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An Uphill Struggle

Employer Branding in Controversial Companies

Abstract

This thesis aims to examine how companies in controversial industries conduct employer branding and the way this is affected by factors such as their products and general reputation, the research question is: *How Do Companies With a Negatively Associated Consumer Brand attract Talent and Maintain the Employer Brand?* The central structure of the thesis means to illustrate the relationship between different aspects that contribute to a company's public image. The study is limited to companies present on the Swedish market. Our literature review depicts a lack of a single, holistic framework that provides a representative view of the factors that contribute to the strength or weakness of an employer brand. Furthermore, the link between the consumer brand and employer brand has been researched primarily on a rudimentary level, and a deeper understanding of the dynamics in this relation is sought for. Finally, research on employer branding from a controversial company perspective has, to our knowledge, not been conducted before. A multiple case study was conducted and five companies in controversial industries (tobacco, alcohol and gambling) were included in the data sample. Interviews were conducted with representatives within HR, PR/Communications and Public Affairs to ensure a broad empirical foundation. Consumer brand appears to be the most important factor when it comes to the creation of company awareness. Our findings indicate that the consumer brand feeds into the employer brand and is key to successful employer branding. Consequently, companies that have to separate the employer branding practices from their consumer branding, whether due to overly negative reputational losses on account of their products or legal requirements, are at a heavy disadvantage in regards to attracting talent. Such disadvantaged companies, however, try to compensate for this dynamic by imbuing their recruiting processes with greater amounts of transparency and brand ambassadorship. A refined model based on Hepburn's "Four elements of employer reputation" is introduced as well as a model that proposes emphasis on the interrelation between the employer brand, consumer brand and corporate brand.
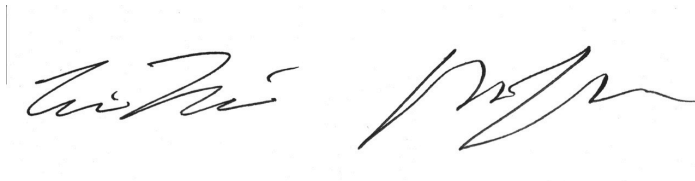
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Abbreviations used

CFO – Chief Financial Officer

CSR – Corporate Social Responsibility

FMCG – Fast-Moving Consumer Goods

HR – Human Resources

HRM – Human Resource Management

KAM – Key Account Manager

PR – Public Relations

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Prior to the summer of 2013, one of this thesis's authors was offered a position as a brand marketing intern at a leading tobacco company in Stockholm. After some careful deliberation, the author accepted the offer mainly on the account of curiosity. In his mind, the tobacco industry is a sector regarding which most people have a very strong opinion, but the fact remains that few have a substantiated understanding of its actual workings and processes.

Leading up to the start of the internship, the author was heavily scrutinized by a diverse range of interested parties such as friends, parents, and grandparents. He was essentially bombarded by questions, the one most frequently asked being:

How can you work for a tobacco company?

In response to this inquiry, the author did not view his future employment as any source of moral dilemma due to the underlying facts that the job was fundamentally an internship with very limited time duration.

Upon starting his internship, the author was given a holistic introduction to the company, including presentations given by a wide selection of co-workers on topics ranging from the company's social engagements to HRM policies. It rapidly became clear to the author that the company was very favorably positioned in relation to other consumer goods companies in terms of employment aspects such as remuneration and benefit-packages. In addition, there was a strong focus throughout the entirety of the company's processes on compliant behavior. The idea that gradually emerged was that the company must place such emphasis on being a good employer in order to counteract some of the "employment scrutiny" that the author himself experienced prior to joining its ranks. This perception of the complications that are imbedded in his former employer's recruitment practices was further solidified throughout the summer through the author's interactions with his co-workers. For example, it was revealed that the company had previously experienced difficulties in terms of attracting Swedish graduates for its management trainee positions in Sweden.

"In a world where top performing employees are becoming a scarce commodity, finding the right people is critical for business success. At a time when low birth rates are significantly shifting world demographics, the dilemmas of the 21st century are not only "Who will make up your workforce?", yet more importantly "Who will own it?"- Multinational companies are increasingly aware of the current and future challenges of a shrinking workforce." (Nylander, 2012)

The quote above illustrate the constant need for companies to attract talent, a need that is heightened by an aging population in developed countries (European Commission, 2012) and an increasingly dynamic world market that bears witness to the continuing decay of traditional competitive advantages. In this context, the question of "What makes an attractive employer?" becomes extremely important albeit difficult to answer in a fashion that is representative of the reality. Randstad[1], for example, annually conducts a survey in combination with awarding the Randstad Award for best employer. In this process, the company investigates the characteristics that define the attractiveness of an employer, and for Sweden, the following were listed as most important: interesting job content, pleasant working atmosphere, competitive salary and employee benefits, long-term job security, and convenient location (Randstad, 2014). Universum, one of Sweden's most recognized employer branding consulting agencies, annually publishes the ranking "Sveriges Mest attraktiva Arbetsgivare (Sweden's most attractive employer)" which is derived from online studies conducted by students of varying academic backgrounds. The following companies were listed as the top-5 attractive employers for students in the field of business and economics: Google, IKEA, H&M, EY, and PWC. In addition, in the same fashion as the Randstad survey, Universum lists the "five most important aspects concerning the choice of employer" which are the following: creative and dynamic working environment, managers who support personal development, strong references for a future career, high future salary and respect for co-workers (Universum Employer Branding, 2014).

Looking at rankings such as these in general, and Universum's in particular, could one logically assume that Google is the most attractive employer according to Swedish students because the company best fulfills the criteria of a desirable employer? In our mind, this presents a clearly evident logical gap because generic "most desirable employer traits", "what makes a great employer", "what makes an attractive employer" etc. lists tend to highlight HR

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[1] Randstad is the second largest HR service company in the world and provide recruitment, consulting and HR solutions (http://www.randstad.com/about-us/company-information, 05/18/2014).

characteristics, such as focus on employee development. Paradoxically, such employment characteristics are difficult to concretize from an external perspective due to a general lack of transparency (Foster, Punjaisri, & Cheng, 2010; Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

In addition, HR policies also tend to assume a very generic, undifferentiated character as they are removed from their organizational context and used to promote recruitment. For example, no company would state upon request, that it does not invest in the development of its employees. In view of this, we pose the question again: what makes Google such an attractive employer? The answer to this question, according to an online debate article published in a leading recruitment forum, is the company's reputation or "the wider perception of your company among the general public" (Leigh-Morgan, 2013). In regards to the generation of a favorable reputation such as Google's, a company's products are of key importance; "If you want people queuing up to work for you, then you need people queuing up for your products" (Leigh-Morgan, 2013). In view of the fact that a given company's products greatly impact the public opinion of that company and consequently its recruitment procedures, the focus again shifts to actors such as the tobacco company at which one of the author's interned this past summer. On account of the overwhelmingly negative associations of combustible tobacco products, how can such companies possibly hope to achieve any measure of success in regards to attracting talent?

1.2 Research Question

How Do Companies With a Negatively Associated Consumer Brand Attract Talent and Maintain the Employer Brand?

1.3 Purpose

The purpose of our thesis is to examine how companies in controversial industries conduct employer branding and the way this is affected by factors such as their products and general reputation. This implies a central structure that means to illustrate the relationship between different aspects that contribute to a company's public image. The starting point of our thesis is naturally the employer brand, but we acknowledge that the employer brand is affected by several other factors that we aim to investigate by examining, for example, consumer branding and corporate branding. These concepts will be otherwise clarified in the theoretical framework. Moreover, the study is limited to companies that are present on the Swedish market.

1.4 Research gap

1.4.1 A holistic model to analyze factors affecting employer branding

In terms of reputations management, there is a lack of a holistic model that includes all the factors that we have identified to be key to our research question: HRM, employer branding, consumer branding, and corporate branding. For example, certain scholars state that the employer brand is mostly affected by the corporate brand (Balmer & Gray, 2003), while no studies explicitly refer to the consumer brand as the key contributor to the general state of the employer brand. Thusly, a clear distinction and observation of the factors that affect the employer brand to the highest degree have not been identified. In view of this, a model that combines the different branding aspects and clearly highlights the interrelation between these should be sought for, albeit the difficulties with studying for example the effects of employer branding in isolation. Consequently, there remains a lack of truly representative answers to the question of what makes an attractive employer.

1.4.2 Attracting talent with negatively associated consumer brands

The second research gap concerns the interaction between the employer brand and the consumer brand, and here some research has been found (Hepburn, 2005; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). It is however once again on a generic, simplified level; for instance, many researches stress that the consumer brand can function as a proxy for the employer brand since the employer brand is not well understood by external observers (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Research on this area focuses on the importance of alignment between the consumer brand and the employer brand in order to maintain the general brand promise to consumers and prospective employees respectively (Foster et al., 2010). In addition, alignment implies a focus on finding synergy effects between the employer brand and the consumer brand, something we see as a guideline that is generally more applicable to companies that do not produce harmful products. For controversial industries, we believe that there is thusly a need for an alternative approach on how to deal with the relationship between products and brands as well as employer branding. For example, it may be more appropriate to actively separate these two aspects due to the aforementioned harmful nature of the products produced in controversial industries.

1.4.3 Employer branding in controversial companies

Current research on employer branding has been focused on companies in industries that are not encompassed the category that this thesis aims to investigate, namely controversial

industries. Tobacco companies, liquor producers and gambling companies may have been included in previous empirical studies, but they have not been observed in isolation from "non-controversial" industries. Research today is consequently not sufficiently focused in regards to scrutinizing controversial companies and their employer branding methods.

Controversial companies have been researched empirically before, but the focus has not been on employer branding. Previous research has mainly centered on how such companies justify the fact that they sell harmful products to consumers, and how these firms motivate their employees as well as ensure that they act ethically etc. (Cai, Jo, & Pan, 2012).

1.5 Definition of controversial industries

In defining the concept of controversial industries, we agree with Cai et al. (2012) who state that controversial industries are composed of companies that sell products that are harmful to human beings, society or the environment. Furthermore, the authors stress the particular importance of sustainability in industries such as alcohol, tobacco and gambling, and these are thusly the industries we have chosen to target for our empirical study (Cai et al., 2012). Wilson and West (1981) also state that people are quick to judge and label vice products, which are alcohol, tobacco, prostitution and drugs (Wilson & West, 1981). In Sweden, the government has well defined strategies and laws on how to reduce the supply and demand of alcohol, tobacco and drugs. Combined, these substances are the direct causes behind a significant portion of all cases of illness in Sweden. Drugs, for natural reasons, would be difficult to include in our study, but we wish to emphasize that tobacco and alcohol, mainly due to their negative health effects and the state's consequently restrictive policies, can be labeled as controversial products (Socialdepartementet, 2013). In terms of gambling, the Swedish Government (2013) says that the goal with regulating gambling is to provide a safe and healthy gambling market where social interests are prioritized and the risk for gambling addiction is minimized. This is executed by providing gambling services in a controlled manner (Finansdepartementet, 2013). At an earlier stage in the process, we also examined the Norwegian Government Pension Fund's ethical investment guidelines when attempting to delimit our alternatives in terms of suitable target industries as well as case studies. The guidelines state, among other things, that they do not invest in tobacco companies (The Government Pension Fund, 2010).

2. METHODOLOGY

This section describes the rationale behind conducting a qualitative study and the manner in which we gathered empirical data, designed our approach and identified appropriate interviewees. We also discuss how the gathered data was interpreted and analyzed as well as the reliability and limitations of our research.

2.1 Choice of research design

After conducting a thorough literature review, it became clear that limited research and empirical observations exist that directly relate to our chosen research area and research question. Consequently, the most appropriate approach to for us has been an explorative one. Due to this chosen mode of investigation, we decided upon a qualitative study. In this sense, we agree with Pettigrew (2013) who states that the quantitative researcher might lean towards prevalence, calibration and generalizability while the qualitative researcher puts more emphasis on narration, description, description, interpretation and explanation (Pettigrew, 2013). Silverman (2000) also states that qualitative research can provide a "deeper" understanding of social phenomena compared to what could be obtained from quantitative research (Silverman, 2000). Due to the explorative nature of our study, our theoretical framework needs to be broad in order to encompass the potential variations in the focus of our findings.

The thesis assumes an abductive approach, which means that we have been able to move back and forth between induction and deduction (Suddaby, 2006). We started by conducting an extensive literature research before conducting our interviews, and then the theoretical framework has been adapted, both adding and removing parts, to ensure alignment and relevance to our findings. Our theoretical framework has been employed as an analytical tool for our empirical findings throughout the data gathering and analysis process.

The focus of our study on employer branding is limited to the company perspective and associated strategies, i.e. not including the perceptions of the extra-organizational receiver of such branding efforts, such as job seekers. For example, in our choice of interviewees, we have only focused our attention on interviewing representatives from the company side, i.e. people who work with attracting prospective employees to the company (Kotler & Armstrong, 2010).

2.2 Multiple case study

We chose a multiple case study approach, and the rationale behind this decision was that we believed a multiple case approach would provide a stronger foundation on which to build our analysis and also match the inherent focus of our research question to a higher degree. This relates closely to Yin's (1994) reasoning, stating that multiple cases work like a series of laboratory experiments, they serve as discrete experiments that act as replications, contrasts and extensions to the currently emerging theory. Multiple case studies also create a more solid theory since the observations are built on varied empirical findings and enable a broader exploration of research questions and theoretical elaboration (Yin, 1994).

2.3 Case studies

Based on the discussion above regarding the nature of controversial industries, we aimed to conduct our empirical study at a broad range of companies belonging to the tobacco, alcohol and gambling industries. Due to the nature of our research question, which can be considered somewhat provocative and also explores internal processes, we experienced general difficulties with finding companies willing to be interviewed. Considerable efforts from our side however ensured a solid sample of companies and interviewees, as are presented below. In line with some of our interviewees' explicit requests, we have chosen to anonymize all companies and interviewees.

When selecting interviewees, we aimed for 2-3 interviews per company and to include representatives in HR, PR/Communications, and Public Affairs (or equivalent) positions, depending on the structure of each company and availability of interviewees. The purpose of interviewing HR representatives was to gain an understanding of how the company works with employer branding, namely the predominantly external strategies with orientation towards prospective employees. It was also expected that HR interviewees would be able to provide insights about general HRM structures and routines for each company. The PR or Communications staff were chosen with the purpose of providing information focused more on external communications in general, both towards consumers but also how the corporate brand was maintained and perceived. Finally, the positions within Public Affairs aimed to provide more detailed information on how the companies work with reputational management and more importantly, how this is communicated and prioritized in the external communications. We also interviewed one CFO and one KAM, based on recommendations from interviewees within HR that these individuals would be able to provide interesting findings related to our research

question. The choice of positions to interview (HR, PR and Public Affairs) was based on a theoretical selection, since we believed that interviewees in these positions were the most appropriate ones in order to answer our research question.

Company 1

Company 1 is a Swedish brewery and one of the largest by volume suppliers to Systembolaget. The company produces a wide assortment of products ranging from alcoholic drinks such as beer and cider to non-alcoholic beverages such as soft drinks. From Company 1 we have interviewed the Director of Environmental and Sustainability affairs, the Director of Recruitment, and the Director of Communications.

Company 2

Company 2 is a state-owned gambling company and one of the largest actors in its local market. Revenue is derived from the company's presence in sectors such as online gambling, casino operations, lotteries, and betting. Interviewees at Company 2 included the Group Head of HR, the Head of Corporate Communications, a HR Strategist and the CFO.

Company 3

Company 3 is one of the world's largest tobacco company and a global actor with sales and operations in over 200 markets. In Sweden, the company sells cigarettes and hand-rolling tobacco as well as smoking utensils. Interviews conducted at Company 3 were with a Manager of Management and Organizational Development and the Head of HR.

Company 4

Company 4 is yet another of the biggest players in the tobacco industry, the company has a global reach in terms of operations and sales. The company also prides itself on being one of the more international players in the industry. In Sweden, the company sells a variety of tobacco products such as cigarettes, snus[2], and pipe tobacco. Interviewees at Company 4 were a HR manager, the Head of Corporate Communications and Relations and a Key Account Manager.

Company 5

Company 5 is a European company that produces distilled beverages, primarily liquor. In Sweden, the company sells wines, spirits, and whiskies either directly or through one of its

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[2] Snus is a moist powder tobacco product originating from a variant of dry snuff in early 18th century Sweden (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Snus, 05/18/2014)

subsidiaries. From company 5 we interviewed the Director of Communications, CSR & Communications as well as an HR Director.

2.4 Pre-study

Prior to the main data gathering, a pre-study was conducted at one of the major telecom operators in the Nordic region. This company recently suffered from allegations of CSR violations in emerging markets, something that has resulted in much public scrutiny and criticism. One interview was conducted with the Employer Branding Director and the purpose of this pre-study was to gain an understanding of how a company can work with employer branding, especially when suffering from reputational damages. Despite the fact that this company is not controversial per se, several takeaways were derived that shaped our questions and approach to the companies we interviewed during the main data gathering. This pre-study will not be referred to further, and only represents part of the work that was conducted prior to the main data gathering.

2.5 Qualitative interviews

A total of 15 interviews were conducted at six different companies (including pre-study) during March-May 2014. Prior to each interview, we prepared by reading up on company facts to ensure that basic introductory questions could be kept to a minimum, meaning that we could focus on our core questions. Interviews were approximately one hour in length and a great majority of these were conducted in person at the interviewee's office location. Phone interviews were restricted to situations in which the interviewee was not based in Stockholm. By being at their respective office locations we also had the opportunity to meet other employees and take in the culture.

Interviewee no.	Position of interviewee	Company no.	Date
1	Employer Branding Director	Pre-study	04-mar-14
2	Director of Recruitment	Company 1	12-Mar-14
3	Director of Environmental and Sustainability Affairs	Company 1	14-Apr-14
4	Director of Communications	Company 1	23-Apr-14
5	Group Head of HR	Company 2	12-Mar-14
6	Head of Corporate Communications	Company 2	27-Mar-14
7	HR Strategist	Company 2	3-Apr-14
8	CFO	Company 2	7-May-14
9	Head of HR	Company 3	14-Mar-14
10	Manager of Management and Organizational Development	Company 3	14-Apr-14
11	Head of Corporate Communications and Relations	Company 4	7-Mar-14
12	Key Account Manager	Company 4	8-May-14
13	HR Manager	Company 4	13-Mar-14
14	Director of Communications, CSR & Communications	Company 5	2-Apr-14
15	HR Director	Company 5	2-Apr-14

Figure 1.

The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, with a framework of open questions that we adapted depending on interviewee and the answers that we had previously received from, for example, the current interviewee's colleagues (see appendix for interview questions). By having open and explorative questions rather than closed "yes" or "no" questions, we gave the interviewees the chance to answer freely without constraints (Kvale & Torhell, 1997). All interviews except one were recorded and careful notes were also taken in parallel. Post-interview, we reviewed the recorded material, synched it with our notes and complemented these with valuable takeaways and quotes. All interviews were subsequently organized into a spreadsheet based on the framework of questions, and this ensured us to have a structured overview of our findings and made it easy to sort and filter findings depending on answers received. 14 interviews were conducted in Swedish, and one interview was conducted in English. Most quotes presented in the empirical part are therefore translated into English by the authors.

2.6 Limitations

Limitations to our choice of research design can be viewed from two perspectives, the possible limitation of not doing a quantitative study, and the limitation of not doing a single case study. Not doing a quantitative study means that the generalizability of our findings is limited. Conducting a multiple case study also implies that we cannot obtain the same depth in our empirical observations as with a single case study. This is a tradeoff we took into consideration when designing our empirical study but the possibility of investigating multiple cases had several advantages, as stated above, that we valued more. Looking at multiple cases also made it possible for us to include several controversial industries in our study, rather than isolating ourselves by focusing solely on for example alcohol and tobacco. This facilitates the possibility of some level of generalization that could have been strengthened further through the inclusion of a greater number of companies/cases. However, due to constraints such as time and scope of the master thesis, as well as our controversial research topic, we did not have the possibility to conduct a more extensive study. Conducting more interviews at each target company was also discussed, but disregarded since additional interviews were considered to not add any additional depth or understanding to our empirical research.

2.7 Validity

Validity refers to how well our findings reflect a critical investigation of all our data rather than reflecting a few well-chosen examples, something that Silverman (2000) refers to as "anecdotalism". Thinking critically about qualitative data can improve validity and Silverman's "constant comparative model" lies close to how we have managed our empirical findings (Silverman, 2000). This means that we used portions of our empirical findings from one company in order to generate patterns that then could be tested and compared on other parts of the data, the other companies (Silverman, 2000).

Internal validity implies that the cause-effect relationships that are identified in our empirical data are correctly interpreted. An accurate interpretation of the data in turn means that our analysis and conclusion also can be considered valid (Gill & Johnson, 2002). By maintaining a strict post-interview routine i.e. comparing notes, discussing the answers given and also comparing the findings to prior sessions, we believe that we have taken extensive efforts to reduce the risk for misinterpretations. Throughout the writing process we have also often reverted to our initial interview notes and recordings in order to clarify and confirm our conclusions.

Since we conducted a qualitative study, it is important to highlight to what extent our findings and conclusions are generalizable beyond the data sample, which is referred to as external validity (Gill & Johnson, 2002). It has not been our purpose to provide such generalizability, but noteworthy is that our multiple case study approach of five companies provides a better foundation for some kind of generalizability compared to what a single case study would have provided.

2.8 Reliability

Reliability refers to the degree of consistency in the interpretation of results, i.e. to what degree a different observer of the same data would conduct similar interpretations (Silverman, 2000). By carefully describing our chosen methodology and by keeping recordings and detailed notes from all interviews, we facilitate the possibility for other researchers to carry out a similar study. This is very important since personal interpretations are impossible to eliminate entirely. A qualitative study also means that there is room for different interpretations of our questions among interviewees as well. This is something that is difficult to eliminate entirely, but by having significant amount of time (one hour) designated for each interview session, we have had plenty of time to ask interviewees for clarifications and also explain what we mean in case of misunderstood questions.
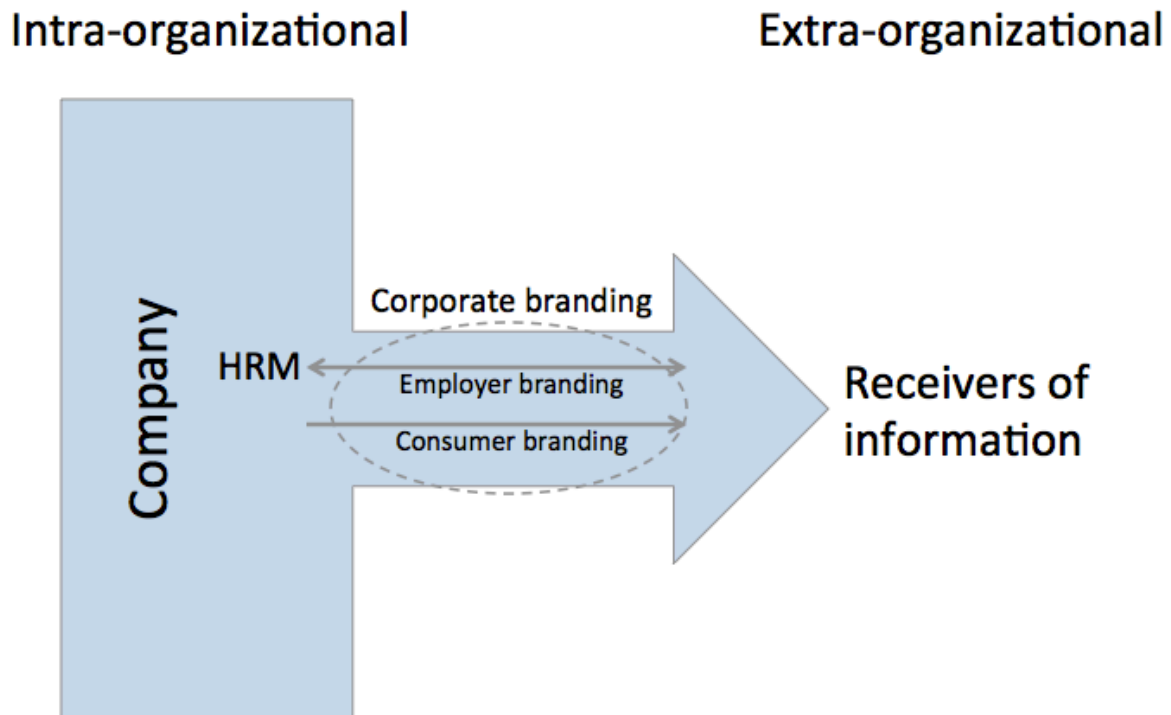
3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Figure 2.

3.1 Theoretical framework roadmap

The theoretical framework is structured, in accordance with the research question, to provide a holistic understanding of the multitude of factors that influence employer branding in controversial industries. We commence by presenting our research gap, after that the first section of the theoretical framework is HRM and HRM-related structures, and the purpose of this section is to depict the intra-organizational tools that companies employ in order to create favorable working environments and to attract talent. The underlying logic for investigating HRM is that it serves as support function and complement to the externally oriented employer branding policies in the sense that HRM and employer branding respectively create and communicate a favorable working environment. For example, the claims communicated to external stakeholders such as prospective candidates through employer branding must be substantiated in internal policies, namely HRM.

In the second section, the focus of the theoretical framework shifts to employer branding in order to portray the manner in which the existing literature discusses the aforementioned

external aspect of recruitment. Thirdly, the relation between the consumer branding and employer branding is discussed as this relationship encompasses the core and crux of our research question. The final section introduces the concept of corporate branding since the aforementioned aspects, consumer branding and employer branding, do not exist within an organizational vacuum but is greatly impacted by the general direction of the overarching corporate brand. As will be seen in the theoretical framework, it is hard to establish a universal theoretical distinction when defining employer branding, consumer branding and corporate branding in isolation. This challenge will be discussed further when presenting our empirical findings and analysis.

3.2 Human Resource Management (HRM) structures

Traditionally, HR has been viewed as a cost that needs to be minimized and an area where potential efficiency gains can be made. It has seldom been viewed as a potential area for gains and value creation (Becker & Gerhart, 1996). Labor costs constitute a large portion of operating costs for all companies, and reductions in employment continues to be a significant aspect of the strategies that aim to reduce costs and restructure operations (Uchitelle & Kleinfield, 1996). However, a number of significant studies have promoted the view that HR in fact generates sustainable competitive advantages (J. B. Barney, 1986; J. B. Barney, 1995; J. Barney, 1991). Traditional sources of competitive advantage (natural resources, economies of scale to name a few) are becoming increasingly easy to imitate, especially in comparison to a complex HR structure consisting of social structures and unique employment processes (Lado & Wilson, 1994; Pfeffer, 2002; Wright & McMahan, 1992).

In order to have a successful employer reputation, Hepburn (2005) argues that there are several internal HR functions of the organization that need to be well maintained: firstly, people policies need to be relevant and attractive, this includes reward and remuneration as well as flexible working hours and employee benefits in general. Secondly, company values are a growing interest from prospective employees and it is important for an organization to communicate what they stand for and believe in. Thirdly, creating the right environment means that the company needs to have an environment that attracts talented people. This can include a well functioning CSR program, coaching or other ways to inspire and challenge talents (Hepburn, 2005). From Hepburn's (2005) reasoning, it is clear that a solid internal HR strategy is a cornerstone in the creation of a successful employer brand.

A successful employer branding strategy increases the chance to hire appropriate candidates who will fit into the organization. Grant (2010) states that there is a growing trend among companies to hire employees based on their attitude and train them rather than to solely hire based on skills. Grant (2010) refers to this as an increased interest in emotional intelligence, meaning positive psychological and social attributes. The ability of employees to adapt and fit into an organization depends not only on interpersonal and social abilities, but also the organizational context. A significant part of this organizational context is culture, which is considered to be a key intangible resource of great strategic importance (Grant, 2010). Culture is also considered important when developing a successful employer reputation, prospective employees take culture and informal soft values into consideration when deciding where to apply and work (Hepburn, 2005; Knox & Freeman, 2006).

Up to date HR practices develop a firm's human capital and thereby influence and improves employee skills. A combination of recruiting procedures that ensures a large pool of suitable applicants and a reliable as well as valid selection process will have a substantial influence over the skills that new employees possess. By providing formal and informal training, such as skills training and coaching, employees' skills can be developed even further (Huselid, 1995). These practices are all part of what can be considered as the HRM structure and the discussion regarding HRM decisions and practices is closely linked to organizational performance and competitive advantage (Becker & Gerhart, 1996; Huselid, 1995). Improving employees' skills and providing challenging opportunities and training is all part of keeping employees motivated and satisfied. These factors facilitate the possibility for employees to become ambassadors and "live the brand", something that is very important when it comes to building and communicating a successful employer brand (Knox & Freeman, 2006).

At the same time as HRM practices provide competitive advantages and organizational performance, it also ensures job satisfaction among employees. Few topics of industrial-organizational psychology have captured researchers attention more than the relationship between job satisfaction and job performance (Judge, Thoresen, Bono, & Patton, 2001). Valentine et al. (2010) states that most current research tends to suggest a modest correlation between job satisfaction and work performance, and that one reason for this might be that job performance traditionally has been defined in terms of "in-role" performance measures, such as quantity or quality of work produced (Valentine, Varca, Godkin, & Barnett, 2010). This view was developed earlier by Bateman and Organ (1983) and included "citizenship behavior" or an "extra

role", which means a job performance that is more altruistic and cooperative to its nature (Bateman & Organ, 1983). A number of researchers have conducted work on this idea, demonstrating that job satisfaction correlates with "citizenship behavior" and "extra-role" more strongly than with traditional in-role performance criteria (Motowidlo, 1984; Puffer, 1987). As mentioned above when referring to Knox and Freeman (2006), keeping employees satisfied and providing the possibility for altruistic work are factors that impact employer branding in a positive way (Knox & Freeman, 2006).

3.2.1 Summary of HRM structures

HRM practices serve to, in short, provide a competitive advantage through the development of employee skills and assurance of employee satisfaction. However, some existing literature states that job satisfaction is more closely related to citizen behavior since satisfied employees are more likely to spend time and effort on ethical, extracurricular activities. From an employer branding perspective, satisfied and motivated employees are highly desirable, it facilitates the possibility for employees to act as good ambassadors and to be able to "live the brand". In conclusion, in-role aspects are hygiene factors while an aggregated focus on and participation in "extra-role", ethical undertakings is a more accurate indicator of employee satisfaction, the holy grail of HRM.

3.3 Employer branding

A number of definitions of employer branding are to be found in previous research, and it is of great importance to highlight these to ensure an aligned analysis of our empirical findings. Berthon et al. (2005) refer to a quote by Lloyd (2002) and states that employer branding previously has been described as "the sum of a company's efforts to communicate to existing and prospective staff that it is a desirable place to work" (Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005). This is in line with what Berthon et al. (2005) consider to be the first definition of employer branding, coined by Ambler and Barrow (1996): "The package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (Berthon et al., 2005) (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). According to this quote, employer branding is a wide concept that entails holistic benefits that are offered to prospective employees. It is also clear that the concept includes an external perspective, namely the perception of prospective employees in regards to company identity. Since the concept is thusly both internal and external, alignment between the prospective employees' aforementioned attitudes and the brand is key (Knox & Freeman, 2006). Furthermore, Ambler and Barrow (1996) compare the employer brand to any other brand, having both a desired positioning and personality (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). The

purpose of employer branding is therefore to build an image in the minds of prospective employees that the company is superior all other companies and a great place to work (Ewing, Pitt, & De Bussy, 2002).

3.3.1 Employer reputation model

Hepburn (2005) describes a model that can be used to concretize the factors that impact employer reputation, something that we deem to be closely related to employer branding. The first perspective, people policies, emphasizes that the most talented prospective employees will be looking for the company with the best people policies. Hepburn's (2005) associated study shows that policies such as flexible working, employee benefits, personal development and training and career opportunities are perceived to be the most important and sought for characteristics. Secondly, Hepburn (2005) emphasizes the merits of "soft factors" such as a culture based on great leadership and effective teamwork. Thirdly, company values is increasingly viewed as important, prospective employees have a strong interest in what a company stands for and how it acts when conducting day-to-day business. Talented people are looking for organizations that are ethical and do relevant CSR work.

The fourth part of the framework below discusses the importance of corporate reputation. Hepburn (2005) states that the corporate reputation of a firm can be viewed from two perspectives; prospective employees wish to know if the company is successful and doing well in general in terms of growth and stability and furthermore, prospective employees want to know where the company stands in relation to other actors in its specific marketplace or industry. They are more likely to find the company attractive in terms of employment if they also feel positively about the products that the company provides (Hepburn, 2005).
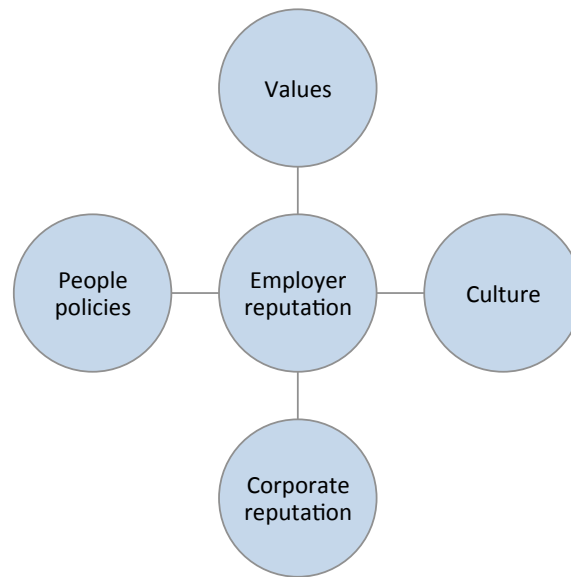
Figure 3. (Hepburn, 2005)

Based on the model discussed above, Hepburn (2005) elaborates on how companies create winning employer reputations by ensuring positive perceptions with both internal as well as external stakeholders. Successful employer reputation is based on two things: what you do as an employer and how you communicate these actions. Individuals today are more selective since a career choice, in today's social context, is so much more than a means to paying rent. To a greater degree, Individuals identify themselves with the organization they work for. According to Hepburn (2005) the benefits of a successful employer reputation leads to the following: enhanced recruitment and retention, improved consumer perceptions and long-term tenacity (Hepburn, 2005).

Knox and Freeman (2006) further elaborate on the reasoning above by stating that it is important to emphasize an integrated approach to internal and external marketing when it

comes to employer branding and recruitment in general. The messages that companies communicate externally need to be reinforced and anchored by the employees of the firm and also external recruiters that aid the firm in the specific recruitment process. Integration of the external and internal communication is one step in the right direction; consistency between the two is the second natural step which means that the internal communication takes inspiration from the "big idea" that is communicated externally. By having consistency between the internal and external communications, employees can more easily fulfill the expectations of them "living the brand" (Knox & Freeman, 2006).

3.3.2 Employer branding resemblance to traditional branding concepts

Moroko and Uncles (2008) conclude that characteristics of successful employer brands are consistent with characteristics of successful consumer and corporate brands in general. Firstly, a good employer brand should be known and noticeable, several studies show that job applicants find such possible employers more attractive. Secondly, the employer brand needs to be seen as relevant and resonant, meaning that the employee value proposition needs to be in the correct context and relate to the prospective and current employers. Thirdly, the employer brand should be differentiated from direct competitors and is considered as key for winning the "war for talent" (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

The aforementioned criteria apply to other forms of branding, such as consumer branding. However, the Moroko and Uncles (2008) state that the following characteristics apply uniquely to employer branding: firstly, an employer brand should fulfill a psychological contract which means that the brand needs to continuously live up to the promise it makes to employees, current as well as prospective. A well-aligned employer brand will facilitate the process of communicating the terms of the mutual obligations and make sure that these are in line with what the company realistically can deliver to prospective and current employees. Moroko and Uncles (2008) argue that consumer and corporate brands can maintain a distinction between a "front stage" and a "back stage" in a way that is less feasible for an employer brand. This means that there are covert aspects of consumer and corporate brands that cannot be accessed by consumers, such as production and management processes. Employer brands, on the other hand, cannot maintain such a distance since the core of this concept relates to a company's internal processes (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

Secondly, companies need to be aware of unintended appropriation of brand values, meaning that prospective employees tend to suffer from information deficit regarding the employer brand and what it is really like to work at the company. Even though the knowledge and transparency is improving, it is almost necessary to work at the employer in order to fully address the information deficit. Due to this lack of information, companies' corporate and consumer brands may be used as proxies for the employer brand. In view of the proxy effect, an adequate alignment between the three branding aspects can strengthen the employer brand since the actual working situation resembles the pre-employment expectations to a high degree. If there is misalignment, problems can occur since prospective employees' expectations of employment characteristics are not met (Foster et al., 2010; Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

3.3.3 Summary of employer branding

A strong employer brand is a contract between the company in question and current as well as prospective employees. It also serves to communicate the employment-related, mutual obligations of the two parties. According to existing literature, there exists, despite improved general transparency due to new mediums of communication etc, an information deficit between job seekers and potential employers in regards to the actual employment situation. Consequently, the consumer and corporate brands can become proxies for the employer brand, meaning that prospective employees draw conclusions regarding potential employment using the company's products and general reputation as chief indicators of employment viability and quality.

3.4 Consumer branding and employer branding relation

One perspective illustrated in previous research is that employment essentially consists of an economic exchange between employees and employers (Gardner, Erhardt, & Martin-Rios, 2011). Given Gardner et al.'s (2011) characterization, employer branding and consumer branding can consequently be merged since there are clear parallels between the economic employee-employer relationship and the exchange that occurs between a company and its customer (Gardner et al., 2011). In this context, the employer brand works in unison with the consumer brand and in situations when companies seek to develop the employer brand; there should be a joint focus on developing the consumer brand, corporate brand and adjacent associations (Gardner et al., 2011).

The consumer brand impacts employer branding and recruitment in a number of manners; for example, product awareness may serve as an indicator for the employer-related

quality and viability of a company (Cable & Turban, 2001). In addition, Cable and Turban (2001) have found that job seekers develop emotional connections to a company due to exposure to that company's product advertising and this, in turn, impacts job seeker behaviors (Cable & Turban, 2001). Exposure to a company's consumer branding practices also has a more rudimentary and instant effect in the sense that greater amounts of exposure contributes to a higher degree of company familiarity (Barber, 1998). Collins (2007) investigated the relationship between product awareness and recruitment practices and found that low-information recruitment processes are positively related to application behaviors that are based on employer familiarity (Collins, 2007). On the other hand, high-information recruitment practices are positively related to application behaviors due to factors such as employer as well as job information. In summation, Collins (2007) illustrated that employer familiarity, as a result of product awareness, positively impacts job seeker behaviors even in contexts in which there is a generally low degree of information regarding a given job posting (Collins, 2007).

3.4.1 Summary of consumer branding and employer branding relation

Certain scholars stress that the employer brand, much like the consumer brand, consists of an economic exchange between the company and different types of stakeholders. Consequently, this interplay contributes to the fact that the employer brand and consumer brand should be developed conjointly. In terms of the effects of the consumer brand on recruitment, product awareness has been shown to be an indicator of the perceived employer-related quality and viability of a given company. Furthermore, the consumer brand contributes to an emotional connection between a job seeker and the prospective employer as well as general employer familiarity. In the recruitment process itself, employer familiarity positively impacts job seeker behaviors even in low-information recruitment contexts.

3.5 Corporate branding

The idea of the corporate brand deviates slightly from, but remains closely linked to the concept of corporate identity. Corporate identity is characterized by the fact that it encompasses all aspects of a corporation, ranging from business scope to culture (Balmer & Gray, 2003). In addition, the corporate identity evolves more organically through the mixture of different subcultures within the corporation itself and it, in short, provides the organization with its unique distinctiveness. The corporate brand, on the other hand, is a set of supra-values; a general compliment to strategic aspects and it requires constant cultivation over time, especially on account of the staff (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Harris and De Chernatony (2001) also state that a focus on the corporate brand building requires employees to become "brand ambassadors"

since they constantly communicate the brand through their relationships with stakeholders and other groups in the external environment (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001). In response to this dynamic, managers should emphasize the alignment of the brand values with those of the staff and if such alignment is successful, it should contribute to a stable string of representations that occur over an extended period of time and consequently lead to a favorable reputation (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001).

Balmer and Gray (2003) further stress the relation to the extra-organizational environment when they describe the corporate brand as a covenant or promise between the organization and its key stakeholders (Balmer & Gray, 2003). This contract embodies the essence of the given organization much in the same way as Lane Keller's (1999) "three-word brand mantras" such as Nike's "authentic athletic performance" (Lane Keller, 1999). The aforementioned importance of relationship management within the external environment is further supported by a narrowing gap between the concepts brand image and brand identity. The essence of brand image is presentation while brand identity, as previously mentioned, is composed of the totality of a given corporation's identifying aspects, such as: vision, culture, personality and relationships. In summation, corporate branding requires a more holistic approach to brand building as well as greater internal coordination in comparison to corporate image building (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001).

In regards to corporate brand stewardship, King (1991), states that the company brand, unlike product brands or subservient brands, requires a holistic multidisciplinary approach with the HR-department assuming the role of caretaker and promoter (King, 1991). Another early scholar on the subject, Bernstein (1989), like Harris and De Chernatony (2001), tasked the CEO and other members of the management with managing and safeguarding the corporate brand (Bernstein, 1989; Harris & De Chernatony, 2001).

3.5.1 Two main areas of the corporate brand

The value of the corporate brand evidences itself in two main areas, namely the operational and the non-product areas of the corporation (Balmer & Gray, 2003). From an operational perspective, the chief value of the corporate brand is that it distinguishes the corporation in question from its competitors in the minds of the relevant stakeholders (Balmer & Gray, 2003), contributing to a competitive advantage in accordance with Grant's (1991) resource-based view (Grant, 1991). In addition, the corporate brand is generally not as

geographically restricted as a particular product brand and if reputable, a strong corporate brand may also facilitate the attraction of venture capital. The strongest effects of a strong corporate brand, however, are in non-product areas such as recruitment and employee retention (Balmer & Gray, 2003).

Regarding employee retention, this works in such a manner that the supra-brand becomes a template against which all current and prospective employees can be evaluated from a purely value-based perspective: the rationale is such that an employee is more likely to be comfortable and productive in a given corporate context if there is alignment between the corporation's values and that of the individual. To be considered strong and thusly advantageous, an ideal corporate brand should embody the following characteristics: rare, durable, inappropiable, imperfectly imitable and imperfectly substitutable (Balmer & Gray, 2003).

3.5.2 Strong corporate brands

The trend towards viewing corporations more like independent brands can be attributed a number of factors (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). Firstly, faster cycles of innovation and other changing dynamics of product marketing have decreased the financial feasibility of uniquely concentrating on product promotion and product brand building (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). Furthermore, broadening sales channels and more diversified communications channels makes it more advantageous to communicate the corporation as opposed to the products due to greater exposure to non-customer stakeholders such as small investors and B2B-partners (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). Moreover, global M&A activities result in a need to identify and essentially value the non-material assets of an organization for due diligence purposes (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). Lastly, there is a general trend of increased global activism that warrants organizations to address and manage issues such as corporate social responsibility and organizational ethics on a corporate level (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004).

Companies have to build strong corporate brands to withstand the increased amount of scrutiny coupled with decreased confidence in businesses. As previously mentioned, increased global activism has led to stronger demands for transparency and CSR (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). In relation to corporate reputation, corporate branding is more aspirational in nature but the two interrelate in the sense that the corporate reputation is strengthened when the brand "promise" is kept (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Balmer, 2001). Many strategies

used for reputations management are increasingly becoming key aspects of corporate branding, for example, CSR and organizational ethics (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). By promoting social responsibility, corporations are emphasizing "wholesomeness", a greatly desired characteristic in the current climate of intense business scrutiny (Olins, 2001).

To reiterate on the effects of the corporate brand on recruitment and relate to our initial research question, the perception of a prospective employer's corporate reputation impacts job seekers in a number of ways: for example, job seeking individuals use job reputations as a direct indicator of expected job attributes. In addition, the reputation of the hiring company affects the pride that individuals expect they will experience as a result of organizational membership. The expected pride to be derived from organizational membership, in turn, impacts salary setting in the sense that employees are willing to accept lower wages to become members of organizations with greatly positive reputations (Cable & Turban, 2003).

A strong corporate brand also impacts the recruiting process itself in the sense that a greater level of familiarity with a given organization leads to a higher degree of information retention when a candidate is exposed to job postings. For example, a candidate is more likely to remember the content and details of a job posting one week after reading it, providing that the candidate is familiar with the posting company (Cable & Turban, 2003). The job seekers' employer knowledge that lies at the heart of the aforementioned behaviors can be characterized into three dimensions. The first dimension is employer familiarity; this entails the level of job seekers awareness coupled with their ability to identify a company as a prospective employer. The second dimension is employer reputation and this includes aspects such as, for example, how applicants view the company as a prospective employer. In line with this dimension and as discussed previously, Cable and Turban (2001) state that applicants are more attracted to companies with positive reputations. The third dimension of job seekers' employer knowledge is employer image: the job seekers' beliefs regarding attributes as well as associations of the company from an employment perspective (Cable & Turban, 2001).

3.5.3 Summary of corporate brand

The corporate brand is a set of supra-values that requires constant cultivation, especially on account of the management and staff who, in turn, serve as brand ambassadors through their interactions with the extra-organizational environment. Furthermore, much in the same fashion as the employer brand which constitutes a promise to the employees and potential

candidates, the corporate brand is a covenant between a company and its stakeholders which also encompasses the core values of the company itself. The greatest impact of the corporate brand is in non-operational areas of the company such as recruitment and employee retention. For example, job seekers use the corporate brand as an indicator of expected job attributes and expected pride that they will derive from eventual employment. In addition, the existing literature states that increased scrutiny due to global activism and decreased public confidence for businesses in general has led to a heightened need for transparency and corporate social responsibility. This, in turn, has led companies to develop strong corporate brands through which they can engage in reputations management and consolidate ethical and socially responsible practices.

4. EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The empirical findings and accompanying analysis is structured in accordance with the theoretical framework to encompass employer branding, the relation between consumer branding and employer branding, and finally corporate branding. The HRM-aspect is not discussed explicitly as in the theoretical framework. Observed findings did not warrant HRM to be discussed in isolation, it rather serves as a complement to concretize our other findings.

4.1 Employer branding

We start the employer branding section by presenting a number of general key findings (see table below) from each company to provide an overview of observed employer branding practices. Subsequently, we cover the features and characteristics that are generally communicated within employer branding. Finally, we describe how employer branding communications is conducted from an operational standpoint.

The following table summarizes the main characteristics of the target companies' employer branding strategies. The first column lists key words that the interviewees stated when asked to describe the imperatives of their respective company's employer branding strategies. The second column lists the employment aspects of each company that are most commonly included in the employer branding communications. This initial overview is necessary for a number of reasons, for example: to serve as a general introduction as well as to provide a needed context to be used to concretize the later findings.

Company	Employer branding, strategic key words & imperatives	Focus of employer branding communication (external)
Company 1	Find synergies between employer-corporate-consumer branding, goal-orientation, CSR	Personal development, company culture, work environment, relationship building (with suppliers), goodwill activities (sponsoring)
Company 2	Focus on attracting students, strengthen employer image, harmonizing internal and external aspects (internal credibility), attract IT & marketing competence	"Responsibility and experience" and associated complexity, fun products, responsible employer, joint IT and product development focus
Company 3	"Top employer" certification, EVP (employer value proposition), works with select universities, works with referrals and informal networks, making new employees understand their role as ambassadors	Career advancement, international opportunities, strict routines and compliance practices, personal responsibility, humbleness, personal drive
Company 4	Recruit internally, consequent focus on graduates, emphasize the USP's (international operations etc) of the company at career fairs, works with referrals	Sustainability & ethics, career opportunities, international placement, international culture, opportunity to work in a range of business areas
Company 5	Value alignment (ethics and products), training possibilities, international mobility	Remuneration, training opportunities within the organization (talent university), decentralized organization with global reach but local adaption, international placement opportunities, values, occasionally CSR

Figure 4.

The varying strategic foci of the target companies' employer branding strategies (column 2) are, as to be expected, greatly company-dependent in response to the differing strategic ideologies and overarching company characteristics. Company 5, for example, is a multinational actor and consequently places strategic value in the international mobility and nature of its workforce. Furthermore, company 2 emphasizes the desired attraction of IT and marketing competence, the company's main business areas.

The following trends, however, can be observed in several of the target companies: quest for alignment, focus on attracting graduates, internal recruitment and working with referrals. The quest for alignment entails an expressed desire by the given company to either create synergies between the triumvirate of related branding aspects (employer, consumer and corporate), to align employer branding and business strategy, to achieve value-alignment or to

harmonize internal and external employer-related aspects. As stated by Harris & De Chernatony (2001), value alignment is key to ensure that the employees share the values of the corporation and are consequently able to adequately represent their employer in their interactions with the external environment (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001). In addition, coordination between the employer brand can profit greatly from alignment with the consumer, corporate brand as well as HRM practices as this promotes consistent communications and the associated safeguarding of the brand promise (Foster et al., 2010; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). In our sample, three companies communicate that they actively strive to achieve synergies between employer branding and other operational aspects, the most recurrent of these being products and business strategy. The two companies that do not express this desire are both major actors in the tobacco industry. The question arises whether this neglect of alignment derives from already well-formulated employer branding strategies or if the nature of these companies' products makes such integration problematic? This is something that we hope to derive from further analysis.

4.1.1 Explicit focus to attract graduates

The focus on attracting graduates is something that is specifically included in the employer branding imperatives of companies 2, 3 and 4. Company 2, for example, does this through communication via talent networks such as 4potentials and engaging students for theses projects. The purpose behind this is to supply the company with needed competences, particularly within IT-related fields. The two tobacco corporations, companies 3 and 4, also include the explicit targeting of graduates. For company 4, the focus on graduate recruitment coincides with otherwise overarching HRM-policy of almost exclusively promoting people internally which consequently results in entry-level vacancies.

Internal recruitment, in turn, is described as by representatives of company 4 as being a safer and less costly alternative to looking for competencies elsewhere. In addition, employees from within the organization are already familiarized with the routines, values and working methods of the company that are globally applicable within the organization.

Working with referrals and informal networks is restricted to the two tobacco companies in our sample, companies 3 and 4. Representatives of company 3 stated that there are the occasional difficulties, due to the nature of the company's products and the associated corporate brand, to attract sufficiently talented people as well as to consistently reach the

desired number of applicants for each vacancy. In view of this situation, referrals have the potential to counteract the undesired effects of the consumer brand as they normally include the involvement of an existing employee and consequently are imbued with a higher degree of "brand ambassadorship" (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001).

Our interviews do not reveal if recruitment difficulties also apply to company 4 but the fact that the company operates in the same industry, namely the tobacco industry, and is therefore subject to the same industrial context is sufficient evidence to question whether company 4's use of referrals is also an effort to circumvent this issue.

4.1.2 Communicated characteristics and features within employer branding

When asked questions concerning the messages that are conveyed within the respective companies' employer branding strategies (column 3), the interviewees mainly answered with descriptions of existing HRM-practices. This corresponds to the accepted definition of employer branding as described in our theoretical framework. For example, Hepburn (2005) states that the management of employer reputation consists of internal practices combined with communication of said practices to external stakeholders (Hepburn, 2005). Furthermore, Knox and Freeman (2006), state that employer branding requires internal anchoring with the given company's existing employees as well as integration with the aspects that are communicated outwards (Knox & Freeman, 2006).

In regards to the content of the employer branding communications, the common denominator between all the companies in our sample is that they all stress corporate social responsibility in some shape or form. For us, we consider this to be an interesting finding as we did not explicitly focus on CSR within our line of questioning, something that we will discuss later. For example, company 2 is very keen to communicate the socially responsible purpose of its operations and representatives of company 4 stated that the company's sustainability policies permeate and extend beyond employer branding as this a central aspect of the company's way of operations. Further exploring this finding, we gained insights into the underlying motivations behind this emphasis on responsible practices by asking our interviewees if prospective employees and other external stakeholders pressure these companies to communicate such aspects in recruitment contexts. Company 1, 2 and 4 explicitly stated that their CSR-related communications, whether for employer branding purposes or otherwise, are either partially or fully influenced by the demands of prospective employees and

other interest holders. For example, company 1's representatives stated that there has been a recent surge of interest from both current and prospective employees in regards to CSR. Furthermore, this unison focus on CSR corresponds with theoretical findings stating that increased global activism coupled with stricter public scrutiny of business practices has resulted in stronger demands for socially responsible corporate policies (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). An interviewee at company 4 echoed this sentiment when he stated:

"There is no option, you have to be involved in CSR nowadays."

Disregarding the communications of CSR and related policies, which is the common trend among our target companies, the sample can be factionalized based on chosen focus of employer branding communications, according to Hepburn's (2005) framework. Hepburn (2005) states that there are four aspects that influence individuals' beliefs about a company's employer reputation: people policies, culture, values and corporate reputation (Hepburn, 2005). In our sample, the originally Swedish companies stress aspects relating to culture and values to a greater extent than their foreign counterparts. Company 1, for example, actively communicates the highly entrepreneurial company culture, work environment as well as goodwill activities while company 2 emphasizes responsibility and sustainability that are cornerstones of its operations. Naturally there is some overlap in the sense that all companies give mention to either people policies such as training or certain aspects of company culture and values, but the fact remains that the only companies that communicate the "harder" (Hepburn, 2005) people policies are the foreign ones. For example, company 5 is the only company in our sample that choses to communicate its highly competitive remuneration policy and company 3 and 4 both list career advancement and international placement as employment aspects that they routinely convey to candidates. In addition, company 3 emphasizes that they have a very high promotion rate.

Company 4 also lists "sustainability and ethics" as a communication priority in employer branding contexts but as mentioned, this company distinguishes itself as one of the most socially responsible actors in its industry, which makes such practices a part of its business strategy and consequently harder to decouple from its branding efforts. The underlying reason for this distinction between the companies that chose to communicate "harder" employer branding and HRM policies cannot be derived from our findings and it may depend on any collection of variables such as country of origin, current employment practices in Sweden etc.

The fact remains, however, that companies 3, 4, and 5 are listed multinationals that are active in the tobacco and hard alcohol industries respectively and may be deemed more "controversial" according to Wilson and West (1981) (Wilson & West, 1981).

4.1.3 CSR policies communicated for employer branding purposes

As mentioned in the previous section, the communication of CSR was an observation that arose as we investigated employer branding in general. Grasping the importance of the issue of socially conscious and ethical conduct, we decided to further investigate the approach and rationale behind such CSR focus. For example, is it purely reactive to stakeholder pressures or do our target companies use this for other purposes as well? As mentioned above by Hepburn (2005), company values are becoming increasingly important for prospective employees when considering a future employer, and ethical values and relevant CSR work are an important part of such company values (Hepburn, 2005). The empirical findings regarding the communication of ethical values in employer branding has been touched upon in the above analysis and it is clear that there are significant variations among the researched companies. Companies 2 and 3 clearly state that they include ethical standpoints and values in their employer branding communications. Company 1 provided contradictory answers among interviewees, which in turn says something about how aligned these organization are in regards to external communication, while company 5 does not include sustainability in its recruitment communications.

4.1.3.1 Companies 2 and 3 - Ethical communicators

Company 2 strives to demonstrate to the external environment that they are fully aware of the fact that they act in a controversial industry and that they only earn "healthy money". They also wish to highlight the responsibility they infuse in the gambling industry.

> *"We have a very clear mission from the Swedish Government that says that we are supposed to sell and offer gambling solutions to consumers in Sweden, but that we also are taking a very clear social responsibility regarding gambling addictions."* Interviewee at company 2

Company 3 thinks it is very important to communicate, for employer branding purposes, that they do everything by the book. They also aim to emphasize that they do not wish to create new smokers, but to grow by acquiring market shares from competitors. At the same time as they wish to highlight concrete CSR measures that they are pursuing, they also consider it

imperative to not overly flaunt their these initiatives. The reason for this is that they do not want the external environment in general and prospective employees in particular to perceive their CSR initiatives as compensatory actions for their otherwise dangerous products.

"We can become better, both internally and externally with communicating what we actually do. But we have to be very careful and not advertise too much either and say: "We do all this!" There is a balance also to be quiet as well and not oversell what we do and that it somehow becomes forgiving to our industry." Interviewee at company 3

One explanation regarding the emphasis that these companies place on actively communicating their ethical values externally can be what Moroko and Uncles (2008) refer to as the front and the backstage of the company, as well as the fact that this distinction is not possible to apply to employer branding (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Prospective employees seek to gain an insight into the given company that extends beyond the front stage or consumer perspective, and there is thusly a greater need to expose the backstage workings and communicate what the company does internally as employers. Furthermore, this need is augmented in view of the fact that HR and recruitment are non-core aspects of the operations and that these are somewhat intangible and consequently harder to compare as well as benchmark. Another relevant perspective on these empirical observations that lies closely to the above reasoning is what Foster and Carley (2010) as well as Moroko and Uncles (2008) refer to as unintended appropriation of brand values due to information deficit (Foster et al., 2010; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Companies 2 and 3 may be concerned that their controversial products risk causing negative spillover effects to the employer brand since there is, due to the employer brand information deficit, a constant risk that the corporate and consumer brands become proxies for the employer brand. By extensively communicating ethical values and concrete CSR initiatives, these companies are reducing the employer brand information deficit and therefore also decreasing the risk of unfavorable appropriation in a context in which company perception is hard to regulate.

A distinction between the state owned gambling company and the global tobacco company can also be highlighted; company 2 gives the perception that the communicated ethical values permeates the entire organization and the entirety of its operations. It was mentioned, for example, that all prospective employees need to buy into the company culture.

"We have a strength in the fact that all our profits go back to the Swedish state. [...] There is no fat director on a tropical island who earns money on this, the money actually goes back to you and me." Interviewee at company 2

Company 3 on the other hand, give a more superficial impression, i.e. that the CSR initiatives have been developed because of external pressures and are thusly not a key aspect of the company's operations. Even though they state that they "do everything by the book", they still maintain a strong profit focus. Essentially, company 3's CSR policies appear to serve more as a hygiene factor to for example, placate candidate concerns.

4.1.3.2 Company 1 - Less defined ethical communicator

Company 1 gave contradictory answers regarding the communication of ethical values. The Director of Recruitment stated that they do not deliberately communicate CSR and argued that all companies have a social responsibility and that it is not something unique or sought for to communicate such information in employer branding purposes.

"I do not think that alcohol should steer your CSR, every company has a responsibility to society, because the employers are part of it regardless of what product it is, alcohol or not." Interviewee at company 1

The Director of Environment and Sustainability affairs, however, conversely reported that they communicate concrete CSR measures that they pursue throughout the value creation chain, including a number of examples of current sponsoring initiatives. Company 1 conducts sponsoring on a local level, a more regional level with focus on entrepreneurship (for instance Ung Företagsamhet[3]) and with a drug and alcohol addiction focus such as the Maskrosbarn[4] organization. This interviewee also mentioned that she does not think company 1 would conduct CSR with focus on drug and alcohol addiction if they were not manufacturing alcoholic beverages. This implies that company 1 sees an extra need to conduct and communicate CSR measures based on the fact that it is an alcohol manufacturer. Without being present in such a controversial industry, the risk for negative proxies or spillover effects on the employer brand is less prevalent and more controllable. In line with Moroko and Uncle's (2008) statement that

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[3] Ung Företagsamhet is a nonprofit organization that aims to, together with schools, introduce entrepreneurship and an active business relationship in the educational system in Sweden (http://www.ungforetagsamhet.se/organisation/om-ung-foretagsamhet, 05/18/2014)
[4] Maskrosbarn is a nonprofit organization that supports youngsters who have addict parents or in a state of mental discomfort (http://www.maskrosbarn.org/om-oss/, 05/18/2014)

successful employer brands need to be relevant and resonant, a CSR strategy focusing on alcohol related issues should be considered applicable for company 1 (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

4.1.3.3 Company 5 - Exclusion of ethical communication

Company 5's representatives state that they do not explicitly focus on communicating ethical values and CSR in their employer branding strategy. Such values are however considered to be present in every part of the operations of the company, but that there is no need to distinguish ethics and CSR separately when communicating with prospective employees. Using an analogous reasoning as above, it can be said that company 5 does not seem concerned that the corporate or consumer brand are used as proxies for the employer brand due to information deficit, and that further transparency towards prospective employees is therefore not necessary. Company 5 might also consider its product awareness sufficient and that further justification from an ethical or CSR standpoint becomes redundant in accordance with Cable and Turban's (2001) reasoning on consumer brand awareness as indicator of employer brand quality and viability (Cable & Turban, 2001).

Regarding the possible proxy effects, it is interesting to compare company 5 with the tobacco company analyzed above: the alcohol beverage manufacturer does not see the risk for negative proxy effects on its employer brand, while the interviewed tobacco companies consider this to be a threat. It appears as if different categories of products that we deem controversial provoke varying degrees of negative reactions. The Norwegian Government Pension Fund, the largest sovereign wealth fund in the world based on assets under management (Sovereign Wealth Fund Institute, 2014), includes all of the significant tobacco players but no alcohol manufacturer in the "companies excluded from the investment universe" list (The Government Pension Fund, 2014). If alcohol manufacturers are subjects to lesser public and investor-related scrutiny compared to tobacco manufacturers, it provides a suggestion to the reason behind the difference in behavior among our observed companies. Company 5 for example, as an actor in a less controversial industry, would consequently not perceive the same need for communicating ethical values and CSR measures for employer branding purposes.

4.1.4 Operational communications

Three companies, in particular, engage in specific activities to ensure maximum exposure of the employer brand. Company 4 and 5 actively attend career fairs at universities, company 4 arranges case competitions and both company 3 and 4 state that they work with networking and informal contacts for recruiting new employees rather than only recruiting

through a predetermined process. These three companies all touch on Moroko and Uncles' (2008) first step of successful employer brands: to make the brand noticeable and known. The second step, making the employer seem relevant and resonant, requires a greater effort from the observed companies. Conducting case competitions and actively managing the surrounding network and informal contacts are efforts that serve to make the company more relevant towards prospective employers (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

Both tobacco companies, company 3 and 4, state that they recently started to focus more on arranging office visits for prospective employees. The rationale behind this strategy is that prospective employees in general are reluctant to consider these tobacco companies as employers and there are negative assumptions regarding the moral orientation of current employees. HR representatives from companies 3 and 4 state that office visits counteract some of these negative perceptions by providing the opportunity to partake in the workings of the company and to interact with current employees in a more familiar setting. By conducting office events, current employees have the opportunity to be what Knox and Freeman (2006) refer to as true ambassadors and to "live the brand", something that positively affects prospective employees' perceptions (Knox & Freeman, 2006). Office visits can also be seen as a way to manage the lack of front stage representation that, according to Moroko and Uncles (2008), characterizes employer branding in comparison to consumer branding (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Furthermore, the office events is a way to guarantee control of the communication towards prospective employees in an effort to manage perceptions, and by doing so reducing the risk for what Foster and Carley (2010) as well as Moroko and Uncles (2008) refer to as unintended appropriation of brand values due to information deficit (Foster et al., 2010; Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

4.1.5 Summary of employer branding empirics and analysis

In regards to the strategic foci of our sample companies in regards to employer branding, the following trends could be observed: quest for alignment: focus on attracting graduates, internal recruitment and working with referrals. The companies that omit the aforementioned focus on aligning the employer branding with for example business strategy and products are coincidentally the ones that pursue an employer branding policy that is more practical in nature and thusly more oriented towards the latter three trends. These companies are the tobacco companies 3 and 4.

The employer branding communications of all companies in our sample convey at least a brief mention of social responsibility, whether independently or at the request of candidates and other interested parties. There is, however, a distinction between the companies that focus on communicating "softer" organizational aspects such as corporate culture and those that stress their "harder" policies including remuneration schemes and international mobility. The companies that have a "harder" approach to employer branding are active in the tobacco and alcohol industries as well as foreign, multinational players in contrast to the remaining sample which is more geographically fixed in the Swedish market.

As we investigated further into the connection between employer brand and ethical aspects, we sought to identify which companies that proactively use CSR as a cornerstone for attracting talent. The companies that stated that they pursue a proactive approach, namely 2 and 4, do this for varying reasons. Company 2 stresses that CSR is ingrained in its mission statement while company 4 pursues this for, in our minds, more superficial reasons. For the remaining sample, we either received contradictory answers or the position was conveyed that this is not a priority due to a perceived low risk of unintended proxy effects.

The companies that placed the most emphasis on their methods communicating their respective employer brands were the foreign actors 3, 4 and 5. The tobacco actors, 3 and 4, are particularly active in arranging office visits for students and other candidates. Such strategies, in line with the established literature, can be considered strong vehicles for brand communication as they include a greater degree of transparency, control and brand ambassadorship on account of the existing employees.

4.2 Consumer branding

In this second part of our empirical findings and the associated analysis, we cover the connection between the consumer brand and the employer brand and the implications of this relationship.

4.2.1 Connection between consumer brand and employer brand

In investigating the link between employer and consumer branding, we sought to inquire how the companies in our sample strategically manage and perceive the interplay between these two branding aspects. The sample illustrates a range of attitudes towards the combination or separation of the employer as well as consumer brands. Company 1 stresses a passive combination based on the assumption that consumer awareness is beneficial for employer

branding due to heightened employer familiarity. Company 2 seeks to separate the two branding aspects to heighten the clarity of its communications and avoid negative proxy-like effects. Finally, the tobacco companies in our sample, companies 3 and 4, have strict internal guidelines (influenced by legal directives) that prevent association between the consumer and employer brand.

Representatives of company 1 state that because the focus of operations naturally falls on the consumer branding and the promotion of the company's products, the assumption is that this will have positive effects on the company's employer branding practices. In this sense, the employer branding is secondary to the consumer branding and the company's promotional efforts appear to focus on the creation of general company awareness and the fulfillment of commercial purposes in contrast to, for example, specifically conveying employment characteristics. To link back to the literature, product awareness and the associated employer familiarity relates to employer branding in the sense that these aspects mitigate the effects of practices such as low-information recruitment processes (Collins, 2007) and serve as indicators of job attributes (Cable & Turban, 2001). Consequently, company 1's predominant focus on consumer branding may be sufficient as a communicative tool since it creates general company awareness, which in turn positively impacts employer familiarity.

Company 2, in contrast to company 1, aims to limit the link between consumer and employment branding because they perceive a greater need to communicate the company as an employer, specifically in view of the fact their products are very well-known in their primary market. A representative of the company relates this to the aforementioned negative proxy dilemma (Foster et al., 2010; Moroko & Uncles, 2008) in the sense that prospective employees do not inherently recognize certain employment opportunities within the company exclusively based on product exposure. For example, an interviewee stated that external interest holders do not immediately perceive the company's focus on IT. Another representative echoed this general statement but clarified that the company maintains employer branding and consumer branding as two separate strategic foci with, as mentioned, no emphasis on combination or separation efforts.

Companies 3 and 4, the tobacco companies in our sample, stress that their internal guidelines prevent them from using their consumer brands for employer branding purpose. A representative of company 3 speculated that such policies are necessary to counteract the

potential spillover effects from the generally negative perceptions of the company's products. The practice of active distancing extends to other aspects of corporate communications, both companies stated that they do not show their respective brands' logos on their corporate websites and there is a general vigilance in regards to associating the overarching corporate brands with the products. An interviewee made the comparison to other FMCG-companies that, in contrast, frequently include a banner detailing the company's brands in their recruiting materials. This dissociation and the underlying internal guidelines that warrant such actions do not simply serve to avoid negative proxy-effects but additionally represent an attempt to ensure legal compliance. The existing legal framework in Sweden places strict limitations on the contexts and formats in which tobacco products may be portrayed and advertised; by enforcing internal guidelines that go beyond the legal requirement, companies such as company 4 seek to promote responsibility in line with their values and ambition to be the most socially responsible actor in the tobacco industry.

Company 5, in the same manner as company 2, has a strong portfolio of recognizable brands which equally presents benefits and complications in terms of employer branding. A company 5 representative stated that prospective employees are attracted to the company primarily due to its innovative approaches to marketing their products and brand values such as modernity and artistic orientation. The same representative also mentioned that the reason behind the alcoholic products' popularity is that they are usually consumed during the highlights of life, for instance parties and other social events, and consequently inspire positive connotations. Employer familiarity is thusly favorably affected by the product awareness and associated with positive and favorable contexts (Collins, 2007). Conversely, the strength of the consumer brand overpowers the corporate brand to the extent that prospective employees are, at times, unaware of the company's operations when presented with the corporate name without product associations.

"Unfortunately, the knowledge is not too good, but it is getting better. We were quite anonymous in the beginning, only being the ones standing behind the brands. [...] In general, people have better knowledge regarding the brands and it happens that I get questions such as: Company 5, what do you do?" Interviewee at company 5

Along the same lines as the previous discussion regarding the tobacco companies 3 and 4, Swedish law prohibits company 5 from marketing itself in employment contexts to people

under the age of 25. In essence, the paradoxical issue remains that the legal limitations imposed on company 5 prevent it from fully exploiting the positive emotion connection (Cable & Turban, 2001) that its consumers have with its products. Consequently, employer awareness suffers and this contributes to the aforementioned lack of knowledge regarding the company's operations among uninitiated job seekers. If the company employs any concrete strategies to bypass this issue other than compliance could not be derived from our interviews. On a more speculative note, however, it should be mentioned that the Swedish branch of company 5 has chosen to integrate its most famous brand in its corporate name. By doing so, the company effectively promotes itself by referencing to its well-known products while simultaneously not actively communicating the product-company association, thus ensuring adherence to existing laws. The question remains, whether this is a general promotional effort or an actual attempt to circumvent the restrictive legislature?

4.2.2 Summary of consumer branding empirics and analysis

In regards to the consumer brands of our sample company, we sought to investigate the perceived connection between the consumer and employer brands as well as the strategies that the companies employ to manage such connections. Company 1 stressed a passive combination based on the assumption that consumer brand awareness is beneficial for employer branding due to heightened employer familiarity. Similarly, Company 2 seeks to separate the two branding aspects to heighten the clarity of its recruitment communications and avoid unrepresentative proxy-like effects. Finally, the tobacco companies in our sample, companies 3 and 4, have strict internal guidelines (influenced by legal directives) that prevent association between the consumer and employer brand.

4.3 Corporate branding

Corporate branding is the final perspective that is presented in the empirics and analysis portion of the thesis. This part starts with discussing corporate credibility and reputation from a more holistic perspective and then explores to a greater degree the question of alignment between corporate branding and employer branding.

4.3.1 Corporate credibility and reputation

As we started investigating the corporate branding practices of the companies in our sample and the effects of such practices on employer branding, we questioned the interviewees in regards to how they view the corporate credibility and corporate reputation of their respective employers. As stated in the theoretical framework, corporate branding and reputation

management interrelate in the sense that the strategies previously used for reputation management has gradually become a cornerstone of corporate branding in parallel to the emergence of the discipline (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). Strategies that promote a positive corporate reputation include, for example, favorable employee behaviors (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001), CSR (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004) and the maintenance of the brand promise (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004; Balmer, 2001). The purpose of this line of questioning was to provide us with a basic understanding of the perceived need for reputations management (using the corporate brand), particularly in view of the fact that our sample companies derive their revenue from producing harmful products.

When questioned regarding the corporate practices and the general state of company 1's reputation, a representative stated that since the company is not purely an alcohol brand, but also maintains other product groups in its portfolio, this mitigates the need for strict reputations management. Another interviewee stated, along the same lines, that the public scrutiny towards the company tends to revolve too much around the alcoholic products and there is a general tendency for external observers to neglect other aspects of the company's operations. In view of this dynamic, there was an expressed belief that company 1 has no additional requirements regarding social responsibility based uniquely on the fact that the company produces alcohol. The first representative supported this argument and stated that current CSR policies of company 1 are in place because the company is a "good company" and since certain business customers demand such policies from their suppliers. These positions conveyed, in essence, a conscious shift of CSR-related focus away from the products and towards general wholesomeness (Olins, 2001). For example, the company, via its owners, is greatly involved in promoting young entrepreneurship.

Yet another representative of company 1, as mentioned, provided contradictory evidence in stating that a portion of the company's sponsoring budget is directed towards organizations such as Maskrosbarn and Nattvandrarna[5] that deal directly with counteracting the damaging societal effects of alcohol and other addictions. In addition, this representative relayed the opinion that the company would not engage in such activities if it were not a producer of alcoholic beverages. This contradiction may be a result of our interview techniques

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[5] Nattvandrarna aim to be adult role models and to be a social and human support to young people and to prevent drug abuse, violence, xenophobia and vandalism http://www.nattvandring.se/, 05/18/2014)

but it may also be attributed to that company 1 is still in a relatively early stage of development regarding the alignment of its policies, for example sponsoring and CSR.

Company 2's corporate brand has evolved as a direct result from its corporate identity (Balmer & Gray, 2003) as a state-owned enterprise with the specific task of enforcing responsible gambling. This mission statement constitutes the very essence of company 2 and is something which is imbued in all aspects of its operations (Balmer & Gray, 2003). For example, an interviewee stated that the "responsibility and experience" mantra is something that guides strategic and product development. This strict adherence to the key values represents maintenance of the brand covenant (Balmer & Gray, 2003) and company 2 derives a great deal of credibility from such practices. In this context, the products of company 2 are not scrutinized in the same fashion as other gambling companies since they essentially present a means to end, namely the promotion of responsible gambling and the financing of Swedish youth sports as well as other athletic organizations. The CSR activities of company 2 are also, albeit not primarily connected to gambling, greatly aligned with the mission statement since there is an inherent focus on athletics.

A representative at company 4 stated that there is a common understanding that the corporate brand is harmed due to the fact that the company produces tobacco products, which leads to reputational losses and a negative public perception. Furthermore, this representative stated that despite the reputation losses incurred by the products, the corporate brand itself serves as an ameliorating factor due to the extensiveness of the company's CSR engagements. For example, the company is the industry leader in sustainability based on the Dow Jones Sustainability Index and maintains the highest level of environmental and social performance throughout its value chain, a degree of commitment that distinguishes it from the competitors (Balmer & Gray, 2003). Similar to company 1, company 4's CSR practices are focused on achieving a wholesome image (Olins, 2001). The company also works extensively with value cultivation (Balmer & Gray, 2003) through staff training in order to promote brand ambassadorship. The same representative expressed that the company's employees are frequently asked to clarify their reasons for working for a tobacco company. In response to such inquiries, the HR department at company 4 instructs its employees to refer to the corporate brand and convey that the company is an "honest" actor that promotes CSR and transparency regarding the harmful nature of its products.

"We communicate to our customers in a way that is legal, and that in many ways can be considered to be more honest than our competitors since we have relatively strict internal guidelines compared to competitors. I get the feeling that we are a nice player, even among our direct competitors." Interviewee at company 4

This form of training is a solid example of promotion of brand ambassadorship, namely the alignment of employee and corporate values to ensure desired representations with the external environment (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001). In general, company 4 can be likened to company 2 since CSR is an aspect that is greatly ingrained within the corporate brand and all facets of the company's operations. This, in turn, contributes to a great deal of credibility since it is clear that the sustainability focus is not there to solely counteract the negative reputational effects of its products and associated scrutiny (Argenti & Druckenmiller, 2004). The other tobacco company in our sample, company 3, conversely is not engaged in CSR activities to the same extent. An interviewee stated directly, for example;

"If you are passionate about CSR, then there are probably more relevant companies to work for than company 3." Interviewee at company 3

The impression gained from the interviews was the company's CSR initiatives, albeit proactive and in line with the industry standard, are in place to meet the external requirements on transparency given the fact that the company is listed. As mentioned previously in the section detailing consumer branding practices, the focus of company 5 falls on promoting the consumer products and the awareness of the company itself consequently suffers. In regards to the corporate brand, the underlying identity of company 5 is that they are a company that combines a global reach with local flexibility. In itself, such a statement contradicts the idea of promoting an umbrella, corporate brand according to which activities such as CSR and recruitment can be consolidated and benchmarked (Balmer & Gray, 2003). A representative of the company stated that the reason for this is that the products themselves are imbued with a great deal of craftsmanship and maintain specific identities depending on their respective country of origin, brand history etc. In view of this level of individuality among the brands, the company actively avoids creating synergies and the corporate brand therefore assumes a purely organizational function as the core activities are dispersed throughout the world.

4.3.2 Alignment and link between employer brand and corporate brand

As mentioned above, Harris and De Chernatony (2001) stresses the importance of a holistic perspective when maintaining a successful corporate brand, and that the HR department works as caretaker and promoter to align this holistic approach (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001; King, 1991). Company 1 stated that they aim to communicate externally that the company is a family controlled business that builds on a culture where entrepreneurship runs deep in the organization. They are aware that this culture is not for everyone and this is why it is so important to communicate such a corporate value externally to prospective employees.

"We have a new communications director, [...] so now I'm trying to find synergies when working with her on how we can lift the employer brand. Every time they market company 1 as a consumer brand, the can also market certain aspects of the employer. Here we have a lot to do." Interviewee at company 1

Without striving for such a holistic approach there is a clear risk that brand values and the values of employees will not be aligned, something that Harris and De Chernatony (2001) emphasizes as very important in order to develop a favorable reputation of the company (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001). Company 2 also wants to ensure that prospective employees are aware of the company's values and responsibility.

"Most other companies have profit maximization as a natural ingredient in their business, we do not have that. We want to earn healthy money and that people gamble for the amount they planned from the beginning. [...] If you are a person who loves sales above all, then you will not enjoy working here." Interviewee at company 2

The corporate values and emphasis on "sustainable gambling" here creates a "recruitment filter" since company 2 clearly states in the communication with prospective employees that applicants need to buy into the culture or else they will not fit in and enjoy the working environment.

Company 3 state that they have to work hard to receive applicants to their openings, and they generally have a hard time recruiting and believe that they need to put in comparably more resources and time to fill vacancies.

"Our perception from the HR department is that we have a hard time recruiting, that is also the feedback we get from headhunters, that they need to call three times as many candidates. When we were arranging an office visit in Denmark we had a hard time finding 15 people who could attend. We had to call people and ask if they could consider showing up, but in the end the event was a success and many of the candidates attending wanted a job. [...] Do we find the right people in the end? Yes we do, but we maybe have to search for a bit longer." Interviewee at company 3

As mentioned previously, they cope with this challenge by conducting office visits, a way to facilitate alignment with the corporate brand and the employees in the company. (Balmer & Gray, 2003) The company generally strives to communicate the corporate brand, both through formal processes as job postings and attendance at career fairs, and more informally through employees' ambassadorship.

"For me, employer branding is about everything we do here. [...] It is extremely important that employees agree with and are up to date with what we are trying to communicate externally. [...] Employer branding should permeate everything we do, from having a job ad out there to that an employee should be able to talk about his or her job during a dinner and be very proud and being able to pitch the company." Interviewee
at company 3

Communicating the corporate brand is as much an internal as an external process according to a representative of company 3. The internal work is focused on ambassadorship which is in line with Harris and De Chernatony (2001) who say that brand building is based on aligning the corporate brand with the values of employees, since they constantly communicate values externally through their interactions with the extra-organizational environment (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001).

Company 4 has not decoupled the CSR and ethics related part of the company and they state that such sustainability questions are highly relevant in everything they do, and therefore also in the employer branding strategy. This approach is in line with the holistic perspective discussed above by Harris and De Chernatony (2001) and facilitates for the HR department to efficiently communicate to prospective employees (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001). Keeping CSR and ethics close to the core operations also ensures easier alignment between corporate

and employee values since employees then will understand and know the ethical values as well as incorporate this understanding into their daily activities.

4.3.3 Summary of corporate branding empirics and analysis

The corporate branding perspective was included in accordance with the theoretical framework in which we acknowledge the fact that the employer brand and consumer brand exist within the context of the corporate brand. In view of this fact, we first aimed to derive findings related to how the corporate brand is used for reputations management given the potentially harmful nature of our sample companies' products. Social and environmental responsibility is closely related to the corporate brands of companies 2 and 4, it is a guiding aspect throughout all facets of the companies' operations. Some representatives of company 1 stated that the company's reputational management policies are in place more to provide a license to operate and promote good corporate citizenship, much in the same fashion as companies 2 and 4. In direct contradiction to this, however, another company 1 employee stated explicitly that certain CSR initiatives of the company are in place purely because of its connection to alcoholic products. Company 5, in contrast to the remaining sample, lacks a strong company brand that can be used as a consolidating platform for reputations management.

When it comes to the link between employer branding and the corporate brand, it is most important to stress the necessity of aligning corporate values with the values of employees who are the ones who constantly communicate the corporate brand to the external environment through their day-to-day interactions. This is stressed by company 3 which states that communication of the employer brand is as much an internal process as an external.

5. CONCLUSION

In our conclusion we will start of with addressing our initial research question, we will then elaborate on the outlook beyond our research question and in doing so assuming a broader more general perspective.

5.1 Addressing the research question

Looking back at our research question: "*Employer Branding in Controversial Companies: How Do Companies With a Negatively Associated Consumer Brand attract Talent and Maintain the Employer Brand?*", there are a number of aspects from our findings that need to highlighted in this conclusion. As mentioned in our theoretical roadmap, the employer branding and consumer branding were investigated due to their direct relation to the research question and the perceived importance of understanding the link between these. In addition, we also included HRM and corporate branding as they have a direct influence on employer branding processes and serve as a platform for reputational management respectively.

First and foremost, one has to note that there are different degrees of controversiality between brands that are, according to the theoretical definition (Cai et al., 2012), active in controversial industries. Not all companies in our sample perceive that their consumer brands, due to the nature of the products, have a harmful effect on their employer branding efforts. This may depend on any number of factors such as culture, industry reputation, regional preferences etc. For example, The Norwegian Government Pension Fund communicates that alcohol is less detrimental to society than for example combustible tobacco through its choice of investment targets (The Government Pension Fund, 2010).

5.1.1 Key relationship: Consumer and employer brand

All companies apart from the tobacco manufacturers concluded that the strength of the consumer brand is an advantage in terms of employer branding. One company even went so far as to say that their consumer brand was too strong and therefore led candidates to misjudge employment possibilities since these were not innately conveyed in the consumer branding. Regardless, the companies that consider the strength of the consumer brand to be an advantage want to achieve greater alignment between the daily operations and their external recruitment procedures. While these companies consider greater alignment behind the employer branding process to be key for maintaining a successful employer brand, the tobacco companies are forced into an alternative. They are severely limited by their consumer brands,

due to the aforementioned consumer perceptions, and have trouble attracting people for vacancies and job advertisements. They promote a separation between the consumer brand and the employer brand, something that is further necessitated by the legal frameworks in Sweden that prohibit the marketing of the products in recruitment purposes. To compensate for this dynamic, there is a shift of focus towards the corporate brand as the main point of attraction. HR representatives from the tobacco companies frequently stress, for example, that the companies have extensive resources and consequently favorable practices in terms of remuneration, talent development and international mobility.

5.1.2 Operational recruitment: Transparency and inclusion

The tobacco companies also work differently compared to the other observed companies in terms of HR. The representatives from these companies portray a strong focus on internal recruitment, succession planning, and working with referrals. One can say that they nurture and maintain the pool of possible employee candidates to a larger extent than the other companies because this pool is smaller and requires more resources to compile in the first place. They also work with office visits, which together with other HR efforts, serve to circumvent the recruitment issue or to infuse their recruitment policies with greater transparency.

5.1.3 Non-impact of CSR

The use of CSR is, as expected, mostly related to the general reputation building and is not, for the majority of the company's in our sample, a direct mechanism for compensation for the controversial products. In essence, CSR has become a hygiene factor. Only Company 1 stressed that they are explicitly involved in certain types of CSR due to the nature of their products. For some of the companies, however, CSR is used as a differentiator in their respective industries. For example, one company has it infused into its core operations due to the state ownership situation. Another company sees the use of CSR as a direct competitive advantage and a source of differentiation, something that was also reflected upon sporadically by other companies.

In regards to our research question, our most important finding is the dynamic between the employer brand and the consumer brand. In summation, the fact remains that the consumer brand appears to be the most important factor when it comes to the creation of company awareness. The consumer brand feeds into the employer brand and it is definitely interrelated to the corporate brand. In itself, however, the corporate brand lacks the necessary exposure to

govern public opinion. It can be used as a consolidating platform, but a platform needs an audience. Consequently, companies that have to separate the employer branding practices from their consumer branding, whether due to overly controversial products or legal requirements, are at a heavy disadvantage according to our findings.

The recurring importance of consumer branding is something that needs to be highlighted, it has not been dealt with extensively in previous research and we will propose a solution to this in the discussion below.

5.2 Outlook beyond the research question

Based on our findings, there does not seem to be a clear best practice according to which companies in controversial industries should work with attracting talent. Every company in the sample has different strategies that are very specific to their product, external stakeholders and environment. In consequence, there is great variation in our findings despite the restriction of the sample to controversial companies.

When reflecting upon our findings one can consider if it in the end only is a question of awareness, value alignment and transparency when it comes to successful employer branding. Awareness is vital and necessary for attracting prospective employees and serve as an underpinning factor, while value alignment and transparency are both more concerned with the accurate communication of the company and its characteristics in order to reduce risks such as the residual generation of faulty expectations. Hiring the wrong individuals is costly from many aspects: an unnecessary recruitment process is costly, the employee will not perform according to expectations, and a new recruitment process needs to be conducted. Due to the risk of failed recruitments, there is no valid argument for why companies should not, in their employer branding and recruitment procedures, aim to provide prospective employees with a highly representational view of the company. As stated, such tendencies have been observed among some of our companies, like the initiative of office visits and the emphasis on brand ambassadorship.

On another note, it might also be worth highlighting a possible clash when it comes to aiming for maximum transparency in the employer branding strategy. Employer and consumer branding are highly intertwined, and maximum transparency might not be sought for to the same extent within consumer branding, taking the front and the back stage (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

In view of this, there might be a conflict when it comes to the pursuit of providing transparency within the different branding types.

Regarding our choice of focusing on companies in controversial industries in Sweden, there are some points that need be highlighted in regards to this as well. We ask ourselves if there is a real difference in how companies in controversial industries conduct employer branding compared to companies in "regular" industries. Is there a need to highlight controversial industries in the first place, i.e. how unique are our findings in comparison to the findings we would have derived if the study were conducted on companies in non-controversial industries? Could we have observed different results by placing less emphasis on the theoretical definition of controversial industries and also by not only limiting ourselves to the Swedish market? Observing companies outside of Sweden, however, lies outside of the scope of this master thesis, mainly due to time constraints. This perspective is certainly an interesting topic for future research, something we will elaborate on below.

Furthermore, we see two important aspects to consider due to our geographical limitation. Firstly, we question whether the need for CSR differs from other markets? As we have observed in our multiple case study, CSR is essentially a hygiene factor in Sweden, is this also the case in other countries? Secondly, local knowledge of the companies impacts recruitment patterns. Swedish companies, for instance, might be more successful in recruiting compared to international companies who are active in Sweden.

6. DISCUSSION

Our discussion will start off with theoretical contributions, i.e. how our study fills the highlighted research gap and how our empirical findings can be theorized and fitted with current research. Theoretical contributions will be concluded with suggestions of future research areas that our findings have highlighted. We will then discuss practical contributions that can be relevant from a managerial perspective.

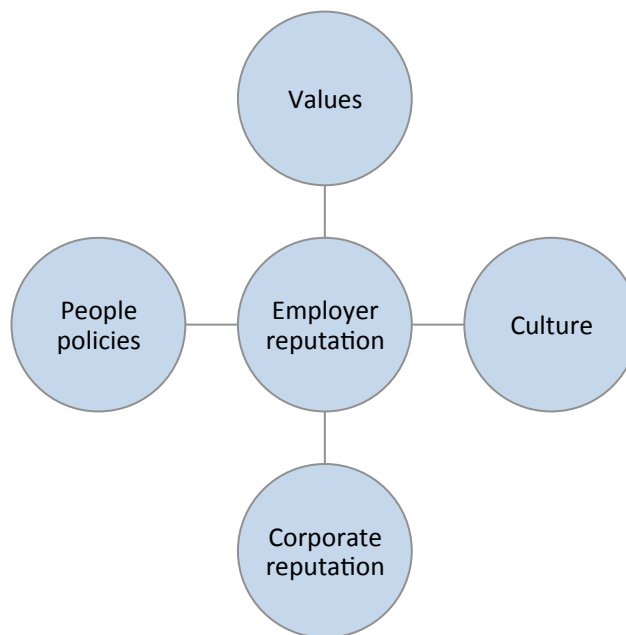## 6.1 Theoretical contributions

Figure 5. (Hepburn, 2005)

Hepburn's model (2005) was included in the theoretical framework as a tool that resembled the structure and logic we wished to follow when approaching employer branding as a concept (Hepburn, 2005). However, we believe that this model is not sufficiently exhaustive since it downplays the importance of consumer branding, something that is clearly evident in our empirics and analyses. Hepburn (2005) includes consumer branding very briefly in reference to corporate reputation, but only to the extent that prospective employees are more likely to find a company attractive if they also find the products provided by the company attractive. Therefore, we propose to add a node to the model developed by Hepburn (2005) and that this node focuses solely on consumer branding (Hepburn, 2005). Through this addition, we believe that,

based on our empirical findings, an exhaustive tool to analyze all significant factors that affect employer branding has been developed.

The consumer branding node facilitates an analysis of several important factors: firstly, it highlights general consumer branding awareness. By this we mean the awareness of the company from a pure consumer perspective. Is the perception for instance good or bad, increasing or decreasing? Secondly, the public perception of the company's products can be pointed out. By this we mean to a broader context than what Hepburn (2005) refers to in the corporate reputation node (Hepburn, 2005). Apple for instance has products that are not only loved by consumers, but that also aims to reveal a lot about a consumer from a social context and reputation. Thirdly, many companies carry out recognized and creative consumer marketing campaigns that also affect the employer brand.
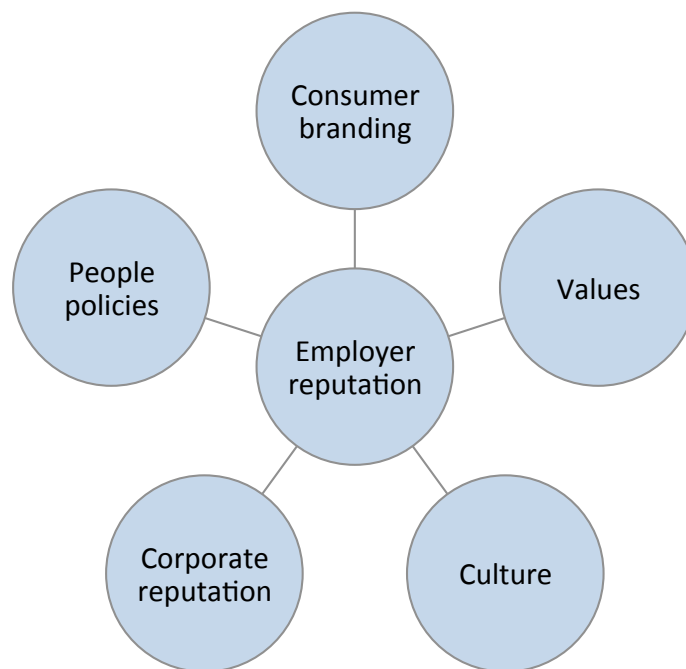
Figure 6.

As a complement to Hepburn's revised model, we also wish to place emphasis on the self-developed framework that has provided the underlying structure of our thesis.
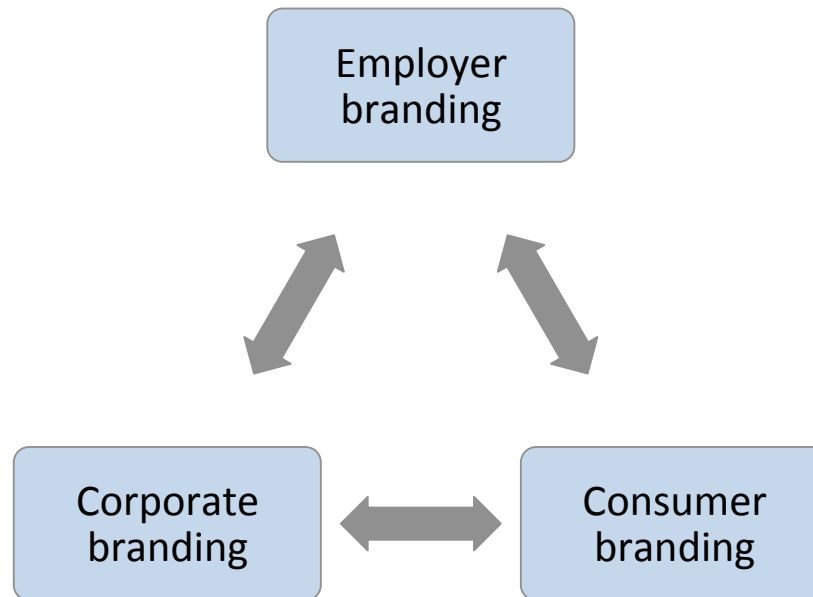
Figure 7.

With this tool we wish to highlight the interrelation between the three types of branding, something that we believe Hepburn (2005) and previously described literature does not cover in a sufficiently holistic manner.

Both models are not only applicable on controversial industries, but can be used in any kind of employer branding analysis relating to any kind of consumer-oriented company. As mentioned in our theoretical framework, there is limited research on employer branding in controversial industries, which means that the number of models and tools to analyze such observations are, to our knowledge, non existent. By adding the consumer branding node to Hepburn's model (Hepburn, 2005), we adapt an existing model to be more representative of reality and consequently better suited for its purpose, namely illustrating the conceptual components of the employer reputation and the associated employer brand.

6.2 Future research

There are a number of aspects that we wish to bring up as suggestions for future research. First of all, we suggest that our two models presented above are tested and scrutinized with another data sample, preferably a more extensive study that exceeds the scope of this master thesis. The topic still qualifies for explorative study approaches and it would be interesting to see if there are significant factors or causalities behind successful employer branding that we have not touched upon due to the information derived from our sample.

Secondly, we suggest an empirical study that has a broader geographical scope than we were able to provide in this master thesis. It requires more time and resources than we had at our disposal, but it would be very interesting to, for example, see a comparison between two regional markets, and how controversial industries and employer branding procedures differ between the two. Thirdly, we suggest further studies that further investigate the specific relationship between employer branding and consumer branding. A study that is fully devoted to this relationship can most certainly lead to findings that our study, that has taken a broader and more explorative approach, has not covered.

Fourthly, our study is limited to the company perspective of employer branding and does not included receivers of the employer branding communication. Beyond this perspective, future studies can be extended to include the perceptions and other psychological reactions of, for instance, job seekers. Such studies can facilitate a more practical use of our proposed model.

6.3 Practical contributions

The emphasis we have had on consumer branding in relation to employer branding is a topic where, as stated previously, current research is limited. Our findings might be an eye opener for companies and managers in the sense that more thought and time could be assigned to the relationship and alignment between employer branding and consumer branding as well as the consideration of the trade-offs of such an alignment. Our study, in addition, can provide insights into the positive and negative aspects of this relationship, for example possible synergies between employer branding and consumer branding regarding the generation of company awareness. On the contrary, there is also the constant threat of negative proxy effects as the consumer brand is used as a substitute for the employer brand due to information deficit.

The presented models can be used as evaluation tools and benchmarking tools for businesses to identify the current state and contributing factors behind employer branding strategies. In terms of the model's relevance, it can assist practitioners by providing a more in-depth understanding of the aspects that have an impact on employer branding procedures. This, in turn, may contribute to the streamlining of such procedures.

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8. APPENDIX

8.1 Questions for qualitative interviews

8.1.1 Employer branding

- How does the company's employer branding strategy look like?
    - o Specify the strategy with a few key words
- Which factors related to employer branding do you believe are most important?
- What messages are of vital importance to communicate to future possible employees?
- What might be missing in the strategy today?
    - o Why is this? Lack of resources, knowledge, priority etc.
- Is the current employer branding strategy derived from local or global procedures?
- How have you come up with this strategy?
    - o Benchmarking, market research, gut-feeling etc.
- How do you believe that your employer branding strategy differs from competitors?
- How is the employer branding strategy adopted to the local market (i.e. Sweden)?
- Why, in your mind, are employees attracted to your company?
- What factors influence the success of your employer branding efforts the most?
    - o Distinguish between internal and external factors
- To what extent do you adapt to external pressure from different stakeholders when conducting and maintaining your employer branding strategy?
    - o What kind of external pressure do you experience from prospective employees?

8.1.2 HRM practices

- Briefly discuss your most important HRM structures
    - o Why are these the most important ones according to you?
    - o To what extent are they adapted to current employees' input as well as possible input from external stakeholders, such as prospective employees?
- To what extent are current employees part of recruitment and employer branding (e.g. ambassadors for the company)?