Let's get certified ?

A qualitative case study on an organizational culture certification and employer branding

By

Freja Fabricius Ekenberg & Jourike Nonkes

Abstract

Title:	Let's get certified ? - A qualitative case study on an organizational culture certification and employer branding
Authors:	Freja Fabricius Ekenberg & Jourike Nonkes
Supervisor:	Roland Paulsen, Lund University, Sweden
Course:	BUSN49, Degree Project in Master's Programme Managing People, Knowledge and Change, Business Administration, 15 ECTS
Submission date:	May 19, 2023
Purpose:	The purpose of this study is to examine the meaning of an organizational culture certification. We are intending to create a deeper insight into the certification process, its outcomes and benefits in order to get an understanding of how the concept can be interpreted in a scientific manner. We further aim to challenge the current perspective of organizational culture certifications as a means of employer branding. In exploring its relation to employer branding, we are specifically interested in determining whether an organizational culture certification can be used as a tool for 'culture washing'.
Methodology:	This research is a study of qualitative character that followed an interpretative and abductive research approach. The empirical data consists of a document study and twelve semi-structured interviews with employees and clients of the case organization.
Theoretical perspective:	Although there is limited research available specifically regarding the meaning of an organizational culture certification, the study relies on the theory of organizational culture and employer branding, with a particular emphasis on Backhaus and Tikoo's (2004) branding process. Additionally, the literature on other organizational certifications, such as environmental certifications, is utilized.
Contribution:	Our study's results go in a different direction than previous literature on organizational culture certification and its functionality as a means of employer branding. We thus contribute to the research field of branding organizational culture by adding a new dimension that allows for employer branding efforts to be viewed as a means of '*culture washing*'.
Keywords:	organizational culture, organizational culture certification, surveys, employer branding, culture washing, organizational ranking.

Acknowledgements

Table of content

List of Figures

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

We try to set employer branding and specifically culture on the agenda - Louis, Excellence employee (interview, 21 March 2021).

There is no mention of organizational culture work without also touching upon employer branding; however what happens when one begins to overshadow the other?

Jain and Bhatt (2015) state that the increase of globalization and liberalization has steadily raised job market competition and further intensified the search for employees. For this reason, they claim that attracting and retaining employees has become increasingly important to secure organizational growth and gain competitive advantages. According to literature (Turban & Cable, 2003) a positive organizational reputation will make organizations more attractive for future and existing employees in the market. Organizational reputation is the set of organizational characteristics that are socially constructed and based on organizations' previous actions (Weigelt & Camerer, 1988). According to Highhouse, Lievens and Sinar (2003) organizations must thus find a way to differentiate themselves from their competitors to be seen as attractive employers for potential candidates. Due to employee well-being gaining a growing interest, the number of companies branding and promoting their organizational culture has increased (Gallup, 2022). For this reason, organizations are paying greater attention to creating a positive cultural image in the eyes of prospective employees through employer branding practices, which is why it has become an essential management task (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Employer branding was first studied by Ambler and Barrow (1996) and focuses on developing a positive image for organizations to improve employee attraction and retention. According to Leekha, Chhabra and Sharma (2014), corporate investment in employer branding is a recent and relevant trend for organizations. Beardwell and Thompson (2017) claim that one emerging trend within employer branding is for organizations to be considered an 'employer of choice'. Being an 'employer of choice' is in essence creating a winning environment with values and brand images of which employees can be proud and which can be used to differentiate organizations from their competitors (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017).

For this reason many efforts to stand out from competitors in the search for employees have emerged, such as an organizational culture certification. This certification seeks to make it easier for organizations to recruit employees by promoting to potential candidates that a company is an excellent employer (Sophia, Excellence employee, interview, 4 April 2023). According to a provider of this type of certification, it is a tool to internally and externally express the strengths of an organizational culture by capturing all the nuances of organizational culture through an employee survey (John, Excellence employee, interview, 20 January 2023). However, Taylor (2014, p. 183 cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2017) points out that efforts of employer branding inevitably fail when they are untruthful and for this reason expresses that the concept ought to be applied cautiously. Other research has pointed out that various types of certifications have been heavily criticized for deceiving consumers by creating false impressions for their own financial gain and holders of those certifications were rather accused of 'washing', which refers to branding claims that hold little connection to reality (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009; Blackmer, 2019; Vredenburg, Kapitan, Spry & Kemper, 2020). For example, a company is associated with 'greenwashing' when it brands its products and services as if it is not harming the environment, while in reality the organization's practices are doing the opposite (Alonso-Calero, Cano & Guerrero-Pérez, 2021). Thus when assessing organizational culture through an employee survey, the branding thereof needs to be approached carefully and ethically (Frandsen, 2017).

As earlier described, an organization's reputation is a central part of its competitive advantage, which consists of both attracting and retaining employees (Turban & Cable, 2003). Although organizational culture and employer branding have been heavily researched, the established and prevalent literature has limited focus on the specific branding tool, organizational culture certification. Today, as a result of organizational culture certifications, organizations can use their employees' feedback on organizational culture as a form of employer branding (Louis, Excellence employee, interview, 21 March 2023). Therefore, an organizational culture certification cannot be ignored, since it may have a substantial effect on a company's reputation. In other words, the external image of an organization appears to be affected through the use of the certification by spreading an organization's internal characteristics more directly to a larger audience. In addition, an organizational culture certification might not only impact an organization's external image, it could also affect the overall organizational performance when labeled as employer of choice among competitors (Beardwell & Thompson, 2017). Thus, considering that the promotion of organizational culture plays a vital role in employer branding

practices, which can potentially also be accused of 'washing', we need to advance our knowledge in the field of organizational research on modern communication tools that can influence the external image of an organization. Particularly while the phenomenon of 'culture washing' has emerged on popular platforms, which refers to organizations that falsely promote a healthy organizational culture whereas in reality the opposite is true (Fortier, 2019; Fataar, 2022; Schmidt, n.d.). For this reason, the concept of organizational culture certification invites more in-depth exploration. This research project will therefore make an effort to understand and question the meaning of such a certification and how it relates to employer branding.

1.2 Purpose and research questions

Previous studies have explored the relationship between organizational culture certifications and organizational performance or employer branding (Guiso, Sapienza & Zingales, 2015; Garrett, Hoitash & Prawitt, 2014; Gartenberg, Prat & Serafeim, 2019; Dabirian, Kietzmann & Diba, 2017). However, literature has not kept pace with the rapidly changing modern society and the increased shortage of labor. Therefore, we believe it to be important to revisit and reexamine the theoretical concept of organizational culture certifications.

Literature lacks information about the functionality of organizational culture certifications. This is of particular interest as other types of certifications have been scrutinized for being misleading. By exploring how organizational culture is measured, we want to shed more light on the meaning of an organizational culture certification, in addition to understanding how an organizational culture certification makes an effort to capture all the complexities of organizational culture.

The scarcity of research on organizational culture certifications results in a narrow knowledge base. Therefore, it appears relevant to conduct a study that focuses on the interrelation between an organizational culture certification and employer branding. As previously stated, the current literature on organizational culture certifications as a means of employer branding is pre-existing. However we find it necessary to create a deeper understanding of an organizational culture certification in relation to employer branding, in order to explore the emerging concept of 'culture washing', while over the past decades many types of 'washing' have come to existence as a result of organizations branding themselves under false pretenses (Alonso-

Calero, Cano & Guerrero-Pérez, 2021; Blackmer, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). For this reason we aim to contribute to academic literature by adding a new dimension that allows for employer branding efforts to be viewed as a means of 'culture washing'.

To develop this understanding we propose the following research questions:

- *What is the meaning of an organizational culture certification?*

- *How does an organizational culture certification relate to employer branding?*

When researching the meaning of organizational culture certification we are intending to create a deeper insight into the certification process, its outcomes and benefits in order to get an understanding of how the concept can be interpreted in a scientific manner. So we are aiming to grasp its technical significance, particularly as a means of employer branding. In exploring its relation to employer branding, we are specifically interested in determining whether an organizational culture certification can equally be used as a tool for 'washing', as other certifications have been accused of these practices. Through analyzing the development and implication process of the certification we are curious to explore indications of deception that can lead to culture washing. Overall, we are anticipating that these questions will provide us with a more in depth understanding of these concepts.

1.3 Research outline

In this section we present the structure of our thesis by describing the outline of all chapters. After the introductory chapter, we continue to chapter 2 which entails a literature review of the theoretical concepts that are considered relevant for our study. In chapter 3 we go over the methodology of our study including our philosophical grounding and how we approach the data collection and analysis. We conclude the chapter by reflecting on the importance of reflexivity and ethical principles in our study. Chapter 4 illustrates our empirical findings as we present the process of becoming certified, the benefits of a certification and how the certification contributes to employer branding. In chapter 5 we move on to the discussion where we interpret the empirical findings from chapter 4 and bridge them to theoretical concepts. Moreover, we expand existing literature on employer branding by adding the dimension of

'culture washing'. Finally, in chapter 6 we conclude our main findings and theoretical contributions. We also reflect on the limitations of our research and discuss future research possibilities and we end by discussing the practical implications of our study.

2. Literature review

In the literature review relevant literature will be used to analyze the case study. The aim of this chapter is to understand the key concepts and how these are related. Firstly, an introduction is given to facilitate understanding of organizational culture, followed by a discussion of the extent to which this concept can be quantified. Then an analysis of the existing conceptualizations of employer branding illustrates the theoretical understanding of the concept. Finally organizational certifications are explained in addition to how in particular the organizational culture certification is linked to employer branding and the new emerging term culture washing.

2.1 Organizational culture

The objective of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of a certification related to organizational culture. In pursuit of this goal, this chapter begins by examining past literature on organizational culture. The aim is to establish a clear understanding of the specific aspects of organizations that are subject to the certification. In the study field of management and business, organizational culture is a major area of interest, likewise in practice (Alvesson, 2002). Palmer, Dunford and Akin (2017, p. 150) define organizational culture as "shared values, beliefs and norms that influence the way employees think, feel and act towards others". Particularly top management plays a great role in trying to manage these thoughts, feelings and actions, however Alvesson (2002) stresses that in fact all management and organizational activities take place within culture. This emphasizes why the concept is hard to grasp in one definition, while on the contrary there is a tendency to oversimplify it in the process of understanding (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Schein, 2010). According to Schein (2009, p. 21) organizational culture tends to be referred to as "the way we do things around here", "the rites and rituals of our company", "the reward system", "our basic values". He however sees these views rather as a result of culture instead of defining what the meaning of the concept on different levels is. Schein (2010) claims that organizational culture has multiple layers, while it consists of detectable aspects and tacit and implicit aspects, once again showing the concept's complexity.

According to Cunliffe (2008) organizational culture is of high importance because it creates the framework for direction of the organization, offers an opportunity to increase organizational

effectiveness, influences the general perception of a company and contributes to employee attraction and engagement. Additionally, the research of Purwadi, Darma, Febrianti and Mirwansyah (2020) establishes that organizational culture has a positive and significant effect on job satisfaction and performance. On the contrary, when the relevance of an organizational culture is not acknowledged and taken care of, the effects could be catastrophic, such as loss of people, integrity or profits and damage of public image or economic value (Cunliffe, 2008). Resulting in organizational culture frequently being presented as an essential element for the overall performance of an organization, along with organizational leaders regularly giving credit to their culture for company achievements like accelerating expansion (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017). According to Puffer (1999, p. 34 cited in Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson) "companies win or lose based on the cultures they create". However, other literature points out that in order to achieve excellent organizational performance there are a number of varied qualities required and these can possibly not be demonstrated in merely one type of culture but rather need constant upgrading (Kaupa, 2023). For this reason, Schein (2009) claims that a distinction cannot be made between a "right" or "wrong" culture nor can a culture be ranked as better or worse. An organizational culture can only be evaluated on how the company is operating in its environment. He states that in certain business sectors employee engagement and job satisfaction are shown to be extremely beneficial in order to obtain organizational success, while other fields of business gain success by operating in controlled environments with steady practices and authoritarian management. Nonetheless, organizational cultures are often examined and critiqued because of or in spite of the performance of a company, resulting in organizational culture being a major factor that shapes the image of an organization, not merely its image as a provider or producer of services or products, but also its image as an employer (Szymanska, Zarządzania & Wroclawiu, 2014).

2.1.1 Survey studies

While organizational culture has an influence on how a company is perceived, it has become a common practice to measure organizational culture quantitatively in order to improve it, however its applicability is rarely questioned (Einola & Alvesson, 2021). As our research is specifically focused on an organizational culture certification that is obtained through an employee survey, it appears pertinent to explore this approach in greater detail, particularly since the study field of organizational culture is a major area of interest in which different efforts are made to measure and objectify it (Einola & Alvesson, 2021). According to literature

(Einola & Alvesson, 2021), it is considered a common practice in much research that questionnaires are applicable and reliable for the mere reason that others have used them in the past or because the research has been published in highly ranked journals. However, these studies also argue that many of the published research that use this measurement tool have significant flaws, and often poorly reflect the real-life phenomenon. Einola and Alvesson (2021) add to this by claiming that survey research fails to capture the interpretive, ambiguous, and contextual dimensions of the phenomena it aims to study and it should therefore be supplemented with a qualitative component. As Porter (1995) suggests, while numbers and data are often considered to tell the truth, these are rather overconfident assumptions. For this reason, when conducting quantitative research, there needs to be more sensitivity to the context of the phenomenon and it is a necessity to acknowledge that there are strong limitations to the quantification of ambiguous phenomena such as culture (Einola & Alvesson, 2021).

Schein (2010) argues, as previously mentioned, that many aspects of organizational culture are not explicit, therefore organizational members cannot easily translate their culture into writing. Alvesson and Sveningsson (2016) equally acknowledge that an organizational culture is hard to grasp and for this reason does not lend itself to measurement. Schein (2010) debates that an assessment of culture is invaluable without having a purpose of detecting an organizational problem. However, according to research of Hofstede, Neuijen, Ohayv and Sanders (1990) a quantitative approach makes interpretative phenomena, like organizational culture at least somewhat more usable. In their research they acknowledge that organizational cultures have complex structures, but likewise recognize that we live in a world of bottom-line figures, so a quantitative measurement of culture offers organizations a way to transform the structures into an asset. For this reason, they conclude that measuring culture quantitatively can be seen as an opportunity that allows comparisons to be made with other organizations and track culture change over time, which consequently can help top management with decisions about the next course of action. Moreover, Marsick and Watkins (2003) argue that while quantitative measurements sometimes imply that improvements will follow if an organization adopts recommended practices, there are many other factors that affect the successful adaptation of practices. They view the quantitative measurements as a diagnostic tool that should be considered carefully when making changes for improvements.

Nevertheless literature (Islam, 2013) suggests that in reducing organizational members to a quantitative study they become a set of human resources that can be exchanged in return for other organizational benefits. It is thus important for organizations to consider the ethical

implications of people management as they try to meet organizational objectives through the development of "human capital" within organizations (Islam, 2013).

In addition Galasinski and Kozlowska (2010) argue that questionnaire research makes the assumption that respondents of surveys have sharp opinions, are aware of their feelings and are then able to formulate these in the options that are presented in the questionnaire, while simultaneously assuming that the tool has the ability to accurately capture those opinions and feelings in all their complexity, which in reality may not be the case. Thus organizations need to carefully think through how they move from the questionnaire data to making knowledge claims. Despite organizational efforts to make sense of data, according to Robbins (2002, p. 213 cited in Einola & Alvesson, 2021), rather than offering insight into what the respondents actually think or feel, quantitative data is at worst an "unknown mixture of politeness, boredom, and a desire to be seen in a good light".

2.2 Employer branding

While it remains arguable whether survey studies are a useful tool for measuring organizational culture work, many organizations make an effort to create a positive image by applying employer branding (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Since our research aims to enhance comprehension of certifications that are supposedly utilized for branding purposes, it appears essential to investigate this concept in greater depth. Therefore, to provide a deeper understanding of employer branding, we first shortly delve into the concept of branding itself, before focusing on the specific form of employer branding. According to the American Marketing Association (2003 cited in Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004) a brand can be defined as "a name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competitors". Multiple research states that the creation of a corporate brand is a challenging and complicated process while it is a powerful method to create a symbolic representation of the company which in return allows management the opportunity to control the meanings that internal and external parties associate with it (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Frandsen, 2017). Whereas a corporate brand is used to differentiate the company's goods and services from its competitors, according to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) an employer brand specifically focuses on how distinction can be made between various employers. They state that the two main differences between an organization's corporate brand and employer brand is firstly that the

employer brand is directed at both internal and external parties, whereas corporate branding practices are mainly focused on an external audience. Secondly, the employer brand specifically characterizes the company's identity as an employer. Hence, the concept of employer branding represents an organization's efforts to promote, both within and outside the organization, a clear view of what makes the organization a desirable employer while aiming to connect people through shared values and creating an inclusive environment (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2013).

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) argue that employer branding can be considered a process that consists of three steps. Initially a "value proposition" for prospective and current employees is formulated by an organization. The proposition is considered the key theme that is expressed in employer branding practices. It ought to be a true representation of the company's characteristics, such as the organizational culture, management approach and employee viewpoint. Next, the value proposition, that was developed in the first step, is used for marketing purposes in order to attract potential employees, either directly or through recruitment agencies. In the third and final step of the process, an organization makes an effort to "walk the talk" by applying the promises that it made to job applicants and incorporates these into the organizational culture. Following these steps accordingly can result in a competitive advantage for an organization, granting that the employer brand is in line with the overall corporate brand and other branding efforts (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Yet, Dabirian, Kietzmann and Diba (2017) argue that healthy work environments do not emerge from mere expression of concern about employees and offering resources, but are rather a product of taking intentional and well calculated steps directed at the goal of attracting, engaging and retaining employees. In addition, Taylor (2014, p. 183 cited in Beardwell & Thompson, 2017) points out that efforts of employer branding inevitably fail when they are untruthful and for this reason expresses that the concept ought to be applied carefully. Similarly, Frandsen (2017) argues that organizational efforts of branding have the tendency to rather develop into a route of what an organization wants to become than an accurate representation of what an organization is genuinely like. As a response organizations were founded that provide independent assessments which evaluate companies' current organizational culture or other aspects. The results of such an independent assessment can in return be used as a branding tool, while retaining its integrity. An example of such an assessment and branding tool is an organizational certification. One of which that is specifically used for employer branding

purposes is the organizational culture certification. This concept will be further discussed in the next section.

2.3 Organizational certifications

In academic literature organizational culture certifications are not commonly discussed, which is why this study aims to shed light on the concept and improve the understanding of it. For the purpose of this research, in this chapter we will therefore investigate the broader notion of organizational certifications, since examining their use and outcomes appears essential to comprehend how the concept can be approached from a scientific perspective. One of the providers of an organizational culture certification describes it as a tool to internally and externally express the strengths of organizational cultures. According to this institution, having an organizational culture certification can result in higher company profits, more applicants for available positions, lower staff turnover, more employee engagement and productivity. This institution states on its website that in order to obtain an organizational culture certification, employees are required to fill out surveys, after which the results will be translated into an overall score that ranks the quality of the organizational culture. There is a growing number of organizations that provide culture certifications for the purpose of branding and promoting companies' cultural strengths due to employee well-being gaining a growing interest, while according to the State of the Global Workplace Report by Gallup (2022) the year 2020 marked a record high number of global employees reporting stress, and this statistic increased even further the next year. The report states that the stress experienced by workers inevitably affects the organizational culture. Despite this and while measuring organizational culture has been argued (Schein, 2010; Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016) limited research can be found on how organizational culture is measured by providers of certifications nor what the meaning of these certifications are.

However, an organizational certification which is thoroughly discussed by academics, is the so-called green-certification in relation to corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Hauser, Ebert & Eßer, 2011). For this reason, in our research project information will be drawn from literature in the study field of CSR regarding organizational certifications as a form of branding. Hauser, Ebert and Eßer (2011) refer to CSR certifications as a description of requirements that represent the objective of sustainable practices in a comprehensive manner and can be obtained through the assessment of the entire product cycle such as measurement of energy use and emissions.

According to them the aim of certifications is to make organizational efforts to act sustainably visible and transparent for investors and customers. Similarly, Flagstad, Hauge and Johnsen (2022) state that an environmental certification communicates a company's effort to produce in a sustainable manner. According to them, internationally the number of certified organizations grew steadily in response to a growing interest in sustainability. However, their research also claims that skepticism exists about these certifications while they can be obtained effortlessly. Therefore, doubt exists about the sincerity of green-certifications while a number of organizations, which carry certifications promoting the company's efforts to act sustainably, are rather greenwashing (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009). A company is associated with the concept of greenwashing when it brands its products and services as if they are not harming the environment, while in reality the organization's practices are doing the opposite (Alonso-Calero, Cano & Guerrero-Pérez, 2021). As a result, green-certifications have been under much scrutiny as they reduce the complexity of CSR practices, making them misleading to consumers (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009; Alonso-Calero, Cano & Guerrero-Pérez, 2021). This is a common trap of branding tools, while they create "a seductive fantasy of order and control of messages", when in reality many organizational concepts are obscure and cannot easily be condensed (Frandsen, 2017). Nonetheless, organizations have used the same approach to create various certifications to prove a certain level of organizational care for environmental, societal or economic issues, among which the organizational culture certification.

Although employees are considered a resource with value, when organizations are commonly stating that their staff is their most important asset it is often met with derisive laughter, as it rings hollow and lacks credibility (Thompson, 2011). On the other hand, organizational culture certifications are considered more credible as they are authorized by an external party, while equally offering companies the opportunity to promote their efforts of providing resources to employees which enable them to grow, learn and develop skills, along with offering time and space to focus on one's well-being (Saks, 2022; Houghton, J. D., Pearce, C. L., Manz, C. C., Courtright, S., & Stewart, G. L., 2015). Nonetheless, multiple research (Cushen, 2009; Müller, 2017) has argued that companies solely promote and express personal interest in their employees as a practice of normative control, resulting in organizational care becoming an element of employer branding that misleads (potential) staff instead of sincere effort to increase employee satisfaction. The research of Bertilsson and Rennstam (2018) also claims that branding has destructive sides, as they argue that in branding practices complexity is reduced in a matter that diminishes certain aspects of an organization while highlighting others.

Resulting in organizational efforts to control the public's focus and shifting it away from questionable practices in order to start or continue with operations that alternatively would be challenging to "get away with". From this can be referred back to the concept of 'washing', while it is those practices that are otherwise challenging to "get away with" that are potentially 'washed' away through branding practices.

2.3.1 Culture washing

Since this study is exploring the relation between an organizational culture certification and employer branding, we are specifically interested in determining whether this certification can equally be used as a tool for 'washing', as other certifications and efforts of branding have been accused of these practices. Over the past decades more types of 'washing' have come to existence as a result of organizations branding themselves under false pretenses (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009; Alonso-Calero, Cano & Guerrero-Pérez, 2021; Blackmer, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). In academic literature greenwashing has been one of the most discussed types of washing, whereas little research has been done about other examples of washing, such as pinkwashing and woke washing (Blackmer, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). The term pinkwashing has been used in relation to different forms of "cause marketing", which means that companies are advertising their support for a certain societal issue or charities, for example the use of the pink ribbon logo to advertise a company's support for breast cancer victims and survivors or using the rainbow flag to show up as an activist for LGBTQ+ rights (Blackmer, 2019). While organizational involvement in societal dilemmas does not necessarily need to be a gloomy act, "cause marketing", also known as brand activism, is becoming a marketing tool for organizations to differentiate themselves from competitors by branding themselves as concerned about and caring for societal issues (Vredenburg et al., 2020). The opposite of authentic brand activism is defined as 'woke washing', according to Vredenburg et al. (2020) this refers to organizations acting and branding themselves as an active participant in tackling societal issues but have undetermined practices that prove their involvement. Their research states that there is an increase of controversial issues being used for branding purposes to redirect the public's attention to organizational efforts of social involvement instead of a company's everyday practices. This shows that the phenomenon of 'washing' often follows after a much discussed issue becomes a topic for branding practices.

A new and interesting emergence within this area is the phenomenon of 'culture washing', which has been discussed on popular platforms and refers to organizations which falsely

promote a vibrant and healthy organizational culture that is unrestricted and offers opportunities to learn and grow, whereas in reality the opposite is true and the culture is rather toxic and controlling (Fortier, 2019; Fataar, 2022; Schmidt, n.d.).

This phenomenon has yet not been discussed in academic literature even though the concept of organizational culture is growing societal concern and is equally reduced to be captured in organizational certifications for branding purposes, despite it being a complex phenomenon (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Schein, 2010; Gallup, 2022). Thus, this thesis sets out to develop a deeper insight into how an organizational culture certification is applied in employer branding practices, along with making an effort to question its implication and how it can be obtained.

2.4 Summary of Theoretical Concepts

At the start of this chapter, we examined the fundamental literature on organizational culture. Despite the many definitions of this concept, in our research organizational culture is understood as the overall work atmosphere created by an organization's values, beliefs, and norms, which exists of implicit and explicit aspects. Consequently, as a subchapter of organizational culture, we analyzed survey studies as a tool to measure organizational culture, while these form the basis of an organizational culture certification. In return such a certification can be used as a means of employer branding, which is defined as organizational efforts to internally and externally create a positive image, for which an organizational certification serves as an instrument. However, literature suggests that in efforts to create such a positive image, organizations often try to mislead individuals by branding themselves under false pretenses, which refers to the concept of washing. Our particular interest lies in exploring culture washing in relation to organizational culture certification, as this involves organizational efforts that falsely promote a healthy organizational culture when in reality the branded claims do not meet the expectations.

Figure 1 *Overview of theoretical concepts*

3. Methodology

In this chapter we first describe the philosophical grounding of our study, after which we move on to the chosen research approach. We then continue with the research context and background of the case company, after which we outline the process of data collection and data analysis. Lastly, we discuss the reflexivity and ethical principles of our thesis.

3.1 Philosophical grounding

The purpose of this study was to examine the meaning of an organizational culture certification and how it relates to employer branding. We considered this study to be subjective as it drew on organizational members' individual understanding of the organizational culture certification. As we sought to understand how organizational members interpreted and made sense of the organizational culture certification, we found the interpretative tradition to be pertinent (Prasad, 2018). According to Prasad (2018), the purpose of interpretivist tradition is to create new, richer understandings and interpretations of social worlds and contexts. In line with the interpretivist tradition, we wanted to gain a deeper understanding of how an organizational culture certification and employer branding were related in their unique context rather than trying to generalize. However, according to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) the disadvantage of interpretivism is that it can be challenging to understand or familiarize with the individual's social context and understand it from their point of view.

This study was influenced by the variant of interpretive scholarship, Symbolic Interactionism (SI). According to Prasad (2018) SI rests on the assumption that all social phenomenons are symbolic, and therefore events and actions will have different meanings for each individual. For this reason we acknowledged that the employees had different ways of making sense of the organizational culture certification. Prasad (2018) also argues that it is of great importance to recognise that people's identities are considered changeable, and that their meanings are multiple and constantly evolving. The meaning of the organizational culture certification accordingly needed to be explored while acknowledging that the individual meanings of the employees might change depending on the social situation, such as the organization, department or organizational level. According to Prasad (2018) SI also uses in-depth interviews intensively where the focus lies on questioning 'how' individuals make sense of specific

situations or phenomenons. Therefore when conducting the interviews, respondents were asked how they perceived the organizational culture certification and how they made sense of it.

Furthermore, the study has been influenced by another variant of interpretivism, Hermeneutics, which according to Prasad (2018) is fundamentally concerned with textual interpretation. The hermeneutic tradition was central in our analysis of the transcriptions from the employee interviews and the document analysis as we aimed to capture an 'authentic' message. The document provided context for the interviews, whereas an examination of the transcribed interviews increased our understanding of its context. Together, they resulted in a broader and more meaningful understanding of the organizational culture certification and how it related to employer branding. As Prasad (2018) states, the process of moving between the text and context is called the hermeneutic circle.

Moreover, according to Habermas (1990) the newer hermeneutic directions, critical hermeneutics, stresses the importance of delayering a text to reveal whose interests it serves and whose it does not, which was central to our data analysis as we sought to uncover deeper or hidden meanings of the organizational culture certification in order to understand how it related to employer branding as a means of culture washing. Finally, Prasad (2018) also acknowledges that hermeneutics depends on the imagination of the researchers, and being two researchers we found that we were able to discuss our individual interpretation with each other and thereby reimagine more or different interpretations.

3.2 Research approach

This study sought to emphasize the social and interpretive dimensions by using qualitative methods to explore the meaning of the organizational culture certification and how the use of organizational culture certification could be related to employer branding. In order to answer the research questions and conduct a nuanced analysis, the research was best supported by qualitative semi-structured interviews. According to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) qualitative research methods provide the tools to investigate the social interactions, processes, and meanings behind a phenomena in its natural environment. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) argue that the advantage of qualitative data collection is that it offers the opportunity to gain knowledge about conditions that are often difficult to quantify and measure with numbers. The purpose of conducting a qualitative research is not to measure 'how much' or 'how many',

but rather to understand processes, meanings and qualities (Ahrne & Svensson 2011), in our case it was focused on how employees understand the intended and perceived meaning of organizational culture certification and how it relates to employer branding.

Moreover, this study was constructed in an abductive manner. The abductive research approach combines induction and deduction, however Alvesson and Sköldberg (2018) argue that abduction also adds an additional element of understanding. As they argue that abduction includes reinterpreting in the light of theory and empirical facts. We believed that an abductive approach was applicable as we already had a basic understanding of relevant theories before collecting our data while not being influenced or restrained by a specific theory. According to Alvesson and Kärreman (2007) this approach includes an interest in problematizing and rethinking dominating ideas and theory, when empirical findings encourage such. They state that this approach emphasizes the dialogic qualities which can produce or inspire alternative interpretations. For our research, we aimed to conduct our qualitative and abductive research through a case study at a consultancy that provides an organizational culture certification. A case study entails a thorough investigation of a phenomenon within its real-life setting (Yin, 1994). However, in order to get a more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of an organizational culture certification, in our research we did not only look at what is happening at the workplace but also the case company's external relations to the certification.

3.3 Research context

To answer our research questions, we gained access to a global consultancy providing an organizational culture certification and their clients, where we collected the empirical data that our analysis is built upon. The pseudonym for the case company is Excellence to ensure anonymity. The pseudonym has no underlying meaning or affiliation with any organizations.

Moreover, to understand the context of the conducted research, some information about the Excellence was necessary. Excellence is a leading global provider of an organizational culture certification. The organizational culture certification provided by Excellence is used to recognize workplaces with an organizational culture characterized by a high degree of employee satisfaction. Excellence certifies workplaces, where both employees and managers find the working culture satisfactory. The process of becoming certified begins with

organizations gaining access to the survey program. The next step for leaders in the organizations that are aiming to be certified entails providing the employees information and FAQ about the certification. This happens 4 weeks prior to conducting the survey. The survey process takes two weeks and is conducted online through a quantitative employee survey. In Scandinavia organizations must score higher than 70 in order to be certified. 2 weeks after the survey the organization will be notified if it is certified or not. Excellence then shares the results and identifies focus areas along with facilitating workshops and current actions. Once an organization scores 70 or higher they receive a certification that states that they are a good, committed and attractive workplace to employees, potential candidates, customers and business partners. Clients can then use the certification on their online or physical branding. Furthermore, the certification also makes the organizations that scored the highest eligible to be featured on global organizational ranking lists. As researchers, we gained access to conduct empirical research via interviews with Excellence's employees and clients. We were able to include Excellence's clients who achieved a certification to get a deeper insight into all aspects of the case consultancy. These client organizations are all private organizations within different lines of industries in order for us to gain a nuanced perspective on the various views organizations take when becoming certified.

3.4 Data collection

To conduct our research, we aimed to collect empirical data with a qualitative research method in order to discover new dimensions about a phenomenon (Bryman, 2012). As collected empirical data is the raw material on which all our findings are based, it is important to disclose the process of obtaining the raw material (Styhre, 2013). The qualitative case study consisted of 12 in-depth semi-structured interviews as the main empirical data and a document study as complementary empirical data.

3.4.1 Interviews with the respondents

In line with the interpretivist tradition and an abductive approach, we decided to conduct semi-structured interviews to understand how employees and clients make sense of the certification and its functionality. Our focus was to explore the issue of organizational culture certification through our respondents' understanding.

3.4.1.1 Sample

Our research process began by contacting several organizations which provide culture certifications. The Marketing Manager of Excellence, was interested and positive about our preliminary research proposal. She therefore scheduled a meeting with us and their CEO to discuss our proposal and ensure that they had the time and resources to participate. Following the brief meeting we did not contact other providers of culture certifications. Our reason for choosing to contact Excellence was because it is an organization whose certification had gained positive attention in the media for their services.

The first step in our preparation for the interviews was to find a sample of relevant interviewees. We sought to achieve this through purposeful sampling which according to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) involves selecting a research sample based on their ability to answer the research questions. However, purposive samples cannot be considered to be statistically representative of the target population and can therefore not be generalized (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019).

In order for our research to be purposeful, we needed to set criteria that would result in a group of interviewees relevant for our study (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019). The following criteria for the internal interviews were: respondents must work with the certification, as we were interested in understanding the meaning of the certification. We were also curious in understanding the background of the organization and development of the certification so we wanted top management and senior consultants represented. Once we had established these criteria, Excellence provided us with a suggestion of possible respondents which we could choose from. For the external interviews following criteria were set: the external respondents had to have or previously had an Excellence's certification as we wanted to explore the certification in practice. Also, we wanted to focus solely on private organizations as public organizations are subject to strict regulation regarding their branding which would make them less relevant for our study regarding employer branding. Lastly, we wanted interviews with clients who have only been certified once or twice and clients who had been certified for many years. The reason for this was that we wanted a more varied perspective on the certification, as current clients might suffer from sunk cost syndrome which is where they overlook negative aspects since an investment in money or time has already been made (Arkes and Blumer, 1985), whereas previous clients could possibly be overly negative regarding the certification. Once

we had established these criteria, Excellence provided us with a suggestive list of possible respondents. We appreciated Excellences suggestions, while being aware of any bias that could affect their selection of candidates. We decided on which respondents to reach out to and book virtual meetings. Through volunteer sampling, where each respondent was able to determine whether to participate in our research or not, we ended up conducting 5 client interviews (Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill, 2019).

3.4.1.2 Semi-structured interviews

Considering the qualitative nature of our study, semi-structured interviews were conducted. According to Kvale (1996) interviews are capable of portraying a lifeworld and are based on human interaction however they are open to ambiguities. The semi-interviews were carried out based on an interview guide that allowed the interviewer the opportunity to control the interview, while the respondent was free to answer the questions or ask clarifying questions (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2019). We formulated two interview guides where one was focused towards Excellence's employees and one was for their clients. The interviews with Excellence employees included 21 questions (see appendix 2) through which we wanted to gain a deeper understanding of the argued meaning of the certification such as the process and prospective. The one with clients included 17 questions (see appendix 3) with only minor changes. The client interview guide consisted of questions regarding background knowledge on the client organizations, the process and their evaluation to understand the perceived meaning or lack thereof.

According to Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2019) semi-structured interviews can be used with advantage, as they can ensure that all the central topics are touched upon. We opted for conducting all interviews online, while in some cases there was geographical distance, however we wanted to ensure the same experience for all respondents so we applied it to all interviews. However, it limited our ability to observe the respondents body language and facial expressions which Vogl (2013) suggests enhances interview quality. Furthermore, online interviews also face the risk of technical issues to affect the quality of the interview such as sound and recording. We were however able to overcome most of these issues without compromising the quality of the interview. Lastly, the interviews were all conducted in English, which is not the native language of any of the respondents or researchers, which possibly deprived us of nuances in their description. We overcame this by trying to compensate for any language barriers with translation programs to increase the understanding.

The interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes, depending on the length of the respondent's answers and the interview guide. Prior to the recording we did a short introduction of ourselves and asked if the respondents had any questions or objections before we started recording. We also focused on the ten criteria proposed by Kvale (1996) on how to be a successful interviewer. These included for example being sensitive and listening to the respondents while being critical and questioning the respondents if their answers were inconsistent. All interviews were recorded to be able to transcribe them in detail.

3.4.2 Document study

Furthermore, this research included a document study with complementary data provided by Excellence. The document provided by the organization consisted of a published book regarding their certification. The book's first chapters described the certification itself including the company benefits of becoming certified. The following chapters proceeded to explain the certification in relation to the grander scheme of things where the certification was argued to create a better world. Lastly, it dove into the implementation in organizations.

According to Bowen (2009) a document analysis is particularly applicable to qualitative case studies and they produce rich descriptions of a single phenomenon such as the certification. The document was considered suitable for our analysis, as it provided access to additional data and context for investigating the organizational culture certification. Our document study was used in combination with our semi-structured interviews as a means of triangulation (Bowen, 2009). Triangulation is a combination of methodologies when studying the same phenomenon (Denzin, 1970). This allowed us to get a nuanced comprehension of the organizational culture certification and increased the credibility of the study (Eisner, 1991). The document was a rich source of data providing a behind-the-scenes look at the certification at the organization. For this reason a thorough, systematic review of the document helped us understand the context in which the certification was developed and implemented. In addition to providing contextual richness the document was useful in pre- and post-interview situations. We used the data from the document to check interview data and vice versa. The document also helped us generate the interview questions regarding the certification process and evaluation.

As Bowen (2009) argues the advantages of conducting a document analysis is that the corroborate findings across empirical data reduce potential biases. He further elaborates that documents are 'unobtrusive' and 'non-reactive', meaning that the document was stable and unaffected when we approached it critically. The document study also covered a broad range of exact information regarding the certification which helped us get an complete overview of related topics and the organization's official documentation and understanding of the certification.

One of the limitations of our document study is that the document was produced for another purpose than research and it should therefore not be treated as necessarily precise, accurate, or complete on the details of the meaning of the certification (Bowen, 2009). As Excellence's main aim with the book was to promote the certification, the authenticity, credibility and representativeness of the document this was seen as a limitation of our research. Lastly, the document was comprehensive in nature as it only covered the positive aspects of the certification and it should thus be treated as such (Bowen, 2009).

3.5 Data analysis

Prior to conducting our interviews we began analyzing the book provided by Excellence. The document analysis consisted of a content analysis, which according to Bowen (2009) is the process of organizing information into categories related to the research purpose and questions. We began skimming the document for a superficial examination regarding its relevance and meaningfulness. We then identified pertinent information in relation to the research (Bowen, 2009). Once we finished identifying these, a thematic analysis was conducted to find emerging themes that would become the categories for the interviews and the following analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). We took a closer look at the selected data and began coding them based on its characteristics to undercover themes applicable to our research. We then used the same codes to identify recurring themes as well as new ones in the data analysis of the transcribed interviews.

Moreover, qualitative research generally provides a large amount of data (Bryman, 2012). All our conducted interviews were recorded so we would be able to transcribe them afterwards. We used the transcribed interviews as a means to structure the raw data and discover interesting

empirical data for the analysis which according to Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) is essential when analyzing data. We then began sorting and identifying what themes were discussed (the what's) but also how they were communicated (the how's). As stated by Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) through sorting and analyzing the layers of the what's and how's, the empirical analysis will be more nuanced. We found that by focusing on the what's and the how's helped us to delayer the transcribed text, which allowed us to understand any potential underlying meaning.

In addition, we opted to identify themes for our analysis through the process of distilling, categorizing and interpreting the collected material (Rennstam & Wästerfors, 2018). Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) describe distilling of the empirical material as a tool to reduce the interview transcripts into shorter meanings or themes. We continued to reduce our empirical data in order to identify the main themes across our data collection that supported our research questions. Despite identifying a broad number of topics, we narrowed them down to a number of themes which appeared most relevant to the previously formulated research questions. The main themes we identified are 'Becoming certified by Excellence', 'Benefiting from an inspiring work culture' and 'Contributing to employer branding'. The first theme, 'Becoming certified by Excellence', was an easily identified theme, as the process of becoming certified was one of the most frequently mentioned topics since it focuses on how employees and clients at Excellence make sense of the certification process. It explicitly relates to the first research question, *What is the meaning of an organizational culture certification?*. The second theme we identified, 'Benefiting from an excellent work culture' entails data explaining how Excellence employees and clients understand why organizations choose to become certified, thus implicitly linking to both the first research question and the second, *How does an organizational culture certification relate to employer branding?*. The final theme we identified, 'Contributing to employer branding', hints at how Excellence employees and clients implicitly and explicitly understand the certification in relation to employer branding. This theme therefore explicitly links to our second research question.

After we identified these themes, we created sub-themes to present our empirical findings in a coherent and structured manner through argumentation. For effective argumentation we made use of the Emmerson method that Rennstam and Wästerfors (2018) explain as an approach that consists of except-commentary units. The except-commentary units follow a four element

structure beginning with the analytical point, then the orientation, empirical excerpt and finally the analytical comment. This helps link empirical data with its interpretation.

3.6 Reflexivity and ethical principles

Before presenting our empirical findings, we first touch upon reflexivity to emphasize the abductive approach to our research and the impact the empirical findings have had on our research. As Berger (2015) argues, reflexivity is an important element in the quality control in qualitative research, by understanding how qualitative research may be impacted by the characteristics and experiences of the researcher. Reflexivity is commonly understood as *"the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of researcher's positionality as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome"* (Berger, 2015). For this reason we as researchers focused on moving beyond simply reflection, to reevaluate our assumptions. Firstly, with regard to interpretation, we acknowledged that any readings of findings did not stem from one 'universal truth' but were extracted relative to the context of ourselves. Secondly, we consciously applied reflexivity to our research which potentially helped us to overcome the possible limitation of the non-generalizability of the empirical findings (Prasad, 2018).

Moreover, we engaged in reflexivity by reevaluating our research questions through questioning our own assumptions about the meaning of the certification, which were affected by our own experiences and prior knowledge of the organizations. Firstly, we approached our research with a focus on employee engagement and well-being in relation to the certification. However, by engaging in reflexive thinking we reconsidered our approach based on our empirical findings. Our empirical findings therefore ended up dictating our research rather than our own assumptions, which is in line with the abductive research approach. By staying reflexive it prompted us to believe in the strength of the two-way nature of the semi-structured interview which we leveraged by asking clarifying questions or changing the direction of the interview when we came across a different perspective or statement that challenged our current assumptions.

Furthermore, when we conducted our research, we found it essential to engage in ethical principles (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2019). Prior to conducting the interviews we contacted each respondent to gain their consent to be interviewed by us. Also, it was important for us to

follow the ethical principle of informed consent which according to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) can be achieved by ensuring that the respondent receives the necessary information to be able to make an informed decision to participate. We therefore provided each respondent with a brief introduction to ourselves, our study and how we were going to conduct the interview. In addition, due to the sensitive nature of our study, we emphasized to our respondents the confidentiality of our research in case there was anything that they did not want to include in this thesis. We ensured their anonymity and explained how we would use pseudonyms to protect them from any harm, which according to Bell, Bryman and Harley (2019) is paramount in qualitative research. We then moved on to ask if they had any questions or concerns before we began our interview, following which we asked their permission to record the interview to make them feel safe.

4. Empirical Findings

In the following chapter we present the empirical findings in three themes with corresponding sub-themes, which we derived during the analysis of the empirical material. The first theme we identified as 'Becoming certified by Excellence' focuses on how clients are able to become certified by Excellence both with regard to the survey and overall score. The second theme we explore is titled 'Benefiting from an inspiring work culture'. In this theme we present data, which outlines how the employees at Excellence and their clients perceive the potential benefits of the certification. Finally in 'Contributing to employer branding', we present data suggesting that Excellence's certification is a tool for employer branding. Lastly, we conclude each sub theme with a summary of the key factors.

4.1 Becoming certified by Excellence

During the interviews we started to notice a pattern around the topic of 'Becoming certified by Excellence', which revolved around the interviewees' accounts of how organizations become certified and what the certification means to them. Naming this theme 'Becoming certified by Excellence' and exploring it was therefore a priority for us in an effort of trying to understand in depth what the certification entails. This theme is further divided into two sub-themes, each addressing specific aspects of the certification process. The first subtheme 'Insightful employee surveys' examines the process of becoming certified and the importance and complexities of the employee survey as well as the culture policy review. The second subtheme 'The score reduces complexities', delves into the relevance and establishment of Excellence's overall score which signals how well clients overall perform in the survey and whether they present themselves to believe to have earned the certification.

4.1.1 Insightful employee surveys

This first sub-theme centers around explaining how Excellence's employees and clients conceptualize the employee survey used to certify organizations. To provide organizations with a certification Excellence developed an online employee survey to measure an organization's culture from an employee point of view. Employees at Excellence proudly elaborated on the academic validation of their employee survey as to how it was developed on the basis of

extensive research. While sharing this information with us, we began to notice a pattern of how employees at Excellence generally used the historical and academic background of the employee survey to ensure us and their clients of the legitimacy of the certification. Thus emphasizing the advantage that the academic background of the employee survey holds. This was illustrated by Excellence employee Mia who acknowledged that the extensive research of the survey method secures Excellence with a competitive advantage.

"(..) actually worked with the University of (..) to create this study, and to validate it. So that's why a lot of companies also choose to work with us, because it's a validated survey method" - Mia.

Similarly, Excellence employee Louis explained how the history and the amount of data from their employee survey was seen as the source of their main advantage in the organization.

"Our main advantage is the history and a lot of companies surveyed and a lot of data throughout (..) years almost" - Louis.

These excerpts were of particular interest as both stress the advantage of the history and research behind the employee survey along with the collected data. Firstly, in our empirical data it was mentioned several times that the employee survey being academically validated by a university was seen as an advantage. Secondly, the employees at Excellence expressed with pride the validation of the employee survey, which suggested that it is something that they use in their sense making of the employee survey and therefore also the certification. Excellence employee Louis likewise expressed the value of data collection from their surveys as a key element in Excellence's competitive advantage, which suggested that the data collected from the employee survey is trusted by both Excellence and their clients. Thus the data collected from the employee survey was used to legitimize the evaluation of other certified organizations at Excellence.

Despite the perceived advantage of the academic validation and history, there appeared to be some ambiguities in several of the interviews when it came to which university validated the employee survey and what the motivation behind it was, which suggested some uncertainty about the origin of the story. John seemed to reflect on this as he disclaimed the story by

recognizing that it could simply be a version of the story that is formulated for commercial purposes.

"That is the very short version of the story (..). This could be the marketing version" - John.

He thereby recognized that the story of the survey's origin could be utilized for selling purposes. However, all in all it became evident that employees at Excellence were proud of the employee survey and the history and research behind it, although there remained some misalignment of the stories regarding its origin.

Furthermore, the employees at Excellence and their clients drew attention to the challenges that exist with a standardized survey as a tool to measure organizational culture. From our empirical data we found that several of the respondents pointed to the different challenges that a standardized employee survey to measure organizational culture could have. During one of the interviews Excellence employee Louis explained that the employee survey is open to bias as it is often inadequate.

"The survey is not gonna help you be better, of course it can. I'm aware of survey bias and stuff like that (..)" - Louis

Similarly, one of Excellence's clients, Sara, recognized that she is aware that the survey carries various challenges in its representation of the organization culture.

"Maybe people are starting to just complete the questionnaire without really thinking, just tick the box to make it go away. To be honest, I mean there's not much I can do to ensure it because people are people and do what they want" - Sara.

We found these experts noteworthy as they illustrated how both employees and clients at Excellence are aware of the complications that occur when generalizing data from an online standardized survey. By recognizing these complications it also called into question the truthfulness of the data that the employee survey produces. As Excellence's client Sara suggested the answers from the employee might not reflect how employees actually feel as they might just fill out the survey without reflecting on their answers. Ultimately this kind of respondents' behavior contributes to a deviation of feedback that is based on the less truthful

data from the employee survey. On the other hand, Excellence employees claimed that their system tracks the time that an employee spends on filling out the survey, indicating that they could potentially identify when an employee merely ticks boxes without reading or reflecting.

To make the certification less standardized, in addition to the employee survey, clients of Excellence are encouraged to fill out a culture policy review with specific information about their current organizational culture. However, as Excellence Sophia explained, these are not mandatory for SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) to become certified.

"We had so many clients, telling us it was just too much work for them (..). So we listened and said, you can still do it if you want, we can still review it for you, but it's not mandatory to be certified" - Sophia.

Thus despite the employee survey being open to bias it appears to be the only measurement that is taken into account when providing SMEs with a certification that celebrates their organizational culture as a way to make it easier for clients to obtain the certification. Excellence employees explained that the culture policy review includes information about an organization's management approach and more insight into its culture work and can therefore create a more in-depth understanding of the organizational culture to compensate for the survey's quantitative limitations. However for many of Excellence's clients it is not necessary to provide in order to achieve the certification.

In addition, from our empirical data we began to notice how the outcomes of the employee survey was understood by Excellence's employees and clients. We saw two different perspectives of the perceived outcomes from the employee survey. It was often stated that the employee survey's main advantage was its use to find focus areas where organizations could improve, however it was also mentioned that this might not alway be the case. Excellence employee Victoria explained how the employee survey outcome is intended to be used by their clients.

"(..) once we have the results we also know what you need to do to improve your results" - Victoria.

However, one of Excellence's clients, Laura, recognized that unless the results from the employee survey are actively used it would be an ineffective tool.

"I believe it's a great tool to get an overview of how things are going and where to improve and how to change things but I also believe that unless you do something very structured about it then it's also just a tool that you use once per year" - Laura

We considered these perspectives on the employee survey interesting as they suggested that it cannot stand alone and needs to be followed up and worked with in order to be meaningful. The employee survey appears to provide them with quantitative data as it enables them to examine themselves. We believed that the differentiation between the two perspectives illustrated how the organizational culture certification can either be viewed as a strategic assessment to find areas of improvement or passive measurement.

To summarize, we found in our empirical data various complications that focus on the employee survey. Firstly, we saw elements of marketing as Excellence utilized the history and academic validation behind the employee survey for selling purposes despite being unsure of the actuality of it. It also became clear that the insightful employee survey holds some bias when it comes to just ticking off boxes and survey bias. We found that the employee survey despite being open to bias is the only measurement that is taken into account when providing organizations with a certification that congratulates their culture as a way to make it easier for clients to gain the certification without it losing its full meaning. Finally it was interesting that there were two perspectives on the perceived outcome of the employee survey where one suggested that the employee survey cannot stand alone and needs to be followed up and worked with for it to be meaningful and the other simply viewed it as a passive form of measurement.

4.1.2 The score reduces complexities

When conducting the interviews we quickly found that in order to obtain Excellence's organizational culture certification clients must reach a final score of at least 70 on a scale of 1 to 100 on the conducted employee survey. This naturally led us to asking Excellence's employees the question: Why is the threshold set at 70? The interviews with the employees of Excellence exhibited issues of uncertainty about the reasoning behind the set threshold. Despite

efforts to explain the concept of the rating system, the threshold appeared to have been chosen somewhat randomly. Excellence employee John explained this in the following excerpt.

"It's part of both the national benchmark and the global framework that we operate within and the 70% is a number picked basically. There's no statistical relation to an average or anything like that. (..) It had to be somewhere" – John.

On the other hand, multiple employees emphasized the importance of the threshold being set at a score that is achievable for their clients while equally perceived as high. So, relevance appeared that the threshold is established at a score that is not too low and not too high as another of Excellence's employees, Karen stated below.

70 is quite high and the reason why we don't check 80-90, I don't know if it's because that's maybe too high" – Karen.

These statements were of interest while they indicated that there is a limit as to what is perceived as achievable in addition to the threshold lacking logic. It remained debatable whether the reachability of the threshold was for the benefit of Excellence or for their clients. This was of particular significance while suggestion was made that an ordinary organizational culture might not be able to reach beyond a certain level of excellence. On the contrary, interviews with clients confirmed that an overall final score of 96 has been achieved. This exhibits the complexity of measuring organizational culture, while throughout the empirical data it became evident that in return achieving the highest score on the scale (100) appears as an impossible goal to reach. This was presented in the following excerpt by Excellence employee Louis.

"For an average company of 100 people, if they would have 100 in our survey, I would be suspicious. Because it's not normal for a company to have so many people agreeing with everything on an average" - Louis

This statement appeared interesting while it suggested that skepticism exists when organizations reach the maximum level on the scale that is set by Excellence. Naturally leading to questioning what score organizations then ought to aim for. While all employees of Excellence gave similar statements to Louis, merely one employee, Mia, contradicted the above mentioned skepticism by expressing her optimism about clients' ability to achieve a final score of 100.

"Of course the goal for many is 100%, (..). Yes [it might be challenging], due to different factors, but I think it's possible (..) and of course I'm an optimist in that way too" - Mia

In return one can argue whether this is Mia's personal optimism, however it was contradictory to all her colleagues suggesting that it is impossible to score 100 due to a number of the questions in the employee survey conflicting with one another. Excellence employee Louis explained that certain management approaches cannot be practiced simultaneously. This would mean that particular features of organizational culture cannot equally be evaluated as positive by employees. The previous statements therefore showed a misalignment between the employees of Excellence about the obtainable score, which once again signaled that measuring organizational culture is complicated while interpretations of such a scale might differ and therefore provided a reason to question how scientific the score is as the employees themselves do not agree on what is attainable. This appeared to underline that they were uncertain about how this works. Nevertheless as the majority of Excellence's employees suggested that scoring 100/100 is an unrealistic outcome of the employee survey, we asked the clients a similar question by discussing whether they are aiming to increase their current score until they would eventually reach 100. For similar reasons all clients stated that scoring 100/100 is not a goal they are aiming for. Excellence's client Anna stated this in the excerpt below.

I think you should never have 100 then it's strange. Something wrong I think. - Anna.

Other clients made similar claims to Anna's, which suggested that clients are likewise suspicious when companies would reach the highest attainable score as a result of the conducted employee survey of Excellence. Suggestion was made that this outcome is rather

ambiguous and dishonest than excellent. This appeared as an interesting finding, as in the case that skepticism exists about one outcome of the employee survey, one can argue whether other scores ought to be considered accurate.

Similarly, ambiguity presented amongst the clients of Excellence about the threshold of 70, while the empirical findings showed that all clients shared the same opinion that a score of 70 out of 100 is not considered excellent, but is rather considered a starting point to build towards an excellent organizational culture. For this reason, during each interview each client explained to have set their own threshold at which they consider their organization to be an excellent employer. One of Excellence's clients, Claus, , considered a final score of 82 as a minimum goal at which they consider themselves an excellent workplace, whereas another client of Excellence, Sara did not consider any score below 95 as excellent. The other clients mentioned different scores between 82 and 95 which they considered to be a threshold at which they perceive their organization as an excellent employer. Maya, representing one of Excellence's clients, expressed her view on the threshold of 70 in the following excerpt.

When you have a result that is so much higher than 70. Then 70 doesn't feel, I mean in one way that doesn't feel excellent" - Maya.

Additionally, Laura (client) stated that she believed that a score below 90 is not worth promoting.

From my point of view I don't want to flag that much with us only having a 78 (..). If it was above 90 then we would have made a post of it every week but until then we do not flag with it. (..) 78 that's not good enough in my opinion, but we still got the stamp - Laura.

Both comments showed that there were contradicting views between what score is perceived as excellent by clients in comparison to the threshold that is set by Excellence. The above mentioned suggested that a score below 90 is not a result to be proud of and should not be sufficient to obtain the certification nor to call an organization an employer excellent. Thus

showing that it is difficult to set the bar for what is considered an excellent culture as the meaning and interpretation of that varies per organization or industry.

Furthermore, our findings showed that although the results of the survey are accessible to an organization's management team, the final score, which is sometimes promoted along with the certification, does not indicate if one department or group does not meet the threshold. Excellence employee Sophia explained that the overall score which enables organizations to obtain the certification does not take into account the individual departments.

> *"(..) there can be departments that are not working well. But the overall score is high"* - Sophia.

We believed this to be a profound issue as it was also emphasized by Excellence employee Karen, that there can be critical challenges within an organization that do not necessarily need to be resolved in order to obtain the certification.

> *"If one group, let's say women at a company, have a very bad result, but the rest of the people have a great result then something is not really right, you know, and to be honest, I don't know exactly how this works"* - Karen.

We found that this excerpt highlighted essential issues with the use of an overall score to certify organizational culture. Since Excellence's overall score is generalized it becomes impossible for people outside the organization to see through the certification as it reduces the complexities to the point where it can affect the transparency of it. This was also confirmed by another Excellence employee who agreed that the certification could create false expectations for potential employees about an organization's culture if only a number of departments are excellent and others are not, or if an organization's culture is only considered excellent by the men and not the women. In that case the certification appears deceiving for a new employee that expected to work in an excellent organization but rather ended up in a department that had a low satisfactory score. Thus emphasizing the issue with a generalized overall score.

In addition, Laura continued by explaining another reason why she would not promote the certification as the timing of the survey impacted the final score.

If the questionnaire is in a week where people are mad then it reflects in that one and not the entire year. (..) It will be a completely different score because people were stressed as hell in October. (..), so I believe it [the score] would have changed" - Laura.

From the empirical data it was established that the certification of Excellence is valid for a maximum period of one year, however Laura's statement suggested that the score possibly fluctuates over the course of one year, resulting in an annual overall score being merely a snapshot of the employee satisfaction. It was therefore suggested that conducting one survey in order to obtain a score that leads to the certification is not sufficient to promote an organization's culture for one year. For the same reason a number of the clients stated that they are or potentially will start conducting employee surveys more frequently in order to get more up-to-date scores of their organizational culture throughout the year. Client Maya explained her motivation for this consideration in the excerpt below.

"One of the challenges is that you measure just once a year and I'm not sure that's enough. (..) then the data you get will get old kind of quickly." - Maya.

Through this statement along with similar views of more clients it became clear that clients appeared not to believe that an overall score that is the result from one survey can represent the overall organizational culture over the timespan of one year. They suggested that continuous internal and external changes occur, which are ought to be taken into consideration when explaining an organization's culture and affect the final score. From this suggestion can be made that despite a company obtaining an organizational culture certification, due to recruitment of new employees or managers along with other inevitable internal and external changes after the obtained score, the organizational culture might present a different level of excellence than the certification allegedly claims.

Overall, the empirical material showed that capturing an organization's culture is challenging to measure on a scale and to capture in one score, as it appeared that different interpretations exist about the score at which an organizational culture is considered excellent, both between Excellence's clients and employees. Equally it came to our attention that skepticism existed

about the highest attainable score, leading to ambiguous goals for clients. Finally, it was expressed that measuring organizational culture once a year appears unreliable while the final score can quickly become outdated due to internal and external changes. Which led to the perception that the more time passes, the less valuable the certification becomes.

4.2 Benefiting from an inspiring work culture

Our empirical findings pointed to a second central theme, which we identified as 'Benefiting from an inspiring work culture'. This theme describes Excellence employees' perception of the perceived benefits of the certification compared to their clients. Our findings highlighted three sub-themes relating to how an inspiring work culture can benefit organizations. Firstly, the sub-theme 'Retention of employees' revolves around how the certification is understood by the employees and clients as a tool to increase employee retention in organizations. Secondly, the sub-theme of 'Certified workplaces are more attractive' describes how Excellence's employees and clients appeared to perceive the certification as a means of attracting employees in the battle of labor. Finally, the sub-theme of 'Getting certified is good for business' depicts how Excellence's employees and their clients related financial results to the certification.

4.2.1 Retention of employees

Our first sub-theme, 'Retention of employees', outlines how the certification appeared to help organizations keep their employees for a longer period of time and maintain their organizational culture. From our empirical data we found that retention of employees is understood as an important benefit from the certification. Both clients and employees of Excellence viewed retention of employees as critical in an organization's overall success.

The document analysis illustrated an emphasis on the internal benefits for certified organizations. In the document it was argued that certified organizations among other things were successful in retaining employees because of their organizational culture.

Excellence employee Victoria elaborated that retention is becoming increasingly important for organizations as they acknowledge the importance of their employees well-being.

"I would say that the trend is that more and more companies are beginning to understand the importance of actually taking care of their employees" - Victoria.

Victoria expressed that companies are starting to realize the importance of retention whereas organizations previously most often approached them to become certified for recruitment purposes. However, from our empirical findings we gathered that the certification signals that the employees in an organization are satisfied with the organizational culture of their employer and thus become some kind of ambassador for the organization. One of Excellence's clients, Claus, recognized that the certification is proof that the organization has a good internal culture and that the employees are thus considered ambassadors.

"I think the most important for us is that the certification is a receipt for a good internal level at the company. And that every employee is an ambassador" - Claus

This excerpt appeared interesting as it suggested that the certification can be used to communicate that the employees believe that the organization is excellent. The certification thus seems to signal that employees are ambassadors of the employer they are working for. This exemplified the importance of having employees who embody the organizational culture because they believe in the value of it themselves. The employees act as ambassadors and thus provide a more genuine and credible source of information for the organization via the certification. We believe that this can be seen as a means of employee retention because the goal is to make an organization's current employees channel the organizational culture, which indicates that they are fulfilled by the current management approach. However, Excellence employee Louis explained that retention of employees can also be used for branding purposes.

"We like to call it the employer branding from the inside out because it's what your employees are saying about you" - Louis

In this excerpt Louis recognized the importance of employer branding from the inside out because having employees represent and promote an organization's culture positively both internally and externally, helps to articulate and humanize its organizational culture. It appeared to suggest that employees are feeling a sense of pride when working in a certified

organization as the certification makes them feel valued and contributes to them acting as ambassadors. On the other hand, it seemed somewhat absurd that the certification seeks to confirm what current employees already know in order to retain them, as assumption can be made that employees who are satisfied would equally stay regardless of the certification. Thus it seems to be self-fulfilling that retention of employees is based on a certification that the same employees in essence provided to their employer through the employee survey. Meaning that the certification in a way merely confirms what they already know.

To summarize, in our empirical data we found various references to employee retention as a benefit of the certification. Firstly, we saw that retention of employees is becoming increasingly important for organizations when they get certified since interest in employee well-being has been growing. Lastly, it appeared that the certification stands as a symbol of employees being ambassadors in an organization and it thus appeared somewhat paradoxical that the certification should increase retention as the certification merely confirms what employees already feel.

4.2.2 Certified workplaces are more attractive

Our empirical findings pointed to the second sub-theme, 'Certified workplaces are more attractive'. While in addition to employee retention, we found in our empirical findings another topic that received much attention: employee attraction. Excellence employee Sophia explained that there is a lot of competition between organizations regarding recruitment of employees and the certification can make it easier to attract the right employees.

"The main motivation I would say is to make it easier to recruit in specific industries where it's a real war for talent, extremely hard to recruit. And by showing potential employees that they actually have a good workplace. It's more attractive" - Sophia.

This excerpt represented how most of the Excellence employees and their clients explained one of the main benefits of being certified, which suggested that there is a strong emphasis on external use of the certification. This was also emphasized by Excellence employee Mia who confirmed that they promote the certification for recruitment purposes. Mia explained that the certification serves as verified proof of a positive organizational culture. This can be seen to

relate to why Excellence views their academically validated employee survey as one of their main advantages. It suggests providing their clients with academically validated confirmation that their organizational culture lives up to certain standards.

"It's actually to give them the proof of being a good workplace" - Mia.

The point by Mia appeared striking as it drew attention to the fact that potential employees look to the certification when they apply for a job, which suggests that it holds some external validation. In other words it can be viewed as the rational justification of a belief. Suggestion was therefore made that Excellence externally validates organizations culture in order for their clients to communicate it externally and thus attract employees. The certification can thus be seen as an authorization of an excellent organizational culture. However, this highlighted that Excellence is being held accountable for that authorized organizational culture and should it not live up the potential employees expectations then there is a risk of it (partially) losing its value. One can therefore consider it of great importance that Excellence's certification, and thus the employee survey, maintain a high standard so it does not compromise the intended meaning of the certification.

In addition to external validation, Excellence employee Louis pointed out that potential employees have a difficult time trying to figure out how an organization's culture is perceived by its current employees. Thus it was suggested that potential employees investigate an organization before they apply for a job and that organizational culture is a very important factor in their evaluation of potential employers.

"And also of course people looking for jobs don't have anything to compare. They have of course the (..) and sites like that where people write about the workplace, but it's not the same" - Louis.

This excerpt signified that potential employees seek more transparency from organizations, when they apply for a job. Louis explained that the certification makes it easier for people to decide where they want to work next, which is also why the certification is considered important as it is unlikely that potential employees would consider working in organizations that have a poor reputation. In addition, it suggested that potential employees look to current

or previous employees to assess an organization's culture as they favor the real inside view of the organizational culture.

Finally, the certification recruitment purpose appeared to be connected to employer branding. When asked about the most important benefit of the certification, Excellence employee Louis did not hesitate to state that the certification's main purpose is attracting employees which is connected to employer branding. He thereby acknowledged that the certification is mainly used to externally communicate a positive organizational culture.

"The purpose would be to actually attract. It would be connected to the employer brand if I only could choose one" - Louis.

This excerpt was considered interesting as it illustrated the importance of branding organizational culture work. It was emphasized that the purpose of having a great culture is to promote and market it as a means of employer branding to attract employees. One can consider these findings important as Louis acknowledged that employees at Excellence view the certification's branding purposes as the most paramount. Thus the purpose of creating an excellent organizational culture is merely worth something if organizations externally promote it, which seemed to somewhat overshadow the original idea behind the employee survey which was to do organizational culture work. Thus from this excerpt organizational culture appeared to be viewed as a strategic measure and less about during organizational culture work.

To summarize, in our empirical data we found various statements suggesting that employee attraction is the primary benefit of the culture certification. Firstly, we saw that attracting employees has become more important as there is currently a war for employees. The certification is considered a way for organizations to differentiate from their competitors as it provides proof of a desired organizational culture. Secondly, the certification suggests some form of external validation which therefore appears more effective in attracting employees as it makes it easier for job seekers to identify excellent employers. Lastly, it appeared to be believed by Excellence's employees that the certification is considered a means of employer branding to attract employees. Thus acknowledging the importance of employer branding when doing organizational culture work which equally appeared to be one of the main focuses when becoming certified.

4.2.3 Getting certified is good for business

Our final sub-theme, 'Getting certified is good for business', outlines how employees at Excellence and their clients seem to perceive financial benefits as a positive organizational effect after becoming certified. The benefits of getting certified were described as many related outcomes, which ultimately appeared to come back to increased financial performance. The most common outcomes were described as being one of increased financial performance in addition to retention and attraction of employees. Louis described, in essence, the main motivation for organizations to get certified by Excellence and how he believed it relates to financial performance.

"So we also need to show that if you achieve this you will make more money, because you will have an easier time recruiting and people will want to be with you" - Louis.

This excerpt was worthy of mentioning because it highlighted that once organizations have completed the employee survey and scored the required result to achieve the certification, they will have an easier time recruiting and attracting employees which will ultimately increase their financial result. Louis thus explained that the financial benefit becomes a natural consequence of the certification however it is considered the main goal as the retention and attraction of employees will help that along. He thereby suggested a correlation between variables such as retention and attraction of employees in the calculation of the financial benefits.

From our interviews and document study we also found that there was a strong emphasis on the financial benefits of being certified when Excellence approaches potential clients. The document analysis illustrated a strong focus on the financial benefits for certified organizations. In the document it was argued that culture is a critical factor in achieving business success.

"[Organizational culture] is quickly becoming critical for business success"

Employees at Excellence recognized that the motive for CEO's to gain their certification is one of profit-maximizing, so when Excellence approaches potential clients they make an effort to promote profitability as it is the main selling point.

"But if you're talking to a CEO, you really have to give him or her the hard facts: they want the numbers, they want to know that it's (..)% more profitable. They listen to that because they care more about the numbers and because that's what they are intended to care about" - Victoria

In addition to profit-maximizing as the main motive, this excerpt illustrated that the decision to become certified is often a top-down decision where management wants to increase their profit and thus looks to Excellence to become more profitable through their certification. However, it appeared that organizational culture work was somewhat overshadowed by financial interest in the pursuit of enhanced economic performance.

Similarly, Excellence's employee Louis acknowledged this tendency among their clients.

"This [the certification] is important. Because it's gonna make you money. I mean, for a lot of CEO's it's the first thing they're gonna think about" - Louis

These excerpts portrayed how some organizations regard the certification as a means of profit-maximizing, and thus reduce the cultural aspect to be one of financial outcome, in a rational and somewhat impersonal way as any other resource to be exploited for maximal economic performance. From this perspective it was suggested that for Excellence to sell their certification they need to reduce complexities into a financial perspective to make it seem attractive to their potential clients.

Another notable aspect of our empirical finding was that the employees at Excellence appeared to use the financial benefits in their sales pitch when they approach potential clients. Excellence employee John revealed that the correlation between the certification and financial results is something that Excellence uses in their marketing strategy to attract potential clients which suggests that it is something that their clients focus on when considering getting certified.

"That's actually one of the points that we're trying to push in our online marketing that there is a clear correlation between business results and employee experience" - John

This excerpt seemed of particular importance as it suggested that organizational culture is reduced to numbers and strategic benefits, which can appear contradictory as Excellence also promotes themselves as an organization which helps companies improve their culture and puts the interest of the employee before the organization's. However, in both the document study and these excerpts it appeared that Excellence is trying to highlight the financial benefits of getting certified to attract more clients. In our findings Excellence employees appeared uncritical as to whether or not certified organizations have a higher financial result simply because they have the certification without taking into account other factors such as whether or not those organizations were already profitable to begin with. Which suggested that Excellence tries to push this message as a means to attract new clients to their organization. Though in doing so they also outweigh the financial benefits over the employee and cultural dimension which appeared rather ambiguous as they stated to be an organization that promotes organizational culture work.

To summarize, we found in our empirical data various complications that focused on the financial benefits from the certification. Firstly, we saw that financial performance and employee retention and attraction are suggested to correlate and enhance from the certification. However, in Excellence's communication with clients' top management they seemed to be mostly focused on the financial perspective in order to appear appealing. Thereby they also acknowledged that the decision to become certified is often a top-down decision. Lastly, when promoting the certification to potential clients, Excellence tries to promote the idea that certified organizations become more profitable which appeared somewhat simplified.

4.3 Contributing to employer branding

In the third and final theme of our empirical findings, we examine how the certification of Excellence is perceived. We equally divided the topic into sub themes of which the first one, 'It's just a stamp', delves into how Excellence's certification is perceived, referred to and how it is used. The second subtheme 'Organizational ranking as a tool for bragging power' revolves around the clients' power as their ranking status appears to be related to the way they position themselves in the market in comparison to competitors.

4.3.1 "It's just a stamp"

As mentioned in the section 'Certified workplaces are more attractive', both employees and clients of Excellence stated that the certification is a tool to attract new employees. They referred to this practice as a means of employer branding. Throughout the data collection it became clear that a number of Excellene's clients decided to become certified to strengthen their employer brand. For this reason Excellence promotes this as one of the ways to motivate potential clients to become certified. Excellence employee Louis in short explained this process in the following excerpt.

"We say to them [potential clients], hey, come and measure with us and we can give you the
badge basically because you're already doing all these excellent things. We can help you
show to the world so you can make it official" – Louis

This statement suggested that in order for a company to show its external parties that it is making efforts to be an excellent employer, the company needs official confirmation. Additionally, Excellence employee Victoria suggested that the certification is not merely applied by companies to prove that they are a good employer, but is also used to promote the quality of their core business and sell products or services, as described below.

It's sort of a stamp, like a quality stamp. So it doesn't only have to do with employer branding
and also communication wise. Overall it's very helpful and we know from clients that tells us
that nobody knows our brand, we are not famous, but by using their own name attached to
our name, they get more sort of in their advertising. - Victoria

These findings appeared interesting while suggestion was made that the certification gives meaning to the quality of an organization and is used to promote a positive image of a company's practices. Besides that, in these statements and more of the empirical data it became apparent that both clients and employees of Excellence refer to the certification in various ways, for example as 'badge', 'stamp', 'receipt', 'symbol' or 'mark'. In the empirical data the certification was most frequently referred to as a '(quality) stamp'. For this reason Excellence employees compared their certification to other stamps that are used to label products in order to specify that they have a certain quality in order to appear more appealing to customers and to differentiate from competitors. Specifically, similarities to environmental certifications were

pointed out. The excerpt by Excellence employee Sophia below demonstrated how the organizational culture certification was compared to an environmental certification.

"[In Sweden] we have Svanemerket, which is like an environmental certification of products. (..) it's like a quality stamp when it comes to employee engagement. So it's kind of the same, but different" – Sophia

Sophia's colleague Mia equally explained how certifications are used as a tool to brand the quality of a product or in their case an organization's culture.

"We have seen that when people buy food, they go for this kind of certified food brands and it's the same with the employees. A lot of employees are seeking employers that are certified, which gives them quality insurance" – Mia

These statements above suggested that Excellence's organizational culture certification has a similar purpose to other certifications. Other employees of Excellence explained that environmental certifications serve as a label on products proving that they are produced in an environmentally friendly manner. Similarly, Excellence, through their certification, is making an effort to provide a stamp that proves that employers are treating their employees in a respectful manner. This comparison seemed interesting because they both appeared to have a similar function as they equally determine a certain level of quality. On the other hand, the comparison can be considered quite odd as environmental certifications and culture certifications aim to promote the quality of very different concepts. It seems unlikely that an environmental certification that serves to qualify food is obtained through a subjective employee survey, resulting in the interpretation of such certifications appearing unlikely to be the same. Consequently, when discussing that environmental certifications are associated with green washing, the possibility of similar associations of organizational culture certifications is elaborated on by Excellence employee Josephine.

"Of course it's possible. But they don't take our certification as serious as fair trade. We're not at the same level of a certification. But they [companies] think that it's a good product and they believe in our certification. (..) It's good to have it but it's not a must have" - Josephine

Josephine was suggesting that skepticism in regards to 'washing' about the organizational culture certification can possibly exist, but as Excellence's certification is not mandatory for employers to obtain, she appeared to believe that it remains credible. One could argue that this is contradictory to how Excellence is selling its certification, while the empirical material showed that the organization claims that the certification is essential for companies to stay competitive. So although the certification is not an obligation by law, Excellence's employees made claims that the certification is a necessity for quality comparison. When going deeper into how the certification is perceived, Excellence employee Sophia emphasized that although the certification is referred to in different ways and compared to other stamps, they are not all one and the same. She expressed this in the following excerpt.

"It's like a quality stamp. (..) It's not just a mark. They [clients] want to work with the workplace culture, they want to get employees engaged. It's strategic for them, it's not just a mark or something they want to brag about, it's genuine interest." - Sophia

From the above mentioned quote one can perceive Sophia making an effort to explain why the motivation of organizations to become certified as an excellent employer is different from organizations' motivation to obtain other certifications. She appeared to suggest that their clients have intrinsic motivation to work on and promote the quality of their practices. Additionally she explained that the organizational culture certification cannot be obtained by an organization's management team without participation from employees.

"It [the certification] is not something that you can buy. You won't get it if your employees don't think that you are a good workplace. (..) We have competitors where you're more or less able to buy your mark, but that is not for us" - Sophia

Interestingly enough, Sophia was first to bring up that the certification can not be bought without involving a client's employees. However, suggestion was made that other providers of certifications do not necessarily have this same requirement. Sophia's claim pointed out that one ought to be cautious about the reliability of other culture certifications. Meaning that skepticism about a certification's credibility can be considered reasonable. Consequently, Sophia elaborated how Excellence ensures that their client's employees are involved in the process of obtaining the certification. In the following excerpt Sophia continued to explain how

Excellence is making an effort to ensure that the Excellence stamp cannot be obtained by the mere transfer of capital.

Of course we cannot be certain that the management hasn't told their employees you got to answer positively. But at the same time the employees wouldn't accept that. It would show in the comments and if an organization would cheat and they win with them we take that very seriously. (..) We have had our suspicions, but when we dived into the data nothing was showing that they had cheated." - Sophia

There are several aspects of this excerpt which appeared of particular importance. First, the claim that employees would not accept being told to answer positively seemed somewhat suggestive. It became apparent that no guarantee can be given that employees would or would not accept a management team's effort to force their employees to answer positively on the survey, whereas she first stated that Excellence cannot be certain about what arguments are made by a company's management team towards employees in order to convince them to conduct the survey. For this reason, suggestion is made that Excellence has an optimistic view on how employees would respond to persuasion of members of an organization's management team to fill out the survey untruthfully. Secondly, in the excerpt it was suggested that Excellence relies on the survey data to uncover efforts to influence the outcome, which can be considered inconclusive because one can argue that persuasion of employees to answer positively does not necessarily show up in the survey results. Unless a score of 100 is obtained, while it was previously expressed that this score raises doubt about its credibility. So, the abovementioned statements of Excellence's employees suggested that skepticism about the certification exists. The possibility of washing is expressed, but they rather suggested particular doubt towards other certifications. However, these statements were from the perspective of the employees of Excellence, so clients were equally asked about their view on the certification and in a similar manner, references were made about the reliability of the certification. Client Laura explained that the certification was not of high value to her while her statement below suggested that their current culture does not deserve to be labeled as excellent.

The certification I don't value much actually because it's just a stamp. (..) The stamp right now is not reflecting the pictures that we see. - Laura

She indicated that the certification is not worth much because over the passage of time the stamp loses its value. Interpretation of the score has been discussed earlier in chapter 4.1.2, in which other clients also previously mentioned, that due to internal and external changes the score supposably fluctuates. Meaning that the certification is merely that, a stamp, rather than an accurate representation or evaluation of an organization's culture. This emphasized the complexity of measuring organizational culture and how the quality of an organizational culture over a timespan of 12 months is challenging to capture in one stamp. Nonetheless, clients appeared to suggest that a stamp is becoming a requirement to gain recognition from external parties. Client Anna described her point of view in the excerpt below.

"For us it [the certification] is like a stamp of something (..). We have never been doing advertisements or something, but now we're so big so we have to. So I think it's getting more important for us today because those who know us and work here, maybe they don't need this stamp, but for us to show our owners and people who want to come here and work, it's good to see oh, it seems to be a good workplace. It's something that people recognize." - Anna

This statement appeared relevant while it contradicted the previous statement of Sophia that the certification is *not just a mark or something they [clients] want to brag about, it's genuine interest,* as the above-mentioned quote suggested that the stamp is a way for external parties to identify organizations as either 'good' or 'bad'. So, for an organization the certification is a way to display itself as 'good'.

All in all, our empirical findings illustrated that an organizational culture certification is used as a quality stamp in order to define whether an organization is a 'good' or 'bad' employer, equally to how environmental certifications are used to define the ecological quality of a product. Whereas skepticism exists about other certifications, Excellence employees claimed to make an effort to provide a credible certification. Nonetheless, it was suggested that the possibility of 'washing' exists, although contradicting statements were made regarding this topic.

4.3.2 Organizational ranking as a tool of bragging power

The empirical data emphasized that the organizational culture certification is used to nominate organizations for national and international ranking lists. The ranking lists offer an opportunity to compare organizations to each other, among other things depending on industry, nationality and diversity.

In the interview with John he confirmed that the certification of Excellence is used to create these rankings. Simultaneously he described both concepts as a tool to brag. The following excerpt was stated by Excellence employee John during the conducted interview.

"Both the most excellent ranking list and the certification are under our recognition umbrella, which means that we recognize XYZ company as an excellent employer. Of course, we do that to provide bragging power." - John.

This statement suggested that the certification can be used as a form of power. Meaning that the higher the employer is ranked, the more power an organization has to brag. The issue of power also relates to some organizations appearing superior to others. Therefore, according to John, organizations who are on the most excellent employer lists are eager to promote their listing. However, John also stressed that organizations cannot be considered for the lists if they are not certified.

"The certification is the qualification level for the list."- John.

Based on these excerpts the certification can be viewed as a stepping stone towards a list that offers a higher level of power to brag, as an organization can merely be ranked on these lists once it is certified. Thus, the organizational rankings appeared as a greater achievement than gaining the actual certification. John explained this by comparing the organizational ranking list to the Olympics, where the certification serves as the qualification to participate in the games. Resulting in organizations which are listed on the final ranking lists, to be considered the winners of the competition. Meaning that an organizational culture certification can be used as a direct and indirect tool of power for the organizations to display how much more desirable

their culture is in comparison to other employers. For clients this too appears more powerful, because their branding claims are authorized by a third party, in this case Excellence, rather than bragging without substantial proof of their excellent working culture. One of Excellence's clients, Anna, claimed this in the following excerpt.

" (..) it's not ourselves saying we are good, it's external company measuring and then following data and choosing to show this" – Anna.

As similarly described in chapter 4.2.2, this suggested that efforts of employer branding are more likely to be trusted when the claims are confirmed by a party other than the organization about whom the claim is made. However, organizational efforts to promote themselves as an excellent employer or making claims to make themselves look good, even when confirmed by a third-party, can also be perceived as fake, which client Maya emphasized in her statement below.

"I'm basically allergic to just doing something to be able to tell other people that you're good. (..) It's just not real. (..) How do you work with it? How do you make that every year? That's the hard part" - Maya.

From Maya's remark can be taken that employer branding efforts that merely serve the purpose of bragging to others how good an organization is, instead of providing a framework of organizational actions, lack reliability. Employees of Excellence, unsurprisingly, responded differently to this while they emphasized that the journey to become certified and being nominated is not an easy one and therefore bragging about the accomplishment was claimed to be validated and serves as a reward for the clients' efforts. Employee Sophia stated the following.

"Of course it is bragging, but I mean it's, to be able to get there you have to put in the work"

- Sophia.

This however contradicted Sophia's earlier statement that was mentioned in the previous subtheme, in which she claimed that *it [the certification] is not just a mark or something they [clients] want to brag about, it's genuine interest.* Nonetheless, through the above mentioned excerpts there appeared to be a relation between the perception of the certification and a client's intention to work on organizational culture to become certified. Excellence employee Victoria presented her view of this in the passage below.

"So it's not, it's not just a quick fix. Do our survey and then you're set. It might actually be a lot of hard work to improve. (..) That's why we have a pretty high set bar for certification, because we really want it to be something that's real. Like we don't want everybody to be an excellent certified company because that would sort of take away the value. You really want to only certify really good employers. - Victoria.

Victoria suggested that the amount of time and effort that organizations spend on improving their organizational culture contributes to the authenticity of the certification and consequently the credibility of employer branding practices. On the other hand, she described that the certification loses its value when it is no longer a unique organizational feature. This contradicted the documentation of Excellence in which it was stated that the overall organizational mission is to make every company on earth an excellent employer. When following this mission, one can assume that the current minimum score to obtain the certification becomes the norm for all organizations, resulting in them potentially losing their power to brag. This is implied because from the above mentioned excerpts it can be taken that the level of bragging power is linked to the final score of the employee survey. The controversy of the score has been previously discussed in chapter 4.1.2, where it became apparent that there are different opinions and perceptions on what score is considered excellent and how clients do not necessarily brag about their certification or score as a result of this.

On the other hand, Excellence does make a distinction between what is considered excellent and most excellent by providing the ranking lists. The employees of Excellence all similarly explained that clients can be nominated for the most excellent employer ranking list after they have been certified, but this requires a very high score on the employee survey. The listing is a bonus on top of the certification that Excellence offers, which is explained by Excellence employee Victoria.

"Only the ones that have like 95% and up are actually considered most excellent employers in Sweden. (..) You can never pay for the ranking. So even if you are not certified, you pay the same amount as the ones who are certified" - Victoria.

This suggested that after a client has set the agreement with Excellence to conduct the survey and potentially get certified, no additional charges are added when it turns out that a client scores at a level that results in a nomination for the ranking lists. Consequently, reaching the ranking list becomes the next step for more bragging power after becoming certified, as the higher an employer is on the ranking list the more competitive advantage the organization has. However, it was explained by Excellence employee John that not every organization can eventually end up on the ranking list, which is displayed in the excerpt below.

"So different levels of recognition. And for some, their dream is to participate in the Olympics. (..) Being listed among the most excellent employers is a competition between companies" – John.

This statement suggested that organizational efforts to create healthy work environments for their employees is about participating and/or winning a competition. We found this noteworthy as it highlighted a different motivational factor for clients, which can be circled back to what was previously mentioned regarding the relation between how the certification is perceived and a client's intention to become certified. As from the empirical material in this chapter, suggestion was made that bragging without sincere culture work potentially equals negative

perception of the certification, while a client's genuine intention to work on and improve its organizational culture likely results in the certification receiving higher value. So, John's suggestion that organizations view culture work and becoming certified as a means of competition can be questioned in terms of the perception of sincerity.

Overall, the above mentioned excerpts showed that measuring and ranking organizational culture can be perceived in different ways depending on why and in what way it is presented by a company. As stated multiple times, clients are considered excellent employers when they score between 70 and 100 on the employee survey. However, the empirical material showed that the closer a client gets to a 100 the more bragging power the organization has, thus within those margins there appeared to be sub levels of excellence. Yet an organization that scores 70 can consider itself equally Excellence certified as an organization that scores 93, as the stamp that is awarded is the same for both results. Whereas it can be expected that in reality there is a noticeable difference between how the organizational culture is perceived by employees in comparison to how it is experienced by employees. Excellence made an effort to create a distinction between higher and lower scores through the ranking lists, giving organizations that end up on the listing more power, which was suggested to be more valuable. Nonetheless, it turned out that the value of the certification is more likely to be determined by a company's intention to become certified or ranked. This is however challenging to capture in a stamp or ranking list.

5. Discussion

Below we continue by discussing the implication of our empirical findings in relation to our literature review. The first part revolves around discussing measuring organizational culture through a certification, which relates to our first research question regarding the meaning of the certification, along with discussing how throughout our research, references to the employee survey and overall score led us to believe that these aspects play a vital role in the sensemaking of the certification. Consequently, the second part of our discussion connects to our second research question and centers around what the certification represents and in what way it is used for employer branding purposes. A final discussion dives into the references that were made in our findings to environmental certifications and washing, and what the differences and similarities are to a culture certification.

5.1 Measuring organizational culture

From our empirical findings we found that Excellence employees and their clients have a strong focus on the employee survey and the score regarding how they make sense of the certification. However, while the certification's purpose is to capture the excellent organizational cultures, as we stipulated in the literature review quantitative measures such as surveys and numbers despite seemingly telling us the truth, they may not be applicable when capturing ambiguous phenomena such as organizational culture. Thus corresponding to our first research question, "*What is the meaning of an organizational culture certification?*", we explore the different interpretations and limitations of the certification from Excellence employees and their clients to understand what the certification aims to achieve through its quantitative measures.

We see in our findings that Excellence employees and their clients generally lack reflexivity regarding the quantitative measurements of the employee survey and score, despite those being fundamental in their sensemaking of the certification. We identified four related themes from our findings regarding measuring organizational culture: Quantifying organizational culture, the simplicity of the certification, setting the bar for an excellent culture and comparing organizational cultures. Firstly, quantifying organizational culture explores the benefits and the implicit and explicit limitations of the employee survey and score as a means to measure organizational culture. Secondly, we emphasize the simplicity of the current certification

approach when assessing an organizational culture. We then move on to discuss the implications for Excellent not only measuring culture but also setting the bar for an excellent culture and finally, we look into how the certification can be used to compare organizational cultures for competitive advantages.

5.1.1 Quantifying organizational culture

In our theme in chapter 4 on 'Becoming certified by Excellence' we see that the employee survey and the overall score of 70 serve as a key aspect to how Excellence employees and their clients make sense of the certification. However, as it was specified in the literature review, organizational culture is a complex phenomenon and quantifying it often leads to less reliable knowledge (Einola & Alvesson, 2021). Thus in the following section we aim to explore the implications of using quantifying measurements such as questionnaires and scores as indicators for organizational culture and to what extent it impacts the meaning of the certification. From our empirical findings we see that both Excellence employees and their clients explicitly and implicitly comment on the limitations of the employees survey and the overall score as a means to capture organizational cultures.

Moreover, the employee survey is considered beneficial as we found in our empirical material that it enables Excellence employees to collect more data in their database which they then use to work more effectively and certify organizations. This perspective rests on the assumption that numbers and data tell the truth (Porter, 1995) however, there are limitations to the quantification of ambiguous phenomenons such as organizational culture (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2016). One Excellence employee explicitly recognized the issues of survey bias which was also mentioned by one of their clients who stated that there was a risk of employees just 'ticking off boxes'. Similarly, Robbins (2002, p. 213 cited in Einola & Alvesson, 2021), claims that rather than offering insight into what the respondents actually think, answers given in questionnaires are often the result of boredom and politeness. Thus creating a deviation in the feedback and as the employee survey serves as the foundation for the certification, the reliability of the certification is naturally called into question as the overall score might be a result of survey bias.

Another interesting limitation we found in our empirical findings is how the overall score in some accounts fails to capture the underlying interpretations of organizational culture. As Einola & Alvesson (2021) suggest, organizational culture is a matter of complex realities and organizations thus need to be careful when they move from data and numbers to making knowledge claims. We found in the empirical material that employees at Excellence implicitly express concern about how the overall score quantifies organizational culture. Excellence employees recognize that the overall score fails to illustrate if certain departments or genders are dissatisfied or unhappy with the organizational culture. While Excellence employees try to accommodate these challenges it is a difficult task and previous literature also state that people tend to have different preferences when it comes to what they individually consider an ideal organizational culture (Kaupa, 2023). We thus interpret this as an illustration of the issues with the certification, as not everyone agrees on what an excellent culture is and people may have different expectations or understanding of what constitutes an excellent culture. This emphasizes that the concept of organizational culture can be hard to grasp (Alvesson, Blom & Sveningsson, 2017; Schein, 2010) and quantifying it into a certification does not necessarily make it true.

5.1.2 The simplicity of the certification

As also shown in our theme 'Becoming certified by Excellence', when we asked Excellence employees questions on what makes the certification applicable, we noticed a pattern of Excellence employees referring back to the academic validation of the employee survey and how it was developed on the basis of extensive research. However, as we mentioned in the literature review, while it is considered a common practice to assume that questionnaires work simply because others have used them and the research has been published in highly ranked journals this is often not the case (Einola & Alvesson, 2021). Firstly, we thus interpret the pattern of Excellence employees referring back to the academic background of the employee survey as an example of their lack of reflexivity on the applicability of the certification as it appears that they use the validation to compensate for any uncertainties. However there was one exception, as one Excellence employee appeared to reflect on the story about the history of the concept and acknowledged that it could have been formulated for commercial purposes which thereby suggests that the certification could be built on a somewhat vague basis.

Secondly, we found in our literature review that researchers conducting questionnaire-based surveys are encouraged to supplement them with a qualitative component (Einola & Alvesson, 2021) which we learnt that Excellence also tries to do as they recommend their clients to fill out an additional culture policy review to create context for the certification. As we stipulated in our literature review, organizational culture can only be evaluated in its operating environment (Schein, 2009), however, Excellence decided that it should not be a mandatory requirement for SME to achieve the certification. From our empirical findings we saw that Excellence employee Sophia explained that it was decided to make the culture policy review optional to simplify the certification process. We view Excellence's attempt to simplify the certification process as an example of reducing the distinctiveness that organizational culture entails. However, by excluding the culture policy review from the certification process, Excellence appears to prioritize convenience or quantity over quality, while our results show that clients stated that the culture policy review was taken out of the process because it was "too much work". However, by excluding the culture policy review in the certification process, the certification fails to paint an accurate picture of the organizational context thus the meaning of the certification appears to be an incomplete presentation of the organizational culture. The foundation of the certification which includes the employee survey and the overall score suggests that the certification in some accounts fails to capture organizational culture.

5.1.3 Setting the bar for an Excellent culture

Moreover, while academic literature emphasizes that distinctions cannot be made between a "right" or "wrong" culture (Schein, 2010) the certification contradicts this perspective as it suggests that there is such a thing as a "right" organizational culture by providing a certification. However, our empirical findings therefore also boil down to Excellence not only measuring organizational cultures, they too set the bar for what a desired organizational culture ought to be. While organizational certifications are often considered more credible as they are authorized by an external party (Saks, 2022; Houghton et al., 2015) not one of Excellence's employees or clients managed to justify why the bar was set at 70 and there were also conflicting views on whether a score of 100 was achievable. This suggests some issues with the interpretation of the score in general and that the meaning of the certification is built on a somewhat vague basis. It more so emphasizes that a somewhat reliable concept appears unstable and biased. Similarly, as stipulated in the literature review, numbers do not always tell

the truth and often are based upon vague and ambiguous claims (Porter, 1995). Thus we interpret this as Excellence merely dictating how employees ought to feel about their organizational culture for it to be considered excellent and thereby also objictifying their emotions. Previous literature (Islam, 2013) claims that despite a renewed interest in the ethical implications of people management many organizations end up reducing employees to material and psychological resources to be managed for financial gain. Compared to our findings the certification ends up treating employees' emotions as an essential element for financial gain.

Another interesting perspective on the issue of setting the bar for an excellent organizational culture is the intangible nature of employees' emotions that serves as the foundation of the certification. As the emotions of employees are considered to be highly subjective, how does Excellence then decide on the threshold for the certification? In both the literature review (Robbins, 2002, p. 213 cited in Einola & Alvesson, 2021) and empirical findings we saw that measuring culture is difficult as it tends to vary and is highly subjective, which exemplifies that the score cannot be based on science but is rather a judgment issue. However, as culture is a subjective experience and in trying to objectify it the certification assumes a position of 'human capital' which as Islam (2013) argues is where the employees are regarded as human resources to achieve organizational goals. Thus organizational culture can be used in a reifying way, in which employees are typified as evidence or viewed superficially (Islam, 2013). Thus the meaning of the certification is obscured by the quantification and objectification of organizational culture and employee emotions as it blurs the many nuances into a fade. By allowing the numbers to tell the truth (Porter, 1995), Excellence permits numbers to set the bar and justify what is considered an excellent organizational culture for their clients.

5.1.4 Comparing organizational cultures

Pondering on the meaning of the certification, alternative perspectives in literature (Hofstede et al., 1990) on the measuring of organizational culture emphasize that the numeric measurements do hold some value to organizations. As an assessment of culture is invaluable without having a purpose of detecting an organizational problem, whereas when an issue is identified, most commonly determining how the culture affects the problem is rather essential (Schein, 2010). In the process of obtaining the certification, the employee survey can help organizations to identify problem areas and therefore the meaning of the certification process

can possibly be interpreted as one of gaining insight to employees' emotions and to find areas to improve. For this reason the certification can be viewed as a diagnostic tool as the process in achieving it would highlight potential problems or benefits of the organizational culture (Marsick & Watkins, 2003). However, from our empirical findings we saw conflicting views on whether or not clients work with the survey result in order to improve. In addition, our findings have shown that Excellence equally does not follow up on implications when improvement areas are identified and can therefore not guarantee that the employee survey results are utilized. For this reason, the meaning of the employee survey cannot merely be stated as one of improvement.

When assessing the meaning of the certification, distinction between the employee survey and the actual certification have to be made, since the employee survey holds various quantitative insights whereas the certification itself is merely a stamp, meaning that they hold different meanings and functionalities. The certification appears to have the same function regardless of whether a certified organization is working with the survey outcome or not. So, as shown in our results, it can rather be viewed as a means of competitive advantage while it was suggested that the certification serves as a tool for comparing and ranking employers. Consistent with existing literature (Hofstede et al., 1990), the certification thereby allows organizations to derive financial benefits by transforming their organizational culture into a recognizable stamp that can be leveraged for competitive advantages. While the certification encompasses multiple dimensions, its core meaning revolves around comparing organizational cultures to each other. For this reason we suggest that the meaning of the organizational culture certification can be considered one of gaining competitive advantage through differentiation, rather than providing an accurate representation of an organization's culture.

5.1.5 Summary of measuring organizational culture

To summarize, measuring organizational culture is considered challenging due to the many complexities and nuances it holds. Corresponding with our first research question, "*What is the meaning of an organizational culture certification?*", we explored the different interpretations and limitations of the certification. From our first two sub-themes in the discussion we looked closer at how Excellence measures organizational culture. We found that when quantifying organizational culture, interpretations and nuances get lost in the process and the meaning of the certification appears somewhat vague and ambiguous. Also despite efforts to add

qualitative measurements in simplifying the certification process, Excellence appears to choose quantity over quality which we argue creates an incomplete picture of organizational culture thus the certification seems to provide limited insight into an organization's culture. We then discovered that the certification process boils down to Excellence not only measuring culture but also setting the bar for what a "right" organizational culture entails. Therefore we argue how in doing so, Excellence made it possible for their clients to utilize their employees' emotions for organizational performance gain. Finally, we discussed how the certification could not merely be seen as a diagnostic tool for organizations to improve. However, instead of providing an accurate representation of an organization's culture, the meaning of the organizational culture certification appeared to be one of gaining a competitive advantage through differentiation.

5.2 Branding organizational culture

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the meaning of an organizational culture certification can be found in the comparison of cultures in order to gain competitive advantage and as stated by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) when an organization seeks to differentiate itself from competitors it most often applies branding tools. Thus, our second research question sought to find out how an organizational culture certification relates to employer branding. In this chapter we therefore continue by analyzing how an organizational culture certification contributes to employer branding by examining the empirical findings in order to evaluate how Excellence's employees relate the certification to employer branding and how their clients use the certification to strengthen their employer brand, while research suggests that creating a brand is a challenging process and many organizations often struggle with constructing an accurate approach (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Frandsen, 2017).

Our empirical findings led us to identify five themes that sparked our interest in the area of employer branding and related literature. First of all, we will explore whether an organizational culture certification can be an effective branding tool. We will then delve into the motives behind an organization's decision to use this certification, either because of or despite its usefulness. Subsequently, we will examine how the certification is applied for branding purposes after which we analyze the potential for deception in its application. Finally, as our study has a particular interest in determining whether an organizational culture certification can be associated with culture washing, we will evaluate this.

5.2.1 Organizational culture certification: A successful branding tool?

As previously stated, according to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) an employer brand specifically focuses on how distinction can be made between various employers. Our empirical findings suggest that Excellence's organizational culture certification is used to rate the quality of an organization as an employer, so since the findings show that the certification is used to make comparisons between several employers and create competitive advantage, the organizational culture certification fundamentally appears to have the function of an employer branding tool. However, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) suggest that the employer branding process involves three steps: firstly, creating a value proposition that accurately reflects the organizational culture, management approach, and employee viewpoint. Secondly, utilizing this proposition for marketing purposes. Finally, "walking the talk" by following through on the promises made in the value proposition. When discussing our empirical findings in relation to this three-steps process there are multiple elements that we found interesting to argue. First of all, when analyzing our empirical findings it can be suggested that the certification does not give a completely true representation, for the reason that it is mainly focused on the employee viewpoint as the certification is obtained through an employee survey. Even though the findings also suggest that, in order to obtain a spot on the most excellent employer ranking list companies are obliged to provide a culture policy review, which includes a summary of an organization's management approach and processes for culture work, acquiring the certification on the other hand excludes this aspect. For this reason the certification appears to be a subjective representation and one can argue that organizational culture is more than a mere recap of employees' viewpoint. Secondly, in relation to the final step of the employer branding process, the empirical findings suggest that Excellence does not necessarily follow up on the actions that organizations take after receiving the survey results and certification, unless they purchase Excellence's consultancy services. Meaning that the certification fails to capture organizational efforts of "walking the talk".

All in all, resulting in the certification providing an inaccurate representation of a company's culture characteristics and not fulfilling all steps of the employer branding process in order for the tool to be completely successful and generate competitive advantage. As a result, doubt appears reasonable about whether using an organizational culture certification as a branding

tool does or does not meet the expectations of the audience, which in return raises concern about culture washing while this suggests branded claims not living up to expectations.

5.2.2 Motives for employer branding

Although it appears questionable whether an organizational culture certification is an accurate tool for employer branding, our empirical findings highlight that the main purpose of having an excellent culture is to promote and market it as a means of employer branding, since suggestion is made that employer branding results in retention and attraction of employees and financial benefits. However, there is room for debate regarding the credibility of these motivators to become certified. Specifically, it can be questioned how current employees benefit from an organizational culture certification in terms of employee retention. After analyzing the empirical data, we remain wondering about the reasons behind an employee's need for confirmation of their own feelings regarding their level of job satisfaction. It may seem counterintuitive to use the certification as a tool for employee retention, as it is unclear whether an unsatisfied employee would be more likely to stay with a certified company or whether a satisfied employee would be more likely to leave an uncertified company. This creates an interesting paradox, as the certification may only serve to confirm what current employees already know, rendering it irrelevant.

Furthermore, while the empirical data suggests that the certification is useful for job seekers who want to compare potential employers, in the findings more emphasis is placed on the certification's use as a branding tool to increase a company's financial turnover. Our empirical results suggest that improving employee retention and attraction can enhance financial performance. However, we also found that the motivation behind a company's effort to obtain the certification can influence how the certification is perceived. It is possible to argue that a financial motivation to become certified, rather than a genuine concern for employee satisfaction, may result in a less positive perception of the certification. This correlates with research that has been arguing that companies, which solely promote and express personal interest in their employees as an element of employer branding, potentially mislead (prospective) staff for their own benefit instead of sincere effort to create a healthy working culture (Cushen, 2009; Müller, 2017). Nonetheless, based upon our empirical findings, it is evident that the certification does not communicate what an organization's motivation is to

become certified, leaving room for assumptions. This relates to the research of Bertilsson and Rennstam (2018) as they argue that in branding practices certain aspects of an organization are diminished while others are highlighted. Our findings suggest that the organizational culture certification does just that, as the stamp promotes a positive aspect of an organization but excludes where an organization still has room to improve. By portraying such a positive image despite the possibility of unfulfilled expectations, this may already indicate aspects of culture washing. Even though our results show that top management of a certified organization are potentially motivated to become certified so they can receive the results of the conducted survey and use this data to improve the organization's culture in the areas in which it scored low, the certification on the other hand shifts the focus of other organizational members and external parties, who do not have access to the survey data, to merely the aspects that are positive to highlight.

5.2.3 Good culture? Bad culture?

As suggested in literature, healthy work environments do not emerge from mere expression of concern about organizational culture (Dabirian, Kietzmann & Diba, 2017), however as has been established at this point, our findings suggest that an organizational culture certification fails to summarize all organizational efforts for culture work and is rather referred to as a quality stamp to qualify how well an organization treats its employees. In return the organization can use this stamp for employer branding purposes in order to display itself to external parties as having a 'good' organizational culture. The concept therefore contradicts academic literature in which it is claimed that no distinction can be made between 'good' or 'bad' cultures nor can a culture be ranked as better or worse, but can merely be considered "right" or "wrong" in relation to the company goals (Schein, 2009). Although our findings show that employees of Excellence claim to encourage certified organizations to work with the results of the survey, the empirical data displays that the stamp in itself does not specify why and how an organization works with its organizational culture goals. In addition, the organization we studied is making an effort to do the opposite of what Schein (2010) is suggesting, while it created a most excellent employer ranking list and presents this as a company goal to work towards, which in return can be used as a different level of bragging power. The findings suggest that in regards to organizational culture a company's first goal could be to become certified, after which the next goal is to be listed as (one of the) most

excellent employer(s). Then again, in our findings it is also stated that the certification is not mandatory for organizations to obtain, meaning that the culture of a certified organization is not by definition better or worse than a culture of an organization that is not certified, while the latter organization might just not have taken the effort to obtain the stamp.

5.2.4 Caught in a trap of deception

So far, from the above mentioned paragraphs, it can be suggested that a certification that symbolizes a quality stamp is unable to capture the full picture of an organization's culture. For this reason we make the assumption that an organizational culture certification leaves a lot open to interpretation and can therefore be considered deceiving as the concept appears ambiguous and sparks different expectations. This is aligned with Frandsen's research (2017), which highlights that branding tools often fall into the trap of simplifying complex organizational concepts into catchy messages, while in reality, such concepts cannot be easily condensed. For similar reasons, based on our empirical findings, we suggest that the certification in some ways can be considered merely an alluring message that creates deception. Firstly, as mentioned before, it has become evident that there are varying interpretations of the minimum score required to obtain the certification. While the provider of the certification considers a score of 70 to be excellent, clients appear to disagree. Moreover, not all departments within a certified organization need to score above 70 in order to obtain the certification, which means that a newly hired employee may be disappointed if they join a department that did not receive a satisfactory score. Besides that, all organizations that score 70 or higher receive the same stamp. This makes it difficult to differentiate between organizations that supposedly have a significantly different culture, such as those that score 71 or 93. In addition, the data indicates that no full guarantee can be given by the provider of the certification that employees are not influenced by their management team in the process of filling out the survey, which raises concern about the credibility of the survey results that forms the foundation of the certification.

Furthermore, as discussed earlier in chapter 5.1.2, the certification is based on a survey that equally contributes to oversimplifying organizational culture, which was highlighted by scholars such as Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017) and Schein (2010). Overall, these issues contribute to the certification appearing as a weak extract of a complex concept, hence its tendency to be deceiving.

Finally, the certification can be considered misleading while in our findings it was highlighted that the certification can be used for branding purposes over a maximum timespan of 1 year. However, it became evident that it is challenging to capture an organization's culture based on an annual survey because organizational culture is not static but rather subject to continuous internal and external changes. Therefore, relying on a single survey to represent an organization's culture for an extended period of time may not accurately reflect the current state of the company culture. For this reason, it appears all the more interesting that comparison is made by Excellence's employees to environmental certifications, because these certifications represent organizational efforts to produce sustainably, and unlike organizational culture, production processes are not a subjective experience (Hauser. Ebert & Eßer, 2011; Flagstad, Hauge & Johnsen, 2022).

5.2.5 Culture washing: genuine or unfounded?

As previously stated, the empirical findings revealed that the organizational culture certification is awarded based on the outcomes of an employee satisfaction survey. However, the empirical results equally suggest that such a survey is subject to fluctuations, which makes the certification less objective compared to an environmental certification that assesses the production process of a product. An organizational culture certification rather leaves room for interpretation. Although production processes allow for less interpretation, in literature it was established that environmental certifications have been under much scrutiny as they reduce the complexity of CSR practices, making them misleading to consumers (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009; Alonso-Calero, Cano & Guerrero-Pérez, 2021). Our empirical findings similarly suggest that the organizational culture certification can be considered misleading to potential employees, because it is also an effort to condense a complex concept into a certification in addition to deceiving features which we stated in the previous subchapter.

Since comparison was made to environmental certifications and as these are often associated with deception and so-called green washing (Vanhamme & Grobben, 2009), it appears interesting to discuss an organizational culture certification in relation to the new phenomenon of 'culture washing' that has been mentioned on popular websites and refers to organizations who are falsely promoting their organizational culture (Fortier, 2019; Fataar, 2022; Schmidt,

n.d.). Whereas organizations can equally be accused of woke washing when it brands itself as an active participant in tackling societal issues but has undetermined practices that prove their involvement (Vredenburg et al., 2020), similarly from our empirical findings suggestion can be made that an organizational culture certification proves little in regards to an organization's culture work, for the reason that it became evident that the certification has little value without context and fails to capture how an organization "walks the talk". Hence, an organizational culture certification failing to provide full transparency.

Besides that, in our empirical findings it was suggested that skepticism in regards to the phenomenon of culture washing can possibly exist, however it was also suggested that organizations do not have equal obligation to certify their organizational culture in comparison to certifying production processes as sustainable. It remains arguable what influence this has in regards to culture washing, particularly while other types of washing did not necessarily emerge from a fixed obligation. However, previous studies have shown that 'washing' tends to occur when a highly discussed issue becomes the subject of branding practices (Vredenburg et al., 2020). Excellence appears to be aware of this while it was claimed that the organization is making an effort to ensure that their certification is credible and cannot be obtained effortlessly. On the other hand, it was suggested that other providers of certifications are less reliable, meaning that it can be deemed reasonable to harbor skepticism about the credibility of an organizational culture certification. Then again, as previously established, our findings suggest that doubt equally appears reasonable about the organizational culture certification of Excellence as it was rather considered to be a symbolic stamp than an accurate representation of an organization's culture, as our research results suggest that it fails to capture the quality of organizational culture over a timespan of 12 months.

So overall, based on our empirical findings, suggestion can be made that an organizational culture certification can in a few ways be considered a deceiving branding tool, while the concept does not lend itself to measurement nor can its complexity be reduced to one generalized quality stamp. For this reason the certification potentially creates false expectations, which is considered a feature of culture washing. In our research the phenomenon of culture washing was referred to organizational efforts that falsely promote a healthy organizational culture when in reality the branded claims do not meet the expectations. Based on our empirical findings, in one way it can be argued that an organizational culture certification is a means of culture washing because it is an attempt to capitalize on the growing

demand for employees in competitive industries. On the other hand, we recognize that not every certified organization may engage in culture washing, as our findings demonstrate that the employee survey, which serves as the foundation of the certification, can provide valuable information for enhancing working conditions. Thus, the certification process may not necessarily be viewed as a tool for creating a false impression of organizational culture, however it became evident that the certification itself leaves so much open to interpretation due to its inability to create an accurate representation of a company's culture, that overall we consider it to be a rather ineffective tool, while it turns out to have little meaning at all when it provides no context.

5.2.6 Summary of branding organizational culture

All in all, in this chapter we discussed 5 themes which examined if an organizational culture certification is an effective branding tool, the motives behind its use, how it is applied for branding, the potential for deception in its application, and whether it is associated with culture washing. Our discussion led us to suggest that the certification is not considered a successful branding tool as it does not fulfill all steps of the employer branding process and therefore fails to accurately represent a company's culture characteristics. Besides that, an interesting paradox was identified in the motive to increase employee retention through the use of the certification as it may merely validate information that current employees already know, making its use insignificant and although the survey results motivate top management to improve low performing areas, the certification rather shifts focus of other parties towards positive aspects only. Furthermore, we determined that the certification contradicts literature that suggests that organizational culture cannot be labeled "good" or "bad" without context nor can it necessarily be considered better or worse in comparison to non-certified organizations. Finally, we specified multiple features of the certification that can be considered deceiving, leading to our discussion regarding the certification's relation to culture washing in which we suggested that the certification in some ways indicates aspects of this new concept.

6. Conclusion

In this thesis we set out to develop a deeper insight into the functionality of an organizational culture certification by studying its meaning, how it is applied in employer branding practices, along with making an effort to question its implication and how they can be obtained. Our study aims to answer two research questions: 'What is the meaning of an organizational culture certification?' and 'How does an organizational culture certification relate to employer branding?'. By gathering insights from clients and employees of a company which provides an organizational culture certification, this study makes an effort to provide answers to these questions.

6.1 Empirical findings

Our first finding shows that there are various complications regarding the foundation of the organizational culture certification which exists of an employee survey. We found that when quantifying organizational culture through an employee survey the feedback that organizations receive is subjected to a deviation due to the presence of survey bias. Moreover, we found that for reasons of convenience the employee survey, despite being open to bias, is the only measurement that is considered when assessing an organization for obtaining the certification. This suggests that quantity is prioritized over quality whereas we argue that a certification that is built upon a subjective employee survey and overall score provides limited insight into all aspects of an organization's culture. Throughout our empirical findings Excellence employees remain unreflexive regarding the certification as they repeatedly refer to the academic validation when faced with uncertainty which led us to question the actuality of it.

Secondly, our empirical findings signify that the otherwise reliable concept of organizational culture certification seems quite unstable as there is limited verification for the overall score and conflicting views on which outcome is considered achievable for their clients. This led us to believe that it boils down to Excellence not only measuring culture but setting a bar for organizational culture and employee contentment. Thus in doing so, Excellence made it possible for their clients to utilize their employees' emotions for organizational performance gain. Moreover, despite the employee survey enabling organizations to find areas to improve when assessing the certification solely, we found that it could be viewed as a means of competitive advantage as not everybody works with the results from the employee survey.

So, returning to the first research question in which we examine the meaning of an organizational culture certification, we found that it cannot merely be viewed as a diagnostic tool as it is unable to provide an accurate representation of an organization's culture. However, through leveraging employee emotions and transforming organizational culture into a recognizable stamp, the meaning of an organizational culture certification appears to be one of gaining competitive advantage through differentiation.

This meaning indicates aspects of employer branding which brings us to answering our second research question on how the certification relates to employer branding. Although an organizational culture certification initially appears as a branding tool, our research suggests doubt about the functionality of the certification as a means of employer branding. Through our study it becomes clear that an organizational culture certification is not necessarily a successful branding instrument since it appears to be unable to provide an accurate representation of all features of an organization's culture. We discovered multiple issues which argue for the tendency of deception. These include differing interpretations of the minimum score required for certification, the fact that all certified organizations with various scores receive the same stamp, concerns about the credibility of the survey results, oversimplification of organizational culture and finally the certification can be considered misleading as it can be used for branding purposes over a maximum timespan of 1 year, whereas our research has shown that organizational culture is not static but rather subject to continuous internal and external changes. Overall, these issues contribute to the certification appearing as a weak extract of a complex concept, meaning that in regards to employer branding it can be viewed as a rather misleading than effective tool, which leads us to associate the certification with culture washing as this concept suggests organizations making inaccurate branding claims.

All in all, our research indicates that an organizational culture certification fails to capture the full picture of a company's culture. The certification appears to be subject to fluctuations due to its subjective nature, making it all the more interesting that comparison was made to environmental certifications, while these assess the production process of a product which to the contrary is evaluated in a more objective manner. Although both certifications are generally considered branding tools, the requirements which a company needs to meet to obtain the certifications are built on different foundations. Nonetheless, our study suggests that an organizational culture certification can equally be subject to washing, while its aim appears to be to invite positive assumptions from prospective employees without providing them with any

context. This can potentially lead to expectations not being met once an employee is hired, leaving one merely with disappointment. For this reason, when using an organizational culture certification for employer branding purposes, it can be considered a tool that contributes to culture washing as it possibly creates false expectations. On the other hand, we acknowledge that this does not necessarily have to be the case for each certified organization, because our results have shown that the survey, that forms the basis of the certification, can offer useful insights into employee satisfaction which can be used to improve working conditions. The certification process therefore does not necessarily appear as a means of culture washing, while there are more nuances to it. However, the certification in itself seems merely an empty signifier that does not provide details about any organizational efforts for culture work.

6.2 Theoretical contribution

As stated in our background and problem statement, the concept of organizational culture has garnered increasing attention in recent years and is now frequently promoted for branding purposes, because it has become a fundamental aspect of an organization's reputation and can provide a competitive advantage in terms of attracting and retaining employees (Gallup, 2022; Beardwell & Thompson, 2017; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Despite organizational culture and employer branding having been researched extensively for many years, more recent studies have highlighted concerns about organizations using branding practices as a means to pursue their financial interests, particularly when a certain topic gains popularity (Alonso-Calero, Cano & Guerrero-Pérez, 2021; Blackmer, 2019; Vredenburg et al., 2020). Therefore, relevance appears to investigate the contemporary aspects of organizational culture and employer branding in today's society.

Although our study has similar findings in regards to the measurement of organizational culture and the reduction of complex concepts in branding practices, we add to existing literature of Schein (2010) and Alvesson, Blom and Sveningsson (2017). These scholars have previously claimed that organizational culture cannot be accurately measured, however we delved deeper into this issue and analyzed the challenges that arise when organizational culture is in fact attempted to be measured by companies. In addition, our research focuses on one specific branding tool that tends to simplify organizational culture's complexity. This contributes to academic studies by providing a unique perspective, as previous research of Backhaus and

Tikoo (2004), Bertilsson and Rennstam (2018), and Frandsen (2017) have not examined this particular tool. Rather than making broad claims about branding in general, we aim to provide a more specialized understanding of this particular tool. So with our research we have gained insight in the technical significance of an organizational culture certification and explored creating a scientific meaning to this type of certification. And although the certification in practice is considered an employer branding tool, we suggest that the functionality of it appears not to be that simple and transparent. Our study therefore also adds to the research of Blackmer (2019), Vredenburg et al., (2020) and Alonso-Calero, Cano and Guerrero-Pérez (2021) by indicating that this form of branding can be considered a means of culture washing. Through the introduction of culture washing we present a new concept to academic literature.

6.3 Limitations

Our thesis exemplified the complicated nature of how Excellence employees and their clients perceive the organizational culture certification. Due to Excellence's specialized knowledge about the certification we questioned whether the results are generalisable across all of their clients. Also since Excellence's clients consist of various organizations across industries we found this to be an important limitation in our study as they have different expectations and perspectives on the certification. Despite this limitation, we believe that our findings of the scientific meaning behind the certification can be generalized across other organizations and industries as it focuses on how the certification is constructed by Excellence. Furthermore, we found that our study is limited to specifically Excellence's certification as each provider of such might have a different approach to becoming certified and thus the perceived benefits might not be generalizable.

Another limitation is the sample size of our study, as our findings consist of Excellence employees and their clients' subjective thoughts and opinions which might not be supported by other organizational members. However, since both employees and clients of Excellence had genuine and similar responses for example regarding the score and employer branding perspective, we believe that the smaller sample size does not impact the credibility of our empirical data.

Lastly, we found that our data collection adopts an inside-out perspective where we focused on interviewing Excellence employees providing the certification and management of organizations applying the certification. Thus our findings exhibit the intended purpose of the certification and possibly the wishes and fantasies regarding the certification which does not take into account the actuality of the external image the certification provides for potential employees. Since our study focuses on the relationship between the certification's foundation and employer branding as a means of culture washing, the absence of potential employees as a consideration does not affect our study's outcome.

6.4 Future research

Based on our findings and limitations, we suggest that future research is necessary in order to reinforce the generalisability of our findings. As mentioned in our limitations, we opt for an inside-out perspective when analyzing the intended and perceived outcomes of the certification. However, for future research we believe it to be interesting to dive into how potential employees make sense of the certification and how they interpret the certification in relation to the organizational culture. We believe that this perspective will add another dimension to the actuality of the intended and perceived outcomes by shedding light on the external meaning of the certification and how it relates to culture washing. Moreover, we find it of great interest to explore how employees in certified organizations view the certification and the process to become certified as it would expand our study by adding another dimension of analyzing the practical implications of an organizational culture certification.

As described in our limitations our sample size consists of Excellence clients across industries. We therefore believe that future research consisting of a broader sample size would generate findings that are more generalisable across industries in the private sector. Further, we found that a longitudinal study could be of interest as it might provide insight into how the perception of the organizational certification is affected and changed over time. Particularly during or after a period of recession with high unemployment rates as our study shows the certification as a means to attract and retain employees. Lastly, it would be interesting to research other providers of organizational culture certification as suggestions were made that at other providers clients can more or less buy the certifications without employee involvement which might make the point about employer branding as a form of culture washing more dominant.

6.5 Practical implications

We believe that our study holds practical implications, specifically to providers of organizational culture certifications or similar, since we propose that an organizational culture certification ought to provide more context to enhance its credibility. We also believe that organizations who brand the certification should add that to their branding practices. When examining certification practices, our study highlights the pitfalls in assessing organizational culture through quantitative measures. Our study sheds light on the trap of deceiving employer branding practices and makes an effort to raise awareness to be critical when encountering these efforts to persuade a positive image. Moreover, we believe that our study can be used to provide grounds to evaluate other providers of organizational culture certifications, specifically providers that offer clients the possibility to buy certifications without any evaluation, particularly as a means of culture washing.

Overall we propose practitioners to add additional evaluation measures to strengthen their certification's foundation when certifying an organizational culture, such as qualitative measurements even though these may be considered less convenient for their clients. We also believe that expanding on the certifications overall score would enhance the functionality as it would make the certification more transparent and perhaps more applicable across different industries. In other words, practitioners could differentiate between size, industry and sector when assessing their organizational culture, as what might be considered excellent in one industry might not be the same in a different one. Similarly, a need appears to provide critical markers such as when for example one gender or department scores below a certain threshold, then no matter the overall score the organization could not be certified.

7. References

Ahrne, G. & Svensson, P. (2011). Kvalitativa metoder i samhällsvetenskapen. In G. Ahrne & P. Svensson (eds), Handbokikvalítativametoder (pp. 10-18). Malmö: Liber.

Alonso-Calero, J.M., Cano, J., & Guerrero-Pérez, M.O. (2021). Is the "Green Washing" Effect Stronger than Real Scientific Knowledge? Are We Able to Transmit Formal Knowledge in the Face of Marketing Campaigns?, Sustainability, 14(285), p. 285.

Alvesson, M. (2002). Understanding Organizational Culture, SAGE Publications, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central

Alvesson, M., Blom, M., & Sveningsson, S. (2017). Reflexive leadership. Organizing in an imperfect world. London: Sage.

Alvesson, M. & Kärreman, D. (2007). Constructing Mystery: Empirical Matters in Theory Development, Academy of Management Review, 32(4), pp. 1265–1281.

Alvesson, M. & Sköldberg, K. (2018). Reflexive methodology: new vistas for qualitative research, 2nd edn, SAGE Publications.

Alvesson, M. & Sveningsson, S. (2016). Changing organizational culture: cultural change work in progress. Second edition. Routledge.

Ambler, T. & Barrow, S. (1996). The employer brand, Journal of Brand Management, Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 185-206.

Arkes, H. R & Blumer, C. (1985). The psychology of sunk cost, Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes 35(1): 124-140.

Backhaus, K., & Tikoo, S. (2004). Conceptualizing and researching employer branding. Career development international

Beardwell, J., & Thompson, A. (2017). Human Resource Management: a contemporary approach. 8. ed., Pearson Education Limited.

Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research, Qualitative Research, vol. 15, no. 2, pp. 219-234

Bertilsson, J., & Rennstam, J. (2018). The destructive side of branding: A heuristic model for analyzing the value of branding practice. Organization, 25 (2), 260-281.

Blackmer, C. E. (2019). Pinkwashing. Israel Studies, 24(2), 171–181.

Bowen, G.A. (2009). Document Analysis as a Qualitative Research Method, Qualitative Research Journal (RMIT Training Pty Ltd trading as RMIT Publishing), 9(2), pp. 27–40.

Bryman, A. (2012). Social Research Methods, 4th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bell, E., Bryman, A., & Harley, B. (2019). Business Research Methods, 5th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Cunliffe, A. L. (2008). Organization theory. London: Sage Publications

Cushen, J. (2009). "Branding Employees" Qualitative Research in Accounting and Management, 6(1/2), 102-114.

Dabirian, A., Kietzmann, J. & Diba, H. (2017). A great place to work!? Understanding crowdsourced employer branding, Business Horizons, 60(2), pp. 197–205.

Denzin, N. K. (1970). The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods. New York: Aldine.

Edwards, M. R. (2013). Employer branding: Developments and Challenges. Managing human resources: human resource management in transition, 389-410. (Chapter 18).

Eisner, E. W. (1991). The enlightened eye: Qualitative inquiry and the enhancement of educational practice. Toronto: Collier Macmillan, Canada.

Einola, K. & Alvesson, M. (2021). Behind the Numbers : Questioning Questionnaires, Journal of Management Inquiry, 30(1), pp. 102–114.

Fataar, L. (2022). Don't be fooled by the optics. Culture-washing is all around us, Available online: https://www.campaignasia.com/article/dont-be-fooled-by-the-optics-culture-washing-is-all-around-us/481898

Fereday, J. & Muir-Cochrane, E. (2006). Demonstrating rigor using thematic analysis: A hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding and theme development. International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 5(1), 80–92.

Flagstad, I., Hauge, Å. L., & Kjøs Johnsen, S. Å. (2022). Certification dissonance: Contradictions between environmental values and certification scheme requirements in small-scale companies. Journal of Cleaner Production, 358.

Fortier, O. (2019). The Culture of Culture-Washing, Available online: https://www.primospopuli.com/en/the-culture-of-culture-washing/#:~:text=Culture%2DWashing%3A%20A%20marketing%20or,a%20vibrant%20but%20misleading%20culture

Frandsen, S. (2017). The silver bullet of branding: Fantasies and practices of organizational identity work in organizational identity change process. Scandinavian Journal of Management, 33(4), 222–234.

Galasinski, D. & Kozlowska, O. (2010). Questionnaires and Lived Experience: Strategies of Coping With the Quantitative Frame, Qualitative Inquiry, 16(4), pp. 271–284.

Gallup. (2020). State of the Global Workplace 2022 Report [pdf]. Available at: https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace-2022-report.aspx.

Garrett, J., Hoitash, R. & Prawitt, D.F. (2014). Trust and Financial Reporting Quality, Journal of Accounting Research, 52(5), pp. 1087–1125.

Gartenberg, C., Prat, A. & Serafeim, G. (2019) 'Corporate Purpose and Financial Performance', Organization Science, 30(1), pp. 1–18.

Guiso, L., Sapienza, P. & Zingales, L. (2015). The Value of Corporate Culture, Journal of Financial Economics, 117(1), pp. 60–76.

Habermas, J. (1990). The hermeneutic claim to universality. In G. L. Ormiston and A. D. Schrift (Eds.), The hermeneutic tradition (pp. 245–72). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Hatch, M. J., & Schultz, M. (2001). Are the strategic stars aligned for your corporate brand? Harvard Business Review, 79(2), 128-134.

Hauser, G., Ebert, T., & Eßig, N. (2011). Green building certification systems. [Elektronisk resurs] Assessing sustainability - International system comparison - Economic impact of certifications. De Gruyter.

Highhouse, S., Lievens, F. & Sinar E. F. (2003). Measuring attraction to organizations, Educational & Psychological Measurement, 63(6), pp. 986–1001.

Hofstede, G., Neuijen, B., Ohayv, D. D., & Sanders, G. (1990). Measuring Organizational Cultures: A Qualitative and Quantitative Study across Twenty Cases. Administrative Science Quarterly, 35(2), 286-316.

Houghton, J. D., Pearce, C. L., Manz, C. C., Courtright, S., & Stewart, G. L. (2015). Sharing is caring: Toward a model of proactive caring through shared leadership, Human Resource Management Review, 25(3), pp. 313–327.

Islam, G. (2013). Recognizing employees: reification, dignity and promoting care in management, Cross Cultural Management: An International Journal, 20(2), pp. 235–250.

Jain, N. & Bhatt, P. (2015). Employment preferences of job applicants: unfolding employer branding determinants, Journal of Management Development, Vol. 34 No. 6, pp. 634-652.

Kaupa, S. (2023). Organizational learning culture and sustainable competitive advantage: implications for organizational development specialists. Development and Learning in Organizations, Vol. 37 No. 2, pp. 7-9.

Kvale, S. (1996). InterViews: An Introduction to Qualitative Research Interviewing, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Leekha Chhabra, N. & Sharma, S. (2014). Employer branding: strategy for improving employer attractiveness, International Journal of Organizational Analysis, Vol. 22 No. 1, pp. 48-60.

Marsick, V.J. & Watkins, K.E. (2003). Demonstrating the Value of an Organization's Learning Culture: The Dimensions of the Learning Organization Questionnaire, Advances in Developing Human Resources, 5(2), p. 132.

Müller, M. (2017). 'Brand-centred control': A study of internal branding and normative control. Organization Studies, 38(7), 895-915.

Rennstam, J & Wästerfors, D. (2018). Analyze! Crafting Your Data in Qualitative Research. 1ed ed., Studentlitteratur AB, Lund.

Palmer, I., Dunford, R. & Akin, D. (2016). Managing organizational change: a multiple perspectives approach. 3. ed., International ed. McGraw-Hill Education.

Porter, T.M. (1995) Trust in numbers. the pursuit of objectivity in science and public life. New paperback edition. Princeton University Press.

Prasad, P. (2018). Crafting qualitative research: beyond positivist traditions, 2nd edn, Routledge.

Purwadi, D. C., Febrianti, W., & Mirwansyah, D. (2020). Exploration of Leadership, Organizational Culture, Job Satisfaction, and Employee Performance. Technium Social Sciences Journal, 6, 116–130.

Saks, A.M. (2022). Caring human resources management and employee engagement, Human Resource Management Review, 32(3), pp. 1–15. doi:10.1016/j.hrmr.2021.100835.

Saunders, M., Lewis, P., & Thornhill, A. (2019). Research methods for business students. 8th edn, Pearson Education Limited.

Schein, E. H. (2009). The corporate culture survival guide, Vol. 158, John Wiley & Sons.

Schein, E. H. (2010). Organizational Culture and Leadership, Wiley. ProQuest Ebook Central

Schmidt, L. (n.d.). Culture Washing In The World Of Work. Available online: https://worldofwork.io/2020/01/culture-washing/

Styhre, A. (2013). How to Write Academic Texts: A Practical Guide, Lund: Studentlitteratur.

Szymańska, A., Zarządzania, K., & Wrocławiu, W. S. (2014). The Impact Of Organisational Culture On Employer Branding. In A. Z. Bielawska, & S. Flaszewska, Kulturowe Uwarunkowania Kreowania Wiedzy I Innowacji W Organizacjach. Monografie Politechniki Łódzkiej, 203–218.

Thompson, P. (2011). The trouble with HRM. Human Resource Management Journal, 21(4), 355–367.

Turban, D.B. & Cable, D.M. (2003). Firm Reputation and Applicant Pool Characteristics, Journal of Organizational Behavior, 24(6), pp. 733–751.

Vanhamme, J. & Grobben, B. (2009). "Too Good to Be True!". The Effectiveness of CSR History in Countering Negative Publicity, Journal of Business Ethics, 85, pp. 273–283.

Vogl, S. (2013). 'Telephone Versus Face-to-Face Interviews: Mode Effect on Semistructured Interviews with Children', Sociological Methodology, Vol. 43, No. 1, pp. 133-177.

Vredenburg, J., Kapitan, S., Spry, A., & Kemper, J. A. (2020). Brands Taking a Stand: Authentic Brand Activism or Woke Washing? Journal of Public Policy & Marketing, 39(4), 444–460.

Weigelt, K. & Camerer, C. (1988). Reputation and Corporate Strategy: A Review of Recent Theory and Applications, Strategic Management Journal, 9(5), pp. 443–454.

Yin, R.K. (1994). Case Study Research: Design and Methods, 2nd edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

8. Appendix

8.1 Appendix 1 - List of interviewees

Name (synonyms)	Profession
Sophia	Excellence employee
Victoria	Excellence employee
John	Excellence employee
Karen	Excellence employee
Louis	Excellence employee
Mia	Excellence employee
Josephine	Excellence employee
Claus	Excellence client, Leadership/HR
Laura	Excellence client, Manager
Maya	Excellence client, Leadership/HR
Sara	Excellence client, Manager
Anna	Excellence client, Leadership/HR

8.2 Appendix 2 - Interview Guide, Excellence employees

1. **Introduce ourselves**, mention anonymity and that we would like to record the interview. Ask for their permission.

2. **Introduce our research topic:** We are looking into clients experiences and perceptions of the organizational culture certification such as the one that you have obtained.

3. **Introduce the interview approach:** This interview is a semi structured interview meaning that we have an interview guide with prepared questions, but we can also include follow-up questions for clarifying purposes and you are also welcome to ask us any questions if there is something that needs to be clarified.

4. **Introductory questions:**
   a. What's your name?
   b. What is your job at the organization?
   c. How long have you worked at the organization?

5. **About the culture certification:**
   a. Where did the idea to found Excellence come from?
      i. Why was it founded? (purpose)

6. **Meaning:**
   a. What is an organizational culture certification?
      i. Why was it created? (purpose)
   b. For what reason(s) is the certification valuable to business?
      i. What is the added value of the certification?
   c. How do you define the meaning of 'Excellence'?

7. **Process**
   a. What is the general procedure for organizations to get certified?
      i. How long does the certification process usually take?
      ii. During the certification process what type of information are your clients required to provide?
   b. What are the criteria organizations are evaluated on to become certified?
      i. Why are these criteria considered?
   c. Why is an organization considered 'excellent' when it scores above 70%?

8. **Prospective**
   a. What is the long-term value of the certification for your clients?
   b. What is your clients' main motivation behind getting certified?

      c.   How does Excellence promote the certification?

      d.   Who do you consider as your main competitors?

9. Final question:

      a.   Is there anything you would like to add or clarify before we end this interview?

10. Thank you so much for your participation!

8.3 Appendix 3 - Interview Guide, Excellence clients

1. **Introduce ourselves**, mention anonymity and that we would like to record the interview. Ask for their permission.

2. **Introduce our research topic:** We are looking into clients experiences and perceptions of the organizational culture certification such as the one that you have obtained.

3. **Introduce the interview approach:** This interview is a semi structured interview meaning that we have an interview guide with prepared questions, but we can also include follow-up questions for clarifying purposes and you are also welcome to ask us any questions if there is something that needs to be clarified.

4. **Introductory questions:**

    4.1. What's your name?

    4.2. What is the name of the organization where you work?

    4.3. What is your job at the organization?

    4.4. How long have you worked at the organization?

    4.5. How many employees work at the organization?

    4.6. How would you describe the organizational culture?

5. **About the culture certification:**

    5.1. How many years has the organization been certified?

    5.2. What was your motivation to get certified?

    5.3. How were you introduced to Excellence?

    5.4. What did the certification process look like?

    5.5. How many of your employees fill out the employee survey?

    5.6. What was the organization's overall score?

6. **Evaluation of the certification:**

    6.1. Do you experience a difference between before and after the organization was certified? If so, what are the differences?

    6.2. Do you know how the certification is perceived by your employees? If so, what is the general perception?

    6.3. What do you believe is the overall added value of the certification within your organization?

    6.4. Do you use your certification in your branding?

7. **Final question:**

7.1. Is there anything you would like to add or clarify before we end this interview?

8. **Thank you so much for your participation!**