasingly important to successfully building an authentic ‘one brand’ (Parment et al., 2017).

3.2.2 Employer value proposition (EVP)

A central concept in the established employer branding literature is the idea of the *employer value proposition (EVP)* (Parment et al., 2017; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Ugglä, 2018). The EVP has been explained as the employer branding equivalent of the USP (unique selling point) in consumer marketing; the unique promise from employer to the employee that distinguishes the organization from other employers. Berthon, Ewing & Hah (2005), in an extension of Ambler and Barrow’s (1996) conceptualization of employer branding, identified five dimensions of value that have been conceptualized as desirable employer attributes from an employee perspective, and presented as key drivers of the EPV: (1) *interest value*, (2) *social value*, (3) *economic value*, (4) *development value* and (5) *application value*. In this framework, the EVP consists of an organization’s offered combination of these values, where the employer and employee meet in a ‘trade-off’, described as “the deal struck between an employer and employee in return for their contribution and performance” (Pawar & Charak, 2014). In this view, the EVP is the central competitive means, and the pillar from which successful employer branding is built (Parment et al., 2017). From an HR perspective of employer branding, a strong EVP is based on the organization's culture and identity and on communicating the EVP both internally and externally, with the goal of developing a workforce that is committed to the organization’s goals and values (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

3.2.3 Employer branding and identity

Building on the central concept of the EVP, organizational identity and culture become important factors and are frequently discussed within employer branding research in regards to building company culture. Organizational culture and identity are viewed as defining the long term, distinct, central values of an organization (Lievens, Van Hoye, & Anseel 2007; Parment et al., 2017; Sinclair, Martin & Bushfield, 2020). The most common conceptualization of organizational identity within employer branding builds on social identity theory (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004): “(...) social identity theory posits that people derive their self-concept from their membership in certain social groups” (Tajfel, 1982). This is where organizational identity becomes important as “the reputation of the group with which we identify contributes to our self-concept” (Underwood, Bond & Baer, 2001). With this understanding of what drives individuals and specifically potential employees in mind, the focal activity of employer branding is centered around managing and marketing the internal organizational identity in order to attract the “right” set of employees. In social identity theory, an organization is seen as a group with a set of attributes that, if they align with a person’s self-concept, through membership can strengthen and heighten the sense of self (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). From this view, employer branding can be seen as a strategy to consciously manage the organizational image and identity, in portraying the organization as an attractive employer in the minds of the desired set of employees (Sullivan, 2004). In conclusion, a strong organizational identity that is consistently built over time through defined and manifested organizational values is seen as a condition for successful employer branding (Parment et al., 2017).

4. Method

This section explains our theoretical approach, our collection of research material, our methodological stance as well as our method of analysis followed by a reflection on the limitations and short-comings of our study.

4.1 Ontological and epistemological stance

In discussing our methodology, we will first clarify the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of this study in relation to its chosen theoretical framework. Rosa problematizes the categorization of SA theory according to traditional methodological approaches: “the cogency of the fundamental reflections underlying this work cannot be tested by means of a unified, closed methodology, because there is no method of empirical social research that can simultaneously grasp the interrelated theoretical observations concerning structures, actions and subjects and the complexity of the differently scaled temporal structures and perspectives” (Rosa, 2015, p. 25). For this study, the intrinsic complexity of the theory of SA yields both conceptual and practical challenges in designing a methodological and analytical framework. Ontologically, Rosa builds his work on the assumption that aspects of the social world can be understood as dynamic processes related to socially and culturally constructed temporal structures. In a review of Rosa’s work on SA, Vostal (2014) interprets Rosa’s social ontology as stressing that “(...) shifts in subjective time consciousness, experience and perception are dialectically related to the larger socio-cultural transformation”. This concurs with our understanding of Rosa’s ontology as a collective social reality made up of subjective experiences of social reality. Epistemologically, given his view of what constitutes social reality, Rosa considers the central aspect of *time* as a “fundamental category of social reality” (Rosa, 2015, p. 2) and a “key category for any appropriate analysis of society” (Rosa, 2015, p. 1). In this view, Rosa’s position is that “almost all social phenomena can be temporally reconstructed, that is, redescribed in terms of their temporal aspects” (Rosa, 2015, p. 1). In studying society and social reality from Rosa’s tempo-analytical perspective through the lens of SA, temporal structures are in this study considered systematic links between individual actors and the larger society, and as such, as an analytical frame for understanding the social structures that constitute social reality (Rosa, 2015).

4.2 Operationalizing social acceleration and employer branding

In an analysis building on a grand theoretical framework, it makes sense for that theory to be used as a central analytical tool for producing plausible interpretations and in-depth discussions in regards to theory through observation (Fejes & Thornberg, 2019). As such, our use of Rosa's theory makes it necessary to build our method around a high level of abstract conceptualization with our empirical material serving as supporting arguments. Based on our discussion of Rosa's ontology and epistemology and the methodological implications of these stances, we will be designing a research method based on the one Rosa applies in discussing SA, looking at spatio-temporal structures as a means to analyze social change and social reality. Building on that, in this study we conceptualize communication and communicative acts as a performative representation of the subjective interpretation and experience of a collective social reality, wherein social reality is mirrored as well as shaped. Communication therefore constitutes the gateway to discussing and analyzing spatio-temporal aspects of socio-cultural structures and the social reality which shapes them.

In looking at communication as a representation of social reality, we will be applying a discourse analytical approach. This is fitting as our ontological treatment of communication runs close to foundational concepts in discourse analysis where language is viewed to not in itself portray reality, but as having the function of creating and maintaining a social and collective reality through shared meanings conveyed in acts of communication which are contingent upon their context (Boréus & Bergström, 2018). Discourse analysis as a method has been explained as "the study of language in the context of society, culture, history, institutions, identity formation, politics, power, and all the things that language helps us to create and which, in turn, render language meaningful in certain ways and able to accomplish certain purposes" (Gee & Handford, 2012, p. 5). We will be looking at the discourse regarding socio-cultural structures related to practices and attitudes of labour, employment and work-life balance, viewing work as a social institution. Such aspects will necessarily relate to work but also to the direction of social change and the current state of social reality and to changes in expectations and practices that might ultimately indicate dilemmas for employer branding as a theoretical field and organizational practice.

In short, we will be analyzing the contemporary discourse of work through communicative practices that appear as strategically important to follow and understand for employer branding. In practice, this means that our method and research material will

concern finding arguments portrayed in texts regarding the state of society as related to SA. Once we have established a satisfactory level of understanding of the collective social reality of work we will discuss employer branding, analyzing the implications of the social reality we have perceived on the practice. As such, in the method section of this study employer branding is mainly present in the aspects of social reality we are observing: norms related to work. Applying our method and theory in this sense allows us to draw together seemingly disparate theories, connecting them to make inferences that ultimately present a perspective of reality that offers up *one* plausible and fruitful perspective on employer branding, while acknowledging that other plausible and fruitful perspectives likely exist. This makes the structure of our inferences adjacent to abductive reasoning.

4.3 Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

Our discourse analytical approach is inspired by Faircloughs (2010) critical discourse analysis, adapted to suit Rosa's epistemology. In this study, we regard 'critical' as implying a normative element; analyzing collective meanings of what is portrayed as or deviating from what is 'normal' and how these meanings are produced through language (Fairclough, 2010). In CDA approaches to text analysis, 'discourse' refers to the relationship between semiotic practices existing within certain themes contingent upon specific contexts where the focus of the analysis is to examine how discourses are *manifested* in texts (Boréus & Bergström, 2018). As such, the aim of CDA and text analysis is to explore how social reality and socio-cultural structures are manifested in linguistic practices and reflected in texts (Boréus & Bergström, 2018.). In CDA, discourse is studied simultaneously as "(i) a language text, spoken or written; (ii) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation) and (iii) sociocultural practice" (Fairclough, 2010, p. 132). Conceptually, in our discourse analysis we apply a similar mode of argumentative analysis, using discursive fragments in articles to look for subtextual meaning beyond what is being made explicit.

Regarding how our discourse analysis relates to the overarching argumentative structure of this study we will conduct our argumentation in three steps, reflected in our RQs. Regarding RQ1, we will seek to unlock a broader understanding of the contemporary labour landscape by studying undercurrents of social and normative change in structures of work against the sociological backdrop of Hartmut Rosa's (2015) SA theory. In this step, we will conduct our discourse analysis looking at avant-gardist business publications and predictions

related to the future of work. Second, in regards to RQ2, we will analyze how, as an example of recognized great contemporary employer branding, Spotify's texts regarding their latest WFA initiative relate to the current discourse of work. Third and last, in regards to RQ3, by analyzing and combining our findings from RQ1 and 2 with established employer branding concepts, we will discuss the implications of our discourse analysis on employer branding as a contemporary field and practice.

4.4 Sampling and proceedings

To gain as diverse a text sample related to the discourse regarding contemporary work norms as possible, we searched for texts from three different perspectives: (1) we searched out articles from Spotify's HR blog portraying Spotify's WFA initiative and their employer branding activities, (2) we searched for external journalistic articles portraying Spotify's new WFA initiative, and (3) from the perspective of thought-leaders and business journalists we chose articles and texts about current changes in society and the labour market following the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as articles regarding a probable future of work and society. We opted for articles published in late 2020 and early 2021. Our choice of mainly turning to the established international business press for our research material lay in the fact that the established international business press can be considered to be produced *by* and *for* active participants and avant-gardists in the business sector, and we consider it a watering hole for sharing knowledge about trends and ideas in contemporary business thinking. We believe the ideas reflected in this forum can work both as a direct and an indirect reflection of current movements and structures of social reality in regards to organizational life and, in our case, current trends and tendencies in work and labour. From this view, we see the established business press as potential trend-setters, shapers and reflectors of normative standards in relation to work.

The sampling method used in this study has been a *purposive sample*: Articles deemed rich in meaning and relevant to the aim of the study were purposefully chosen (Schreier, 2018). Articles proving to be low in analytical gain were passed over in favour of articles more dense in meaning. In our sampling, we first identified relevant keywords (Appendix 2) which were used to search out relevant articles in the LIBRIS database, an online-repository for recognized published academic as well as journalistic articles and publications. We read 25 articles in-depth, analyzing them, before choosing 12 articles and

two articles from Spotify's HR blog that we deemed the most rich in congruence between Rosa's and the texts' understanding of contemporary society, in order to apply these as arguments.

In our CDA proceedings, the articles and texts chosen were first retrieved in full, numbered and then stored in a database (Appendix 1). We proceeded to individually analyze each text, looking for testimonies relating to spatio-temporal aspects of contemporary work norms. Secondly, we looked at recurring themes from the individual testimonies, treated as discourse fragments, and structured these. Thirdly, we compiled the findings into a presentation of themes.

4.5 Critique of CDA

For this study to remain self-critical, a meta-discussion of CDA seems appropriate. The main critique of CDA lies in the assumed relationship between linguistic form and social function and the subjective understanding of this relationship that allows the researcher to manipulate the results according to their stance regarding the material (Boréus & Bergström, 2018). As CDA lacks a formalized method for selecting data, this increase in choices left to the researcher calls into question the potential risk for bias. What does it mean for the 'natural' meaning of language when language is recontextualized and analyzed as if it were 'data' in a scientific process? The inability to present a 1:1-mirror-image of the discursive reality is a general problem in CDA approaches as "some degree of fragmentation, of 'scrutiny in isolation', is an inescapable side-effect of CDA methods" (Mautner, 2010, p. 150). Furthermore, CDA is critiqued for supporting findings that researchers already know, wherein the material is only used to confirm their expectations, possibly leading to confirmation bias (Boréus & Bergström, 2018). Responding to this critique, we will again clarify the role of discourse analysis in this study. Our method is to apply our empirical material as arguments for the appropriateness of SA theory, illustrating the potential usefulness of the theory in employer branding research. After all, the social reality reflected in this study is simply one of many possible interpretations and experiences of social reality. We do not claim our interpretation to give a complete depiction of reality, however, we do claim it to provide a useful one.

Furthermore, our discursive approach refrains from taking an *intentionalist* perspective, meaning that in this study our aim is not to understand the sender's intention

behind communicative acts (Åkerström in Eksell & Thelander, 2014). While this position as researchers makes sense from a CDA perspective, we find it necessary to make note of the possible ethical implications this has on the study. Studying published texts means we are observing our research material from a distance by analyzing communicative acts as linguistic fragments that, from our perspective, yield insight into a broader discourse. This means that we are taking fragments of text from one context and placing them in *one specific* discursive reality without analyzing other possible contexts of discourse, and without considering the sender's intention from alternative standpoints through participation, meaning that the perspective of the sender is not given a place in the discussion. As we do not look at the intended *meaning* of texts in this study, we want to emphasize that our discussions and conclusions need to be considered within *this* context and our findings should therefore not be lightly transferred or made into judgments of the sender's intention behind the communicative acts we study.

5. Analysis

In this section, we present our discourse analysis of current work norms as well as how Spotify's employer branding relates to these norms. In the current discourse of work, we found four recurring themes relating to contemporary normative change in the current labour landscape. The themes are as following: 1) Spatial dissolution of labour, 2) Detemporalization of labour, 3) Dynamization of work culture and work identity and 4) Employee empowerment and decentralization of organizational control. We also provide our analysis of the implications of these themes on employer branding. To avoid disruption, the analyzed texts have been referred to by a given number (e.g. (1)) and can be found referenced in full in the appendix (Appendix 1).

5.1 Norms defining the current landscape of work

5.1.1 *Spatial dissolution of work*

In conceptualizing SA, Rosa (2015) argues that one important characteristic of social change is the dissolution and liquefaction of social institutions. In the analyzed texts, we have found testimonies alluding to an understanding of shifts in society that are congruent with such a dissolution, hinting of *acceleration of social change*. We have chosen to demonstrate these as discourse fragments hinting at *spatial dissolution of work*. One recurring narrative of spatial dissolution of work is that of the decline of the office as central to the institution of work, a narrative apparent in descriptions of changing social and organizational functions. In Harvard Business Review (11), Anne-Laure Fayard (Professor of Innovation, Design and Organizational Studies at NYU), John Weeks (professor at IMD) and Mahwesh Khan (research associate at IMD) lay out an argumentation of the office as going from “workplace to culture space”, describing how the office will no longer be viewed as “a place needed to get things done”, but rather as a “culture space providing workers with a social anchor”, with the primary function of “sharing human moments”. This dissolution of an office-centred work structure is further demonstrated by tech-giant and thought-leader Microsoft, in a report on 2021 work trends (13) discussing traditional assumptions of space and time in relation to work as increasingly outmoded:

“It’s time to set aside our long-held assumptions that dictate that people need to work in the same place at the same time to be productive.” (13)

This is further corroborated in a report on “Predictions of work for 2021” from the Workforce Institute at UKG (14), a global consortium of HR and workforce management thought-leaders, where going back full time to the office is discussed as “returning to the status quo” and “insufficient”, implying that going back to pre-pandemic work structures is not an option. There is a sense of permanence in these narratives that hints of social change in the nature of work. Through SA we interpret these as testimonies of increased acceleration and an implicit description of the “slippery slope phenomenon”, where new experiences related to work have called for evolution of the praxis of work in order to cope with apparent changes, forwards being the only reasonable direction.

Another discursive fragment related to the dissolution of work focuses on the decline of the idea that shared physical space is a necessity for productivity. This is apparent in article (9) written by Noah Buhayar and published in Bloomberg Businessweek, where Nick Bloom (economics professor at Stanford) describes the current work trends post-Covid-19 in terms of a “reverse of the urban boom”, presented as a phenomenon that “has only started”, discussing how remote workers increasingly move out of urban areas favouring smaller cities. Microsoft illustrates the same phenomenon but from an employer perspective, discussing how increasing remote work allows for “near-limitless talent pools” from previously unreachable international or far away talent, transcending previous spatial limits and outdating pre-pandemic recruitment practices (13). Together, these perspectives hint at the spatiotemporal unboundedness discussed by Bauman in Rosa (2015), where in late modernity having the choice of nomadism is a marker of emancipation from spatial and temporal structures. In summarizing the theme of spatial dissolution of work, we see that there are indeed narratives pointing to normative change and to new expectations regarding the structures of work. Together with the sub-textual sense of permanence related to these discursive fragments, we believe this changing relationship between work and space to imply normative change in society.

5.1.2 Detemporalization of work in virtual landscapes

Conceptualizing *resonance* Rosa (2019) discusses how time-frames and temporal pressure disallows for creativity and resonance. Considering Rosa's views on resonance as the answer to the alienation that comes with SA, we conceptualize that narratives suggesting a need for more resonant forms of work are symptoms of human attempts to cope with experienced alienation and SA. In the analyzed texts, we have characterized such narratives as testimonies of *detemporalization of work*, referring to narratives that hint of an encouraged and/or predicted separation of, and decline in, time as a fundamental measurement of productivity in virtual and remote work settings. One such narrative is presented by Microsoft, providing a discussion of the stress-inducing nature of work, expressed in terms of the "speed and urgency of virtual work", stating that virtual work leads to new challenges for employees to establish boundaries that promote and uphold a sustainable work-life balance (13). Regarding measuring productivity in virtual work settings, Microsoft presents time as a troubling factor when disallowing for flexibility, problematizing "unproductive meetings" and "digital exhaustion" in relation to "meetingization" in traditional and pre-pandemic business practices (13). Providing a similar narrative for the Straits Times, one of the leading far east English language business publications, journalist Joanna Seow portrays a need for redefining metrics of productivity and a need for tools facilitating "asynchronous communication" in relation to the rising challenges of work-from-anywhere policies, presenting asynchronization of work practices and of collaboration as a possible solution and remedy to the rising pressures of digitized and remote work (4). Seen from the perspective of Rosa (2019), we interpret both Microsoft's and Seow's narratives as testimonies describing a late modern experience of aggression towards time where moving away from time as a central metric of work is a way to cope, hinting of a need for more resonant forms of work. A similar discussion is presented by financial magnate and New York Times best selling author Robert Pozen in Fortune Magazine, explicitly calling for a change in the paradigm of work and in time as a measure of productivity:

" (...) while we should all applaud the demise of the eight-hour workday as a relic of a bygone era, we need to replace it with a productivity measure more relevant to a knowledge economy. Out with timesheets and in with success metrics!" (3)

From the perspective of Rosa (2015), we regard these discursive fragments as representing an emerging need for separation of time and labour in virtual work practices in favour of new and asynchronous ways of collaborating. This implies a shift in the rationale of work in virtual environments; ongoing conversations that seek to redefine ‘work’ and ‘work units’ and promote new ways of organizing and evaluating work. This also implies a shift beyond time as a limitation, reflected in the idea that collaboration does not need to happen in real-time and that there is a need to reconceptualize what entails collaboration in virtual environments. Seen from Bauman (in Rosa, 2015), we view this apparent change in the discourse of work towards an eradication of time as a glimpse of the late modern society, insofar as modern notions of ‘productivity’ and the role of time as inherent to work are being scrutinized.

5.1.3 Dynamization of work culture and work identity

The theme of *dynamization of work culture and work identity* is symptomatic both of Rosa’s (2015) concept of the dissolution and decentralization of social institutions and of the late modern identity shaping process conceptualized by Rosa as situational identity. The dynamization of work culture and work identity is apparent in narratives implying that traditional notions of organizational culture – both in function and form – are changing, through reevaluation by employers and employees following the disruption of traditional work structures and practices during the Covid-19 pandemic. Writing for the New York Times (7), journalist Matthew Haag discusses new challenges for organizations following the Covid-19 pandemic and the transition to remote work, expressing that companies are “struggling to foster workplace cultures” and describing a “changing work culture”. Previously introduced Bloomberg Businessweek writer Noah Buhayar (9) perceives a consensus and uncertainty among organizational leaders, suggesting that “corporate cultures will be eroded” with the shift to remote work. From Rosa’s (2015) perspective, we view these testimonies as symptoms of dissolution and decentralization of work as a social and cultural institution, where the previously centralized and more stable organization allowed for more managerial control over organizational culture and identity. Remote work and Rosa’s predicted dissolution of social institutions can in that regard be perceived as having instigated a destabilization of organizational culture as it has been traditionally understood and practiced among organizational leaders. Writing about the future of work for young

professionals, Fortune Magazine journalist McKenna Moore (12) provides a narrative of social change in how employers and employees view organizational culture post-Covid-19:

“With both employers and prospective employees questioning the norms in recruitment, hiring, and company culture, the only thing that’s certain as the world navigates this crisis is that professional life is going to change.” (12)

Considering Rosa’s concept of situational identity processes, we see narratives of remote work leading to an improved experience of self-fulfilment, with Covid-19 having freed up time episodes allowing individuals to fully pursue self-identification outside of work. In a discussion of whether to expect an eventual return to the office, New York Times authors Julie Cresswell and Peter Eavis present an employee describing benefits in remote work:

“I feel like a whole person. I am living an actual life every single day, instead of trying to cram it into a day-and-a-half on the weekend,” [employee] said. “It’s definitely making me re-evaluate my work-life situation.” (6)

Further discussing these narratives, the traditional idea that work should provide an important and constant identity marker seems contradicted by the sense of relief apparent in testimonies such as the one above, implying a dissolution of an organizational social identity in favour of Rosa’s situational identity. In a similar narrative, Cresswell & Eavis, previously introduced New York Times authors, convey a sense of permanence in stating that the pandemic gave employees “free time they don’t want to give up”, implying that the pre-pandemic work paradigm is already changed (6). Overall, the employer narratives regarding culture in remote work settings seem to focus on difficulties in managing culture whereas employees seem to express a positive attitude, not expressly in terms of culture, but in a sense of relief and freedom. In Bloomberg Businessweek, journalist Noah Buhayar portrays a self-critical narrative from one manager who describes how he can no longer justify making his employees come in to the office:

There's a narcissism to it," he [manager] says, "that, if somehow they're in close proximity to me, we will share some kind of weird energy." (9)

The sub-text in above narratives suggest a decentralization of the organization with managers experiencing loss in regards to culture and employees experiencing gain. In this we see the dynamization of organizational culture and identity: an increasing flow of influence over the organizational culture towards the employees. Through Rosa's (2015) perspective, we can glean a deeper sense in these descriptions of the current work landscape: The social identity shaping process for which work has traditionally been important is increasingly outsourced into other areas of life that have been allowed more time in the life of the employee following the shift to remote work.

5.1.4 Employee empowerment and decentralization of organizational control

Resting on Rosa's (2015) conceptualization of the dissolution of social institutions is our fourth and last theme, *employee empowerment and decentralization of organizational control*. We see testimonies of decentralization in how power in organizations that was previously centralized in a top-down fashion is now liquifying, increasing employee influence in work settings, a phenomenon that we label employee empowerment. One such testimony is portrayed by the previously introduced Workforce Institute at UKG (14) predicting that, going forward, employee trust will be an important factor:

"(...) trust will be more broadly viewed as a foundational imperative to drive true engagement—one that not only defines and differentiates an organization's employee experience, but also unlocks an ability to embrace uncertainty. (...) Although not all organizations will successfully make this transition, those that do will give trust to employees instead of making them earn it." (14)

Furthermore, we see narratives of decentralized managerial influence in testimonies of delegation and relinquishing of control from managers to employees. In Harvard Business

Review (10), interviewing Cynthia Burkhardt (HR thought-leader and Global Head of Talent Acquisition at Philips) on reengineering the recruitment process, Burkhardt describes this shift of control in terms of “increased scrutiny and workers’ demand for more influence”, resulting in difficulties for recruiters to “rely on their usual incentives”. These narratives of increased employee autonomy hint of increased pressure on employers to adopt flexibility and freedom. We interpret this as a normative shift brought on by employees’ increasing reevaluation of traditional work-life balance with the normative shift appearing in shared notions among employees regarding *how* and *where* work should be carried out, and in what work-life balance sacrifices employers can expect from employees. Andrew Jack, global education editor in Financial Times (5) reflects on this shift, discussing predictions of the future of business education in a world where the post-Covid-19 paradigm of work-life balance is permanently changed:

“We’re going to have a very different world which is much more focused on tolerance and on life, not just work and money. We will move to a new economic model in which business and society are more open to trade-offs between efficiency and resilience.” (5)

From an employee perspective on going back to the office, New York Times journalists Cresswell & Eavis (6) as well as Bloomberg Businessweek author Buhayar (9) share employee testimonies:

“If they [employers] try to force us to come in without a legitimate reason, I [employee] can get another job if I don’t want to come in.” (6)

“I don’t want my options to ever be limited” he [employee] says. “And I don’t think they will be.” (9)

The underlying sense in these narratives is that of an internalized understanding among employees as having more influence and thus more freedom of choice. We interpret this as a changed mindset towards organizational structures characterized by increased employee autonomy and self-management. This implicitly describes a flattening of organizations and

can be further understood as a result of an increasing need for flexibility in contemporary society, with the possibility for course alterations needing to be built into the organizational structure. Cresswell & Eavis (6) implies just this, discussing how executives are “spooked that they'll lose their best people if they are not flexible”. Microsoft’s report on emerging work trends (13) portrays increased employee autonomy as becoming essential for organizational success:

“Employees want control of where, when, and how they work, and expect businesses to provide options. The decisions business leaders make in the coming months to enable flexible work will impact everything from culture and innovation to how organizations attract and retain top talent.”

Returning to Rosa’s (2015) perspective, our view is that an increased liquefaction and decentralization of organizational structure as an institution of work is understood and internalized by both employees and employers as a result of the remote work landscape spurred on by Covid-19. This in turn infers a flow and shift in control towards increased employee empowerment in post-pandemic and increasingly virtual environments, possibly denoting normative change.

5.2 Spotify’s employer brand related to work norms

5.2.1 Portrayal of Spotify’s employer brand

In analyzing how Spotify’s practices and their WFA initiative is portrayed in the company’s HR blog and how it reflects the findings from the general business press, we perceive significant overlap. The overhaul of their organizational structure furthers the discourse on the *spatial dissolution of work*, presenting the WFA initiative as fundamentally redefining the rationale in their culture and operations, going from “collocated first to distributed first” (2), in what we perceive as an effort to keep up with tendencies following wide-spread employee delocalization resulting from the pandemic. Spatially, Spotify alludes to a direct separation of work and office as intrinsically connected, implying a change in mindset regarding work, collaboration and recruitment:

“Work isn’t something you come to the office for, it’s something you do.” (1)

“In the past we optimized for in-person collaboration but allowed for virtual collaboration. Going forward we will optimize for virtual collaboration but allow for in-person collaboration. (2)

In above narratives, we see Spotify presenting increased spatial and temporal flexibility as a new normal where virtual collaboration is adopted as standard. This shift appears in the texts as a means of tackling the change as well as a conscious practice of using current structural changes in the labour market to gain new advantages.

Regarding *detemporalization of work*, Spotify provides narratives of values similar to findings in the other analyzed texts, opting for “trust-based” rather than “control-based” leadership in virtual work settings (2). In relation to trusting employees to work remotely, Spotify provides a parallel discussion portraying “output” over “set hours spent in the office” as a more appropriate measurement of efficiency:

“Effectiveness can’t be measured by the number of hours people spend in an office – instead, giving people the freedom to choose where they work will boost effectiveness.” (1)

The general narrative is that Spotify portrays a redefinition of efficiency in virtual or hybrid work environments, conveying the idea that limits of temporality should no longer force workers into a temporal box; when work is no longer dependent on time, time is portrayed as an ineffective and outmoded productivity and employee output metric.

Regarding the *dynamization of culture*, Spotify discusses a reconceptualization of their corporate culture and presents a view where employees are increasingly defining the culture. Spotify describes their culture as “(...) a culture that embraces uncertainty, a fluid organisation, with leadership that enables its people.” (2). This suggests a conceptualization of a future where corporate culture will need to be less fixed and more employee-centered. Spotify does however emphasize the importance of culture as central both to the success of

the company and to the well-being of the employees, aiming to create and maintain spaces that allow for organic culture growth:

"The office plays a very, very big, and very important part of the culture. (...) So we [Spotify] will keep those [office] locations, and we want the culture to really appear and grow within that environment as an office. But we also want to give that freedom and flexibility." (8)

"(...) listening to our employees and embracing the need for change, and finding our way of making adaptations is definitely the way to continue to evolve our culture for the long-term." (1)

These statements hint of a shifting mentality where Spotify's culture, in post-pandemic work landscapes is of equal importance as before, but where the *shape* and *practice* of culture is increasingly contingent upon mutual negotiation between employer and employee in regards to how and where the culture will be practiced. This would make for a less top-down view of managing organizational culture, inferring that culture needs to adapt and change over time, instead of being stable and unchanging.

Lastly, ideas reflecting *employee empowerment and decentralization of organizational control* are mirrored in narratives that discuss a need for emerging and updated leadership models in virtual landscapes. Spotify explicitly calls for managers that "dare to let go of control and empower autonomy" (2):

"(...) if each and every one gets a bit more control over how they manage their time, [employees] will be happier and more engaged." (2)

"Having a flexible approach is a great advantage and a jewel in our talent attraction crown." (1)

From an employer perspective, Spotify presents a flexible work policy that is built on trust

rather than loyalty as a means to gain and uphold competitive advantage in the post-pandemic labour landscape and central to attracting and retaining talent in remote labour landscapes.

5.2.2 Defining the current reality of work portrayed by Spotify

Discussing RQ2, analyzing how Spotify's employer branding activities relate to the general work norms portrayed in the general discourse, we interpret our analysis of Spotify's employer brand as successfully encapsulating the core aspects of the ongoing social change in regards to work. In their activities, Spotify depicts both an explicit and an implicit understanding of social change as we have interpreted it. At their core, Spotify promotes the idea of flexibility. They have already instigated spatial freedom for their workers on a permanent basis and are moving towards temporal freedom as well, measuring work in output rather than in time. Both these adoptions are in harmony with Rosa's (2015) understanding of late modern society and the inevitable dissolution and liquefaction of social institutions. This is further apparent in Spotify's explicit discussions of a need for employee autonomy and self-governance in work. The apparent permanence in these changes showcases an internalized understanding of society as in *motion*. Furthermore, Spotify has a distinct cultural foundation of flexibility, aiming for a strong but *flexible* work culture which we interpret as allowing for late modern situational identity and renegotiation and non-standardization of the role and practice of organizational culture and identity: Spotify is giving its employees enough leash for work not to hinder their individual lives, allowing them to experience an increasing lack of constraints. For the moment, this will likely alleviate pressures from work on the pace of life of the employees. Together with the detemporalization of work, in the texts and testimonies we have analyzed, Spotify appears to allow their employees a work structure that is non-aggressive in its relation to time and space. From Rosa's (2019) perspective of resonance Spotify seems to be going to great lengths to remove aspects of time and space dimensions of work, creating a work structure that allows for integration of the individual life and of different dimensions of time in relation to work, hopefully allowing for more resonant forms of work.

5.2.3 Summary – defining the current labour landscape

Having conducted our discourse analysis, we find that we need to, for the context of this argumentation, accept certain truths from the perspective of SA and acknowledge how these

truths of social reality affect current social change related to work norms in order to create an understanding of where society's level of social change currently is according to SA theory. Addressing RQ1, we have suggested that the defining truths are mirrored in our four recurring themes describing four aspects of current social change of work. Applying SA theory, we determine that society and work are both accelerating and changing in accordance with Rosa's predictions of late modernity; the general "virtualization" of work during the pandemic has further accelerated the dissolution and liquefaction of social institutions. There is a need for changing time-ownership in relation to the institution of work in the individual life and of how the institution of work needs to change in order for the individual to be able to cope with the increasing pressures and demands of current society.

Furthermore, there seems to be an increasing disintegration of the institution of work into our lives. All the while, work is taking up too much space and seems to often be too rigid in its functions, disallowing for the flexibility necessary for the contemporary, late modern human way of being in the world that requires a more liquid way of existing. We see this in Rosa's (2015) discussion of situational identity as well as in narratives in the discourse regarding a dynamization of culture with remote work having alleviated some of the experienced pressures of aggression towards time by lessening the amount of episodes of action related to work required in a day. Perhaps for the first time on a grand scale there is an attempt to remove time from the equation of work and moving forward this ought to be the best form of contemporary work as, with SA's slippery slope phenomenon in mind, acceleration of social change will continue to increase, and the stresses and alienation that come with it, too. Covid-19 does seem to have accelerated the social change in work norms toward spatio-temporal unboundedness where many workers can now taste a different structure of work. From Bauman's (in Rosa, 2015) view, the Covid-19 instigated emancipation from spatio-temporal structures which is emblematic of liquid modernity made for a normalization of more nomadic lifestyles. Although "digital nomadism" was largely possible before Covid-19, the pandemic seems to have made visible and normalized new human relations to time and space, making the spatio-temporal unboundedness of remote work no longer an anomaly.

In summary, bringing our answers to RQ1 and RQ2 together, it has become clear by now that work norms appear to be shifting according to Rosa's (2015) predictions of late modern society, and that Spotify's practices appear to follow an internal understanding of

such a society and of contemporary work norms. Building on these understandings and considering the fact that Spotify is considered to be a highly attractive employer brand, we see a congruence here. Bringing our arguments together, we posit that *a fruitful definition of a successful employer brand is one that embraces and internalizes a deep understanding of contemporary society through the late modern view of work as a social institution that is dissolving, and an employer brand that adapts accordingly and manages to build strong employer-employee relationships based on that premise.* In the final analysis of this study, we will go on to discuss the implications of this more holistic understanding of employer branding on traditional and established employer branding concepts in a post-pandemic, contemporary society.

5.3 Implications for employer branding

Combining the above discussions, it is becoming clear that a successful contemporary employer brand is one built on a deeper understanding of contemporary society and the current work norms. Considering RQ3, we will go on to discuss possible implications of our findings on contemporary employer branding.

5.3.1 The fragmented self – extending the employer branding identity concept

In the initial sections of this study, we established that employer branding has been conceptualized by Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) as “the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors”, adopting the traditional social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982) as one of the pillars within employer branding theory and practice, focusing on managing and marketing a strong and clearly defined organizational identity. The reason for doing so is the idea in social identity theory that in order for employees to strongly connect with their place of work there needs to be alignment between organizational identity and personal identity which in turn will lead to long-form retention of employee talent and “the right set of employees”. Building on Rosa’s (2015) idea of the late modern human’s identity shaping process as increasingly situational, we see possible challenges in the traditional conceptualization of identity in employer branding. We posit that the late modern human has less of a need for strong, stable identity markers, instead forming a richer tapestry of situational identity markers that change over time. Thus, we suggest that there is a clear need

to evolve the employer branding concept of social identity to encompass an understanding of situational identity and to embrace and internalize the idea of society as constantly in change. We believe that there is a need for employer branding to understand and allow for fragmented identities and parallel narratives where employees can have paradoxical relationships to work and organizations. Going forward, we believe there is a need for management to internalize an understanding of the role of identity in late modernity as situational. Paradoxically, such an identity leaves adaptability as the only fruitful constant identity marker in contemporary society. In doing so, we suggest that organizations could apply a more resonant approach to organizational identity that is non-aggressive towards individuality.

5.3.2 The hybrid office – redefining the function of the physical space

Furthering the discussion of culture and the decentralization of the social institution of work, we will continue to discuss the hybrid office and what the role of the office and of physical proximity will mean for work in the future. As predicted by Rosa and suggested by our discourse analysis, the institution of work in late modern society is liquifying and with it the role of the office seems to be shifting in function. From our discourse analysis we found that the norms related to work seem to be moving towards promoting hybrid-work and remote work as the new normal. As such, in order to adapt, we posit that the view of the function of the office needs to evolve. For the majority of work-tasks, the office will no longer play an essential role; the Covid-19 pandemic showed that in most cases, efficiency was just as likely in remote work settings as from the office. What was discussed as a challenge, however, was in spontaneous socializing and in allowing for organic culture growth and practice. This calls for mental deconstructions and reconceptualizations of what it means to be at the office. Moving forward, we suggest that the office should be viewed as a fluid, organic space between employees who can sporadically move in-between virtual and physical practices, and that are free to take part in social activities and collaborate in a way and on a temporal basis that makes sense to them. People have different needs and wants and it makes less sense to view organizations as a collective group that wants the same things rather than individuals with their own preferences. The take-away from our discussion of the spatial dissolution of work for employer branding activities and organizational leaders is that employees will require a higher degree of freedom. As such, the idea of managing the in- and outflux of workers at the office will likely need to be revisited, requiring managers not to expect

workers to be able to “plan” and “report” their socializing as this will diminish the organic, spontaneous nature and interconnectivity of physical spaces that seems to be the key focus for employees in contemporary society.

5.3.3 The empowered worker – redefining the EVP

One of the tenets of the contemporary work landscape that we found through SA theory and our discourse analysis is that of the increasing flow towards employee empowerment following the dissolution of the centrally managed and physically stable organization. As work in remote settings and the absence of a supervisor inherently requires the employee to practice self-management, the Covid-19 pandemic allowed employees to experience increasing agency and freedom, resulting in an increase in employee control that employees seem reluctant to give up. Thus, we see that traditional forms of direct supervision and control-oriented management in the contemporary labour landscape are pushed towards obsolescence, and management practices appear to need to adopt increasingly trust-driven forms of leadership.

We suggest that the implications of this on employer branding can be understood through the concept of the EVP. We have established that the idea of the EVP is a fundamental pillar of traditional employer branding and is based on defined notions of what the focal organization is and should be, based on negotiation between the organization and its employees (Pawar & Charak, 2014; Backhus & Tikoo). In traditional employer branding the EVP seems to strongly take an organizational perspective whereas the increasing shift towards employee empowerment would have implications regarding from whose perspective the EVP is built. In increasingly flexible organizations where employees have more agency and increasing demands on organizations, we propose a need for revisiting the rationale of the EVP. Going forward, the EVP needs to be more employee focused, accepting the fact that employees may not just want different things from organizations, but that in a post-pandemic landscape their increased freedom and empowerment will likely have them demanding these wants to be fulfilled. What could previously be considered a fair “trade-off” may now appear unacceptable to workers as the pandemic made visible the possibilities and unexpected benefits of remote work. We propose that employer branding needs to accept that future EVP-centered employer branding activities should not be designed around single, static “trade-offs”, packaged and signalled in a universal message. Instead, the contemporary work

landscape calls for more dynamic as well as employee-centered EVPs with the inherent possibility of changing over time and of adapting to different people, even within the same organization. In short, we posit that whether an organization is symbolically distinguishable from others becomes less important in remote landscapes; what is more important is whether the organization adapts to the normative shift in the view of work or not, that is, whether the EVP meets the expectations of employees in functional aspects of work related to freedom, time management and opportunities for individual work-life balance.

5.3.4 Leaving time behind – moving towards asynchronization of work

The final main tenet of the contemporary work landscape is that of an increasing asynchronization of work. As we have determined in our analysis, the dissolution of the institution of work is continuously accelerating, and with that the stresses of time-management and a sense of alienation. In order to cope with acceleration and alienation, we see a need for managers to initiate and adopt practices that allow for more resonant, *asynchronous* forms of work. In a concrete sense, this could mean moving towards redefining the meaning of productivity; in a virtual work landscape allowing for endless interconnectivity, time becomes an enemy rather than a tool; time loses its instrumental value both for employers and employees in contemporary virtual work landscapes. When work is virtual, time is less of a guarantee for productivity, instead becoming a hindrance for creativity and a source for anxiety and stress. As such, in a contemporary labour landscape, we see a need for measuring productivity in metrics other than time, with output being the key. While this may not have direct implications on employer branding practices at first glance, it will likely define the future of work and as such it is one aspect of the contemporary discourse related to work that professionals and strategists will need to keep tabs on in order not to be caught unawares. Building on Eberhard's et al. (2017) discussion of the macro-level undercurrents defining the labour market, we thus suggest the possibility that the decline in time as a measurement of productivity is an emerging mega trend which employer branding will need to adapt to and market. Whatever shape it will take, asynchronization of work will likely come to change the premise of how employer-employee relationships are built, affecting the role of employer branding in helping define the dynamics of that relationship.

6. Discussions and conclusions

In this section, we present our final discussions and conclusions, our main contribution to the current state of research as well as a discussion of potential issues arising from new norms related to work. We also provide our suggestions for future research.

6.1 Employer branding – from ‘best practice’ to analytical mindset

The purpose of this study has been to through social acceleration theory (Rosa, 2015) seek understanding of current norms of work in light of the shift to remote work spurred by the Covid-19 pandemic, and from there discuss the implications on contemporary employer branding to unlock a more holistic approach to employer branding. Through the use of discourse analysis of texts, discussing how the future of work is portrayed in the business press as well as in Spotify’s employer branding activities, we have provided an example of how analyzing changes in norms of work apparent in discussions and conversations in society can be beneficial for identifying issues of strategic importance relevant to the success of organizations *as employers*. Through this approach we have identified four areas of normative changes in the labour landscape relevant to contemporary employer branding with the potential to evolve traditional conceptualizations: (1) *extending the identity concept*, (2) *redefining the function of physical space* (offices), (3) *redefining the EVP* and (4) *moving towards asynchronization of work*.

While these four areas of normative change are of significance for employer branding, we believe that these concepts per se are not our most important discovery. Rather, our most vital discovery for employer branding is the approach that allowed us to unlock these areas. This approach has showcased the need for evolution of the rationale of employer branding beyond the managing of an employer brand, evolving employer branding towards being used as an analytical framework for understanding social tendencies of strategic significance to the success of an organization as an employer. In adopting this mindset, we identified a potential discrepancy between the current discourse related to expectations on work and the view of work built into traditional conceptualizations of employer branding. Additionally, through applying a cross-disciplinary approach to employer branding, this study has showcased that where sociology allows for the diagnosis of social trends and the current state of society,

strategic communication thinking allows for the connection between society and organizational practices. It is not the one nor the other that gives us insight into how to conduct contemporary practices of employer branding, but the combination of the two.

Even without the perspective of Rosa, it is becoming clear that we live in a society moving towards a more fluid and interconnected state. Across disciplines, scholars agree on an ongoing structural shift in the labour landscape: observations of a fourth industrial revolution where the line between virtual and ‘real’ worlds is blurred (Eberhard et al., 2017), an emerging gig economy promising less stability (Herrera et al., 2020; Eberhard et al., 2017; De Ruyter & Brown, 2019) and a continuing ‘death of the organization man’ describing workers as separating the “self” from their place of work (Ahuja et al. 2020). In light of these apparent changes and emerging macro-trends in the labour market, where ‘virtual’ is gradually becoming the new normal, important questions arise: what truths will remain valid? Going forward, what organizational practices will become obsolete?

With increasing over-turn and obsolescence of organizational practices, seen from the late modern view of organizational reality, we see that critique towards ‘best practice’ (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016) yet again deserves attention. As Koselleck wrote (in Rosa, 2015, p. 76): “what is still valid within one geographical or social realm has already lost its validity in another”. In this work, we have shown how Spotify can serve as a prominent example of successful contemporary employer branding for illuminating how the core of a successful contemporary employer brand is one that resonates with its times. However, the aim of this study has not been to through Spotify update the employer branding “best practice”. Instead, this study has elucidated how the application of strategic communications thinking can yield benefits beyond practical guidelines in helping organizations achieve their goals through applying employer branding *as a mindset* to tune into society and identify what could possibly be affecting and defining the landscape in which the organization and its extended stakeholders operate. Considering the accelerating obsolescence and dissolution of institutionalized truths in late modernity and the accompanying erosion of stability, we see a decline in the value of ‘best practice’ that in our belief also means that the acquisition and formation of knowledge needs to evolve with the times as well. As such, we believe this study has served as an example of how different disciplines might stand to benefit from increased cross-disciplinary collaboration. From this view, a more conceptual research approach showcasing *ways of thinking* rather than ways of practicing might in late modern

society make more strategic sense.

Having discussed what entails successful contemporary employer branding, we feel the need however to highlight possible emerging risks with the new work norms apparent in the shift towards virtual work that this study has underlined. Should we understand this emerging, cutting-edge view of work, and its inclination towards time-space ownership and self-management as employee empowerment and as an opportunity for employees to regain and recreate their personal work-life balance, or is it a new possible form of managerial, neo-normative control in the guise of employee autonomy? As the French proverb runs: “*Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*”¹. When push comes to shove, we cannot yet know whether the now dissolved boundaries of time and space in relation to work are ultimately more beneficial to the employee or to the employer. Thus, it seems necessary to scrutinize what lies in the core of what actually distinguishes emerging late modern work practices from previous traditional, time-managed modes of work. What does it mean for work-life balance in late modern societies when the last boundaries of time and space in relation to work are being eradicated, with little likelihood of returning? Building on Herrera’s et al. (2020) discussion of the precarities of the emerging work landscape, we perceive a risk in the seemingly ground-breaking employee freedom and flexibility of gig-economies and virtual work practices, with the danger of this becoming a managerial gold-mine for legitimizing exploitation of employees’ newfound free time, demanding new dimensions of accessibility and productivity. Bauman (in Rosa, 2015, p. 219) predicted the spatio-temporal unboundedness of nomadism in late modernity as a form of emancipation; however, with employees being increasingly encouraged to set their own schedules, will they begin to blame themselves if over-working, failing to account for normative pressure on output that could previously be blamed on the organization? With the above potential tensions in mind, we see a risk that the emerging approach to work, and as such to employer branding, would become just another ‘best practice’ for gaining competitive advantage, lacking consideration for whether self-management is in fact valuable *to the employee*. This, we mean, would result in a loss of insight regarding the complex dynamics of the current labour landscape that this study has illuminated.

Given the tendencies apparent in the current state of society, however, we think our study has offered a valuable perspective on how current work norms unfold; we have

¹ “*The more things change, the more they stay the same*”. (transl.)

illustrated in what ways Rosa offers an understanding of the evolving paradigm that we believe unlocks a more sophisticated approach to employer branding given the current state of society. Ultimately, we believe the main take-away from our study to be this: Employer branding would stand to benefit from being viewed and applied as the conscious attempt to make sophisticated examinations and predictions about the undercurrents of society as they flow into expected and unexpected areas of social life, useful in order to navigate a course of action through the labour landscape in which the focal organization operates as an employer. Through such an approach, organizations could increase their chances of adopting practices tailored to them, permitting them to resonate with the times through temporally integrated practices that allow for the accommodation of both employees and employers and which in turn would allow for a strong position as employers on the labour market. To adopt resonant practices is not, we suggest, to *follow any specified tactic* but rather to opt for an approach that permits organizations to unpretentiously meet contemporary society and to permit that meeting with society to affect the organization organically. In a world where the only certainty is change, where all that was previously solid no longer is, employer branding as a strategic analytical framework makes for a powerful mindset.

6.2 Suggestions for future research

Where this study has applied Rosa's framework to acquire an understanding of society, we acknowledge SA as *one possible way* of understanding contemporary society, and undoubtedly not the only fruitful perspective. To further develop the field of employer branding, we encourage future researchers to combine the discussions from this study with more rigorous empirical research; our adoption of Rosa's framework and ontology has made it necessary for us to navigate empirical and conceptual research precariously, resulting in our study and analyses being more theoretically inclined. As such, more empirically inclined research examining possible implications of virtual work on employer branding practices would prove valuable for diversifying the field. Additionally, as discourse changes perpetually, a discourse analysis can only yield a snapshot of the current state of society. Thus, we encourage future studies to map out and conduct repeated discourse analyses, making comparisons of post-Covid-19 normative changes of work over time. Furthermore, given the delimitations and scope of this study being focused on innovation and knowledge workers and organizations with the possibility of implementing remote work as standard, it

would be critical to in future studies determine if our findings could be applicable to other areas of the labour market, such as to the production-, medical-, and service sectors.

Undoubtedly, the phenomena that this study has highlighted would benefit from being further discussed and researched in later stages of social development in regards to Covid-19.

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8. Appendix

8.1 Appendix 1: Empirical material (in-text reference number with APA reference)

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8.2 Appendix 2: Keywords used in the search for articles

labour, nature of labour, labour trends, work trends, employment, work-life balance, work productivity, virtual work, remote work, organizational culture, virtual culture, remote culture, corporate identity, work identity, Spotify remote work, Spotify virtual, Spotify employer branding, Spotify employer brand, virtual employer branding, remote employer branding, gig work, gig economy, digital nomadism, digital nomads, human capital, digital human capital