

Appearance Matters —

Investigating the Return on Putting Effort in the Design of Presentation Material

Abstract

Should business-to-business (B2B) firms care about the design of their presentation material? Previous research within business-to-consumer (B2C) marketing has shown that putting more effort, in terms of e.g. creativity or expense, in advertising can be beneficial for the transmitting firm. This thesis aims to apply this line of reasoning in a B2B context by investigating if the design of a consulting firm's presentation material can affect perceived effort and thereby result in positive signaling effects. Moreover, extended effects on potential employees are also examined. An experimental study with two corporate presentations, one perceived as more well-designed and the other as less well-designed, was conducted. The results imply that more well-designed presentation material increases perceived effort and, in turn, brand attitude, brand ability, perceived product quality and employer attractiveness. From a marketing perspective the findings suggest that the creation of well-designed presentation material could be used for brand building purposes and leverage a consulting firm's marketing expenses.

Key words: employer branding, signaling effects, effort, brand ability, employer attractiveness

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Definitions

Brand ability: Refers in this thesis to individuals' perceptions of the firm's credibility, professionalism and ability to solve customers' problems.

Business-to-business (B2B): Refers to business arrangements or transactions between firms (Investopedia, 2016).

Business-to-consumer (B2C): Refers to business arrangements or transactions between firms and consumers (Investopedia, 2016).

Brand attitude: Refers to an individual's global evaluation of a brand (Keller, 2004).

Buyer: A user of the products (goods or services) from the buying firm. In the context of this thesis a buyer does not necessarily have to be a decision maker.

Consulting firm: Refers in this thesis to a firm providing services in terms of expert knowledge to another party in a B2B context (Investopedia, 2016).

Communication tool: Tool used in marketing to communicate a message, e.g. advertising, social media or presentation material.

Design: Appealing factors of an object in terms of e.g. color, pictures, aesthetics. An object can be more or less well-designed.

Effort: Investment of resources in terms of e.g. time, thought and expense in a marketing activity.

Employer attractiveness: Refers to "the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization" (Berthon et al., 2005).

Employer branding: Current and potential employees' perception of the differentiation of the firm's attributes as an employer compared to competitors (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2007; Edwards, 2010).

Experiential/Hedonic value: Refers to what extent "a product creates appropriate experiences, feelings and emotions for the customers" (Colgate & Smith, 2007).

Mediation analysis: An analysis aiming to identify and explain the mechanism or process between an independent variable and a dependent variable, by including a third hypothetical variable (Malhotra, 2004).

Perceived product quality: An individual's overall evaluation of the value of a product (good or service), which depends on the individual's perceived balance between what is received and given up (Kirmani & Zeithaml, 1993).

Presentation material: Refers in this thesis to one of the major communication tools used by consulting firms to transmit information to their stakeholders.

Product: Something that can be offered to a market to satisfy a want or need, e.g. a good or a service (Jobber, 2012).

Stakeholder: A party that has an interest in a firm, e.g. investors, employees, customers and suppliers (Investopedia, 2016).

Signaling effects: The effects on individuals' perceptions generated by signals sent out by another party via information or actions (Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Dahlén et al., 2008).

Touch point: Any contact point a firm has to its stakeholders (Oxford Dictionaries, 2016), e.g. ads, presentation material or service encounters.

The Handicap Principle: Originates from biology and refers to the behavior of animals' use of wasteful characteristics, e.g. a deer's antlers or long peacock tail, to signal their fitness. This can be applied in other contexts too, such as advertising (Ambler & Hollier, 2004).

I. Introduction

I.1 Background

Imagine that you started your first job after your graduation. The firm you work for just invested millions of dollars in a transformation project for the firm, executed by a consulting firm¹. You have heard that they have been working for months on this project and in your hands you are holding a copy of the results, packaged in a presentation deck. As you flip through the presentation material² you react to the visually dull and even boring presentation of the results. You recognize the design³ as it appears to be one of Microsoft PowerPoint's standard templates. This makes you wonder how important this project actually was to the consulting firm, since they did not express the slightest effort⁴ in crafting this presentation.

How does this affect your judgment of the results and evaluation of the consulting firm? Does it matter how a product⁵ is packaged and communicated?

If you give it a second, the answer for consumer products will inevitably be yes. Think about the design of soft drink and shampoo bottles, or the fact that when you buy high-end products like a designer bag or jewelry, they will always be packaged in fancy paper bags along with wrapping paper. B2C⁶ firms are well aware that these aspects are important when it comes to communicating and affecting consumers' perception of the product and the brand.

Probably, your answer would not be the same for business-to-business⁷ (B2B) products. By tradition, the B2B market is characterized by more rationality and a focus on functionality and instrumental values - rather than how something looks and feels. Consumer marketing has an established body of research whereas B2B marketing is unquestionably lagging behind (Marquardt, 2013; Aaker, 1996). As an extensive amount of theories and practices have been tested and proved in B2C, consumer market firms can better allocate their time and resources in creating their marketing communication. For example, it has been shown that it is beneficial to put more effort, in terms of creativity, in creating ads as it leads to positive effects for the firm (Dahlén et. al., 2008).

According to behavioral researcher Daniel Kahneman (2003), the human brain is hardwired to simplify the complex world we live in and take mental shortcuts. In many situations what we see is all there is. In other words, appearance matters. In the wild kingdom of animals many species endow in wasteful behaviors just to look or appear in a certain way. For example, peafowls interpret the size and beauty of a peacock's feathers as a sign of the male's quality as a partner (Ambler & Hollier, 2004). Therefore

¹⁻⁷ See Definitions

peacocks walk around showing off their feathers to attract females. Thus, how things are designed, e.g. in terms of color, shape and aesthetics, and what it signals are important. In fact, one could even argue that everything has a design, from clothes, buildings, and soft drink bottles to presentation material. The lousy design of the presentation deck you were holding in your hands some minutes ago surely does not signal credibility, or that the consulting firm you paid millions of dollars to is committed enough to tackle your firm's challenges.

Furthermore, is it possible that other stakeholders⁸ than you will be affected by the consulting firm's presentation? The authors have come across a lot of different presentations from firms during their study time, and still get surprised of how firms choose to present themselves – and how fast they can assess the attractiveness of the firm as an employer based on signals of their presentation material.

In the era of knowledge we are in today, attracting talent and competence is a global battle between firms. In this battle - does a firm's appearance really matter?

1.2 Problem Area

Presentation material is one of the most frequently used communication tools⁹ in the consulting industry and constitutes a vital touch point¹⁰ between a firm and its stakeholders. Whether putting effort in designing a presentation could generate positive signaling effects¹¹ and thereby be beneficial for firms in this context, is something that has not been examined.

Weilbacher (2003) argues that marketers in B2C should focus more on understanding *how* consumers assimilate information that firms send out, e.g. from advertising. This reasoning should reasonably be of the same importance for B2B firms. More specifically, the identified problem area regards whether putting more effort in designing presentation material could convey similar signals of effort, as advertising creativity does for ads in the B2C market. In other words, could consulting firms control their touch points to stakeholders better, and is it worth adding resources to this type of activity?

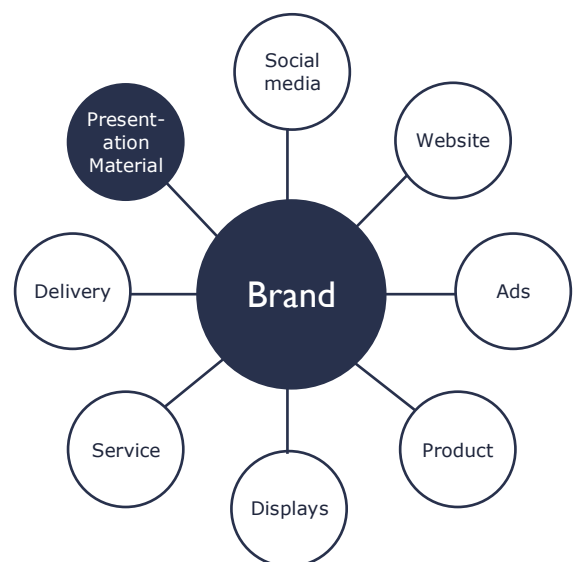


Figure 1: Example of touch points of a brand

An interesting question for consulting firms ought to be how individuals exposed to presentation material evaluate and draw conclusions about the firm based on the material. Examining signaling theory and marketing communication all touch points between stakeholders and the firm, such as presentation

⁸⁻¹¹ See Definitions

material or an ad, is a chance for the firm to affect the stakeholder's perception of the firm. Thus, handling touch points should be highly relevant for the firm, in both the B2C and presumably the B2B market. In a B2B context, however, this is still a relatively unexplored area and there appears to be a knowledge gap in whether or not it is beneficial for consulting firms to allocate more effort in creating their communication tools.

Thereby a problem arises for two main reasons. Firstly, if firms in this context are unaware of what their touch points signal, this could be harmful if stakeholders form an inadequate image of the firm based on signals from these uncontrolled touch points. Hence, a touch point could inhibit rather than enhance the brand of a firm. Secondly, there is no evidence that it would be beneficial for firms to care about the design of their presentation material. In striving for improving the bottom line, time and effort spent on organizational activities should be motivated from a profitability perspective. Thus, it is understandable that there currently is only little, if any, incentive for firms to allocate resources to this activity. With this being said, a knowledge gap has been identified as there is no existing research or theory backing up whether firms could benefit from using more well-designed presentation material.

1.3 Problem Definition and Purpose

In the light of the described knowledge gap it has to be examined if it is beneficial for consulting firms to allocate more resources into this activity, or if it is simply wasteful. Therefore, the main purpose of this thesis is to investigate if presentation material created with more effort can result in positive signaling effects for a firm. More effort will be measured in terms of the level of design of the presentation and the effect intends to be tested on potential clients and potential employees. Effort will be considered a wasteful investment if there is no positive signaling effects. The signaling effects will be measured in terms of variations in brand attitude¹², brand ability¹³, perceived product quality¹⁴ and employer attractiveness¹⁵, see figure 2.

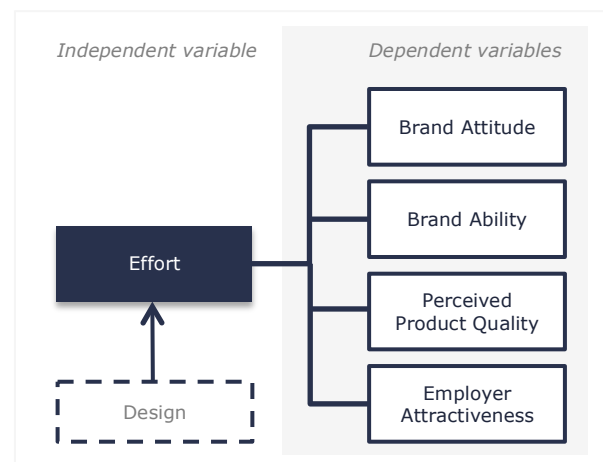


Figure 2: The independent variable *effort* and the dependent variables for this research

The research question for this study is:

Can the design of presentation material affect perceived effort and can this, in turn, lead to positive effects for the firm?

¹²⁻¹⁵ See Definitions

I.4 Delimitations

With the existing knowledge gap in mind, the setting of this research will now be explained. Firstly, this study is limited to the B2B industry, more specifically, the consulting industry, where marketing signals constitute important mechanisms for conveying several intangible aspects. Secondly, since services comprise the core in a consulting firm's product offerings and project presentations, this research is further limited to services. Within this field, presentation material such as PowerPoint presentations, are used for an array of purposes, one of them being promoting and presenting the firm and its offerings. As presentation material is commonly used in this way in the consulting industry, this research is further limited to the use of presentation material as a communication tool. The results should thus be considered to be applicable in this specific context and could therefore imply that the results are not valid for presentation material regarding physical products.

Moreover, there are several dimensions regarding how to manipulate perceived effort. However, in this study it was chosen to manipulate perceived effort by changing the level of design. It is important to note that, since design in itself is an abstract and rather ambiguous concept, this thesis do not intend to explore dimensions in design or to elaborate on factors that could contribute to a "better" design. Instead, similar to Dahlén et al. (2008), the issue of the intermediate effects is avoided by only focusing on design as a signal in itself. Moreover, the potential signaling effects from manipulating the presentation material were measured using the following variables; *brand attitude*, *ability in brand*, *perceived product quality* and *employer attractiveness*. Although these variables were chosen based on theory, it should be taken into account that there exist several other variables to measure signaling effects, which could have been overlooked.

Regarding the actual experiment, it was decided to use BTS, an existing consulting firm that is representative for the purpose of this study in order to gain credibility and to be taken seriously when exposing the presentations for respondents. The decision to not work with a fictive brand was to account for any potential previous impressions of the brand, as this should be incorporated in the brand evaluation. In addition, as it is much harder to influence individuals' perceptions of well-known brands compared to unfamiliar brands, this will contribute to a more robust test of the hypothesis (Dahlén et al, 2008). Despite the fact that BTS has a global reach, and the theory used in this research is very generic, the data sample is limited to Sweden, which not necessarily make the results applicable on a global level.

Lastly, students at a business university comprise the data sample of this research. As this group represents potential clients and employees, this study is further limited to these groups of stakeholders.

1.5 Expected Contribution to Research

The purpose of this study is to verify if increased effort, in terms of design, will lead to positive signaling effects. This is made in a B2B context, more specifically in the consulting industry, by manipulating the level of design in one consulting firm's presentation material. This set up has three main contributions to research. First, manipulating design has not been tested in this context before, neither in near related studies within signaling theory. Second, testing signaling effects on presentation material, a crucial tool for consulting firms, has not been researched before and will provide a new angle to the signaling literature. Third, how these signals further effect potential employees, an important group of stakeholders for consulting firms, will be a contribution to the employer branding literature. Summarizing, this research aims to give guidelines to consulting firms in whether or not they should spend resources on the design of their presentation material by investigating if it could award the firm with the leverage from positive signaling effects.

2. Theory

This chapter describes the theories, concepts and previous research that will form the theoretical framework of this thesis. The framework serves as a base for the formation of the hypothesis that will help answering the research question. Firstly, an introduction to signaling theory will take place, followed by examples of how its mechanisms work in a marketing context. As the majority of previous research within this field has focused on the consumer market, several of the examples are taken from that context to later connect it to the B2B market, and more specifically the consulting industry. Subsequently, a description of how marketing effort works as a signaling mechanism will be examined, and how this can affect factors such as brand attitude, brand ability, perceived product quality and lastly, employer attractiveness.

2.1 An introduction to Signaling Theory

Signaling theory originates from information economics. The key issue lies in overcoming asymmetric information between two parties. The assumption is that one party possesses information, for example about a future transaction, and by conveying this unobservable information to the other party through different signals, the less-informed party can assimilate the information by interpreting the signals. In doing so, the information asymmetry between the parties can be bridged (Kirmani & Rao, 2000). In other words, the party in possession of the information transmits signals, which the other party then interprets to form conclusions.

One might believe that signaling can be used as a trick to unjustly gain benefits from another party. However, Nelson (1974) asserts that signaling is a costly process and will only be beneficial as long as the benefits outweigh the costs. Providing false signals may hurt one's credibility, therefore human beings tend to decipher signals as truthful. Moreover, signaling theory does not only apply to what a party, or in the context of this thesis, a firm, wishes to signal to the surrounding world. Rather, it comprises all signals that a firm sends out to its stakeholders, no matter if the firm is aware or unaware of it. In other words, everything signals something, from brand name to location or public actions (Ford et. al., 1988).

2.2 Signaling Theory In a Marketing Context

Signaling theory has gradually become a practice in other contexts than information economics, the most common area of application for firms is found in marketing (Kirmani & Rao, 2008; Rao & Monroe, 1996). Marketing activities can act as signals for firms to convey and communicate information to their stakeholders, primarily buyers and potential buyers. Thus, firms need to consider which information to communicate, as (potential) buyers interpret and draw conclusions based on the information available (Nelson, 1974; Boulding & Kirmani, 1993). Obviously, most firms know the quality of their products or services but this may be hard to assess for buyers before a purchase. Thus, marketers can use signals to communicate attributes related to e.g. quality.

Previous research, primarily within consumer marketing, demonstrates how different marketing elements and communication tools such as advertising (Dahlén et al., 2008), warranties and price (Rao and Monroe, 1989; Milgrom & Roberts, 1986; Lutz, 1989) act as signals and affect consumers' evaluation of brands (Kirmani & Rao, 2000). Thus, signaling seems to be a powerful tool to apply in marketing as it can communicate aspects about a brand or product, without explicitly expressing it in words. This can influence consumers' evaluations and thus indirectly affect e.g. purchase intention (Dahlén et al., 2008; Spears & Singh, 2004).

Further reviewing the existing literature in this area, it stands clear that advertising is one of the most examined marketing signals. For example, high advertising expenses has been shown to signal that a company believes in its brand and products (Kirmani, 1990; Kirmani & Wright, 1989), the more they spend, the more credible is the signal of the product's superiority in the eyes of the consumer (Ambler & Hollier, 2004). However, more recent research indicates that it is not only the marketing expense that matters when it comes to advertising, but also the perceived marketing effort (Ambler & Hollier, 2004). Perceived marketing effort can be defined as the spending of resources in terms of money, time and thought (Kirmani & Wright, 1989; Dahlén et al., 2008). The notion of effort as a marketing signal will be further examined in section 2.2.3.

2.2.1 Marketing Signals In a B2B Context

The consumer behavior of absorbing and interpreting different signals that firms send out, in order to reduce information asymmetries, is also applicable in other contexts (Nelson, 1974; Boulding & Kirmani, 1993). This includes the B2B market, which is the focal point of this thesis.

Marketing signals in the B2B market is a slightly less researched area. Comparing the B2B market and the B2C, one can find that they have several aspects in common but also some distinct differences. The main differences from the consumer market include fewer actors and customers as well as the increased importance of relationships and interactions. Furthermore, the B2B buying process is often associated with more risk, both in financial and collective terms, since transactions involve more money and purchase decisions affect the organization as a whole (Axelsson & Agndal, 2012; Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006).

Likewise to consumers, firms assimilate the available information about the other firm to reduce uncertainty and risk, and to evaluate its capabilities. One of the more explored research areas regarding marketing signals in a B2B context is the effect of strong brands. Strong brands have many important signaling functions; it reduces information asymmetry (Leischnig & Enke, 2011) and therefore buyers' perceived risk (Aaker, 2004), increases perceived profitability (Davis et al., 2008), perceived firm

performance (Han & Sung, 2008), perceived product quality (Leischnig & Enke, 2011) and could work as a defense against competitors (Mitchell et al., 2001). Despite the fact that this is a fairly explored area within B2B, the research is lagging far behind as the majority of our knowledge is still related to a B2C context (Marquardt, 2013; Aaker, 1996).

Moreover, signaling is especially important for firms providing services as they are intangible, perishable and include experiential elements of the quality that are difficult for customers to evaluate pre-purchase (Blankson & Caliphates, 1999; Kamakura & Russell, 1989). These factors further increase the risk for the buyer and thus, the importance of marketing signals increases in order to reduce information asymmetry. Admittedly, the consulting industry can be seen as an example of such services and, indeed, the use of signals is a well-known concept in this particular industry. The consulting industry consists of markets with experience and credence goods, characterized by conditions of uncertainty. The sellers, i.e. the consulting firms, endow in features to signal for instance quality, reliability and legitimacy, to reduce the information asymmetry. More specifically, these firms often try to signal quality through “impression management”, i.e. by controlling and impacting social interactions (Piwinger & Helmut, 2001), and by input quality, i.e. by hiring talented employees, not uncommonly from top universities (Ambrüster, 2006).

Moreover, the B2B market is considered to being bound by more rationality and objective decisions, with a greater focus on functional as well as instrumental values (Colgate & Smith, 2007). However, more recent research has found that softer dimensions, such as experiential and hedonic values¹⁶, have a significant impact in B2B contexts when it comes to branding (Persson, 2010; Colgate & Smith, 2007; Bondesson, 2012). As previously described, brands have been demonstrated to affect purchase decisions through various elements. Thus, this should imply that these more emotional values also could affect the buying process in the B2B market. Consequently firms in a B2B market should reasonably also be affected by human factors (Kotler & Pfoertsch, 2006) and react to marketing signals similar to consumers (Webster & Wind, 1972).

In other words, it is reasonable to assume that marketing signals could work the same way, or even have a greater impact in the consulting industry, as a consequence of the higher information asymmetry between the buyer and seller and due to the higher perceived risk (Marquardt et. al., 2011).

2.2.2 Extended Effects of Marketing Signals

Marketing signals have also been shown to have extended effects, by influencing stakeholders other than customers (Joshi & Hanssens, 2010; Gilly & Wolfinbarger, 1998; Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014). Most of this research has been related to the effects from advertising. For example, variables such as the stock

¹⁶ See Definitions

price and value of the firm have shown to be positively affected by high investment in advertising, as financial investors interpret this as a signal of future potential (Joshi & Hanssens, 2010).

One specific group of stakeholders is of interest for this research, namely current and potential employees. It has been shown that these stakeholders' perceptions of a firm are influenced by signals from the firm's marketing activities, even though these activities are not directed directly at this group (Cable & Graham, 2000; Collins, 2007; Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014). Attracting talent and competence is essential for firms today, especially for consulting firms (Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Schlager et al., 2011; Ambrüster, 2006). A firm that is perceived as an attractive employer can reduce the costs of employee recruitment and even offer lower salaries (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Slaughter et al., 2004; Berthon et al., 2005; Knox & Freeman, 2006). In turn, this should also affect the firm's performance and thereby it seems like marketing signals is an important mechanism also in this context.

2.2.3 Effort as a Marketing Signal

Effort has been demonstrated to generate marketing signals, transmitted through different communication tools. The underlying mechanism is that people like to reward effort (Gouldner, 1960). Morales (2005) examined how extra firm effort affects consumers' behavior, for example by impacting evaluations and choices (Aronson & Mills, 1959; Weiner, 1974). The basic principle is that people have a behavior of repaying favors that others provide them, even though it is not personally received. This phenomenon is called general reciprocity and was demonstrated by Morales (2005), when he tested the impact of a store putting more effort, in terms of time, in creating their product displays. As a consequence of the extra time spent in creating the displays, the store increased its cost. In turn, the customer rewarded the store for the extra effort, even though it was not a personal benefit. Additionally, an important aspect is that customers often can sense to what extent a firm puts effort into a certain activity. Therefore they tend to feel gratitude towards and reward firms that take their responsibility in working hard. This could even lead customers to choosing the firm over other competing brands (Morales, 2005).

Effort as a marketing signal has been examined in a B2C setting, mainly using advertising as a communication tool. Based on the Handicap Principle¹⁷, which is derived from biology and states that "animals use wasteful characteristics to signal their exceptional biological fitness", Ambler and Hollier (2004) showed that signaling in an advertising context could work in a similar way. They illustrated that "waste", defined as the cost of the extra effort that add nothing to the functionality of the ad, still increases the effectiveness of the ad, as a result of the increased credibility and reliability. For instance, advertising expense has been shown to be an indicator of marketing effort and increase e.g. credibility of an ad (Kirmani, 1990; Kirmani & Wright, 1989; Ambler & Hollier, 2004) where the underlying

¹⁷ See Definitions

assumption is that the more money spent, the more perceived effort. Just like expense, creativity is also an indicator of marketing effort since more creative ads are perceived to require more thought and costs. Redundant, or wasteful, creativity increases brand fitness and leads to more positive brand perceptions, e.g. brand attitude and perception of product quality (Dahlén, 2008).

Accordingly, the human behavior of assessing the level of effort put into an activity by consumers or firms, and the leverage from using effort as a marketing signal comprises a fundamental part of the theoretical framework of this thesis.

Manipulating Perceived Effort by Altering the Level of Design

Previous, effort has been manipulated in different dimensions, such as altering the level of advertising expense (Ambler & Hollier, 2005), creativity (Dahlén, 2008) and personal service (Morales, 2005). However, design has until now remained an unexplored potential dimension to alter. As described, advertising is an important communication tool for convey information to consumers - similarly, presentation material acts as a central communication tool for consulting firms in the B2B market. Design is a natural element when creating presentation material and likewise to previous effort measures like creativity, it does not necessarily contribute to the message or content of the presentation. That is to say, this type of effort (e.g. creativity, expense, design) could be seen as wasteful in itself but may provide benefits in other terms depending on the context.

Furthermore, as consumers tend to absorb both direct and indirect information that is available about a firm, the receiver interprets more signals than simply the direct content of a touch point, e.g. an ad. Design aspects like pictures, coloring and aesthetic appeal could be considered as indirect signals that affect individuals' evaluation and perception of the sender (Kahneman, 2003; Lohse & Rosen, 2001).

As outlined in section 2.2.1, stakeholders in a B2B context should also be affected by marketing signals and thus interpret indirect information when evaluating another party. In addition, the general theory of signaling mechanisms indicates that signaling effects created by advertising effort could be applicable to other communication tools, such as presentation material. Thereby, it is plausible to believe that a more well-designed presentation, in terms of e.g. color, pictures and layout, will generate signals and affect stakeholders in this context.

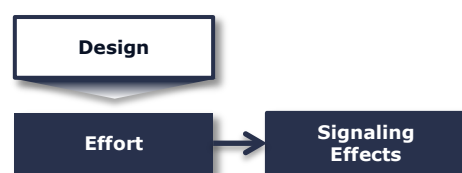


Figure 3: Using design to manipulate effort and in turn convey signals

H1: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) perceived effort.

2.3 A More Well-Designed Presentation Increases Brand Attitude

Effort has previously been shown to generate signaling effects, one of them being attitudes towards the brand (Modig et al., 2014). Brand attitude is an important and well-researched concept within marketing, and has to do with an individual's global evaluation of a brand (Keller, 2004).

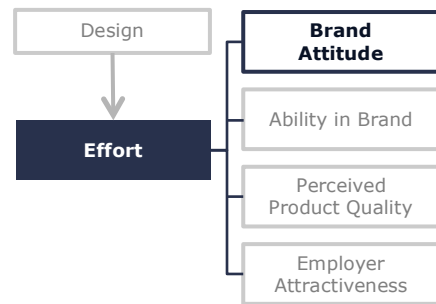


Figure 4: Hypothesis 2 – Effort can positively affect brand attitude

According to research by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975), attitude is related to behavioral actions (e.g. a purchase), through intentions, which undoubtedly is part of the goal for all marketing activities. An individual's collected perceptions of a product's attributes are what mainly affects brand attitude. This is due to individuals' ability to process visual cues, which necessarily do not add any brand information, and turn that into beliefs about the brand. Therefore, every touch point between a buyer and a firm becomes a possible input for affecting brand image and attitude (Webster & Keller, 2004).

The existing literature relating to brand attitude and communication tools has, among other things, shown that an ad that is perceived as more appealing can increase brand attitude compared to a less appealing ad (Mitchell & Olson, 1981). The attitude towards the ad has spillover effects, where the attitude towards the product and the brand also are affected. In addition, if the consumer perceives the brand to have put above-average effort into its ads, it will positively impact brand attitude (Modig et al., 2014). It is reasonable to believe that design could increase the level of appeal in an object and thus, affect brand attitude. In addition, it should be possible to transmit marketing signals through presentation material in a B2B context, likewise to ads in B2C. Given this, and assuming that the first hypothesis holds (that design can be used to affect perceived effort), exposure to a more well-designed presentation should lead to more favorable attitudes towards the brand. Accordingly, the second hypothesis is:

H2: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) positive attitudes towards the firm's brand

2.4 A More Well-Designed Presentation Increases Brand Ability

Effort has further been shown to positively influence perceptions of brand ability¹⁸. A brand helps the buyer to define and assess the firm behind the brand (Aaker, 2004). The brand both acts as a promise of what the selling firm will deliver and as a representative symbol for the firm. This makes it important for firms to signal relevant information to current and potential buyers in order to encourage new, short-term and long-term purchases (De Chernatony, 2002; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). B2B brands may have to communicate their message

differently compared to B2C brands, and depending on the industry in which the brand is operating. For instance, in a consulting context, the buyer will be characterized as being more relational and partnerlike (Ambrüster, 2006). They will probably value the trustworthiness, reliability and corporate credibility aspects more than merely transactional buyers (Webster & Keller, 2004). Moreover, perceived corporate ability is not just one of the most powerful tools for maintaining a sustainable competitive advantage, studies has also found that it influences marketing activities and market value of the whole firm (Luo & Bhattacharya, 2006). Thus, this is an important concept to consider when developing marketing activities, and more specifically when creating the communication tools.

Existing research related to this theoretical frame argues that firms can signal brand ability in several ways when using their communication tools, for example by increasing perceived effort in terms of creativity (Dahlén et al., 2008). This mechanism was illustrated by that more effort, in terms of creativity, signaled an ability to “think outside the box”, especially in relation to competitors and in contrast to the firm’s previous performance. Extending Dalhén’s (2008) reasoning to this context, a firm’s brand ability should be positively affected by putting more effort in their marketing communication tools. Instead of creativity, it is assumed that design can positively impact effort and, in turn, brand ability. Thus, this notion has not been tested, but leads up to the third hypothesis:

H3: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) the perceived ability in the firm’s brand

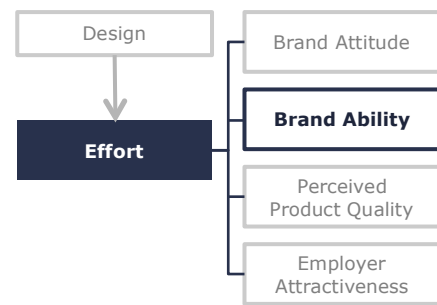


Figure 5: Hypothesis 3 – Effort can positively affect brand ability

¹⁸ See Definitions

2.5 A More Well-Designed Presentation Leads to Higher Perceived Product Quality

Perceived product quality is yet another well-researched concept within marketing and has also been demonstrated to be affected by perceived effort. The concept of perceived product quality is in itself a consequence by several underlying factors, and has to do with an individual's overall evaluation of the value of a product (good or service). This depends on the individual's perceived

balance between what is received (the product) and given up (i.e. money paid or nonmonetary costs) (Kirmani & Zeithaml, 1993).

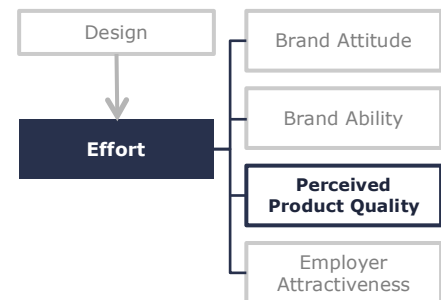


Figure 6: Hypothesis 4 – Effort can positively affect perceived product quality

According to Kirmani and Zeithaml (1993) product quality is a constitution of physical aspects, such as material or specific functions, and additional soft aspects, for instance price or the use of communication tools (e.g. advertising). The latter can work as signals from which individuals interpret to evaluate the product and its quality. Perceived effort is one of the most dominant factors that can affect perceptions of product quality (Kirmani & Rao, 2000). Thus, investing money, thought and time in a communication tool signals that the firm truly believes in its products, as doing this comprises a risk for the firm. Consequently, individuals find greater belief in the firm and its products and perceived quality is increased (Kirmani & Wright, 1989).

In line with Kirmani and Zeithaml's (1993) reasoning regarding the importance of soft aspects, it is feasible to assume that this is essential in the setting of this thesis, due to the lack of physical aspects of services in the consulting industry. Moreover, presentation material is the predominant communication tool used to present product offerings and projects where the quality of the actual result is hard to assess. Thus, by using effort and design it is likely that this touch point could be used to affect perceived product quality. Hence, the fourth hypothesis predicts that a more well-designed presentation increases perceived product quality.

H4: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) perceived product quality.

2.6 A More Well-Designed Presentation Increases Employer Attractiveness

As mentioned in section 2.2.2, other stakeholder of a firm can also be influenced by marketing signals, such as financial investors, current employees and for the purpose of this thesis, potential employees (Joshi & Hanssens, 2010; Gilly & Wolfenbarger, 1998; Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014).

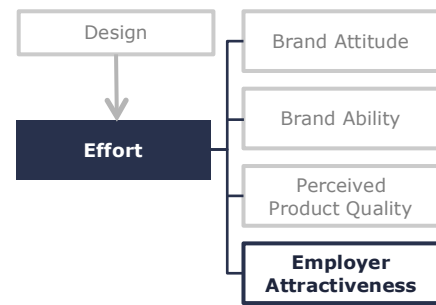


Figure 7: Hypothesis 5 – Effort can positively affect perceived employer attractiveness

Signaling is a well-known notion within employer branding and recruitment (Spence, 1973; Rynes et al., 1991; Cable et al., 2000). More specifically, employer branding can be defined as the current and potential employees' perception of the differentiation of the firm's attributes as an employer compared to competitors (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2010). Also, a part of this concept is employer attractiveness, which is construed as "the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization" (Berthon et al., 2005). Examples of perceptions of the firm's employer brand that favorably affects employer attractiveness include development opportunities for the individual employee, salary and the organizational atmosphere (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Berthon et al., 2005; Knox & Freeman, 2006). Since a great extent of these aspects, e.g. development opportunities, are hard to assess, the potential employee use signals to draw conclusions regarding these unobservable characteristics (Wilden et al., 2010). These signals are most important in the initial steps of the recruitment process (Gatewood et al., 1993; Cable & Turban, 2003; Collins, 2007).

Rosengren and Bondesson (2014) states, by using advertising as a communication tool, more effort (in terms of creativity) leads to increased employer attractiveness, as this signals improved brand ability, development perceptions and reputation. Assuming that extra effort from presentation material affects potential employees, it is reasonable to believe that a more well-designed presentation, similar to ads, should lead to more positive perceptions of the firm as an employer. Thus, the fifth and last hypothesis is:

H5: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) potential employees' perception the firm's employer attractiveness

3. Methodology

This chapter will discuss the method that lays the foundation of this research. Firstly, the chosen approach will be presented and justified, followed by a presentation of the setting of the experiment along with motivation of the selected brand, data sample and signaling tool. Subsequently, the actual research will be presented, which consists of two parts - a pretest and a main study. Finally, an assessment of the research's reliability and validity will be conducted.

3.1 Choice of Scientific Approach

The research of this thesis is based on the theoretical framework, which was outlined in the previous chapter. It is based on existing theories, with an emphasis on signaling theory and effort. These theories have been applied in a B2B context, using presentation material as a signaling tool to communicate effort and by manipulating perceived effort by changing the level of design. This was the base for generating the hypothesis of this research. A deductive approach is therefore appropriate, as this research aims to test and contribute to existing theories by testing them empirically, which would not be feasible using another approach (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Olsson & Sörensen, 2011).

The aim of this research is to compare a more well-designed versus a less well-designed version of a presentation, assuming that the level of design can be used to manipulate effort. Therefore an experimental study, similar to Dahlén et al. (2008), would be a suitable choice, since this allows investigating a possible effect and causal relationship between effort and the chosen outcome measures - brand attitude, brand ability, perceived product quality and employer attractiveness (Malhotra, 2004; Bryman & Bell, 2011). Alternative approaches, such as a descriptive or explorative research method would not allow for this type of examination. On the one hand, experimental methods are frequently used within the field of psychology, however, in an economic context appropriate levels of may be difficult to obtain. On the other hand, an important benefit of using an experimental design is that it typically generates high validity (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Additionally, an experimental design is favorable in this case as it allows using relevant variables while excluding factors that are irrelevant for the study (Webster & Sell, 2007).

Experimental studies commonly use a quantitative method for the gathering of data (Malhotra, 2004; Söderlund, 2010), as this facilitates assembling larger sets of data to be analyzed in order to obtain generalizable results (Andersen, 1998; Bryman & Bell, 2011; Eliasson, 2010). On the other hand, a drawback of a quantitative collection of data is that questions can be misunderstood or simply not taken seriously (Field, 2009). However, since a relatively large pool of respondents ($n=200$) will be used, and the hypotheses will be tested using comparisons of means, there is a low risk of this affecting the results.

3.2 The Setting of the Experiment

3.2.1 Choice of Brand

Due to the scope of this thesis the choice was made to focus specifically on one business segment within B2B, namely the consulting industry. Firms offering intangible products with unobservable quality and results that might be hard to assess characterize the industry. This is suitable since signaling effects have been shown to be particularly substantial when it comes to this type of experience and credence goods (see section 2.2.1). Moreover, the brand from one consulting firm was chosen for the study. The firm in question, BTS, is a global public consulting and training firm that helps clients with strategy execution, business acumen, leadership development and sales training (BTS Group, 2016). The choice to use BTS was decided with regards to accessibility, but also due to the fact that the firm is representative for the consulting industry with its global presence and broad scope of services.

3.2.2 Data Sample

University students were chosen to be an appropriate test group, as they both represent future employees as well as potential buyers/users of the offered services. In addition, this group is used to being exposed to presentations about firms as it is included in the university environment (e.g. case studies), in search for jobs and many kinds of company events.

3.2.3 Choice of Signaling Tool and Content

Previous research has mainly focused on advertising as a communication tool, as it is central for consumer goods. However, within the consulting industry a lot of communication is transmitted through corporate presentations, which makes up an essential part of the communication both internally and externally. With this being said, presentation material is considered to be a relevant signaling tool to test the hypotheses of this study with.

Regarding the content of the presentations, it was decided to use a more general presentation of the firm and how they are differentiated from its competitors. This was found to be more likely for a potential employee and a potential buyer/user to be exposed to that kind of content, rather than a pure sales proposal.

3.3 Pretest

A pretest is recommended when conducting an experimental study, especially when manipulating abstract and unobservable variables, like design and effort (Perdue & Summers, 1986). Since effort will be manipulated by altering the level of design, the pretest was conducted both in order to select which versions of the presentations to use in the main study and to ensure that the manipulation was successful. More precisely, the aim was to make sure that the construct of the manipulated variable had

the desired effect and differed significantly between the different versions of the presentations. Conducting the pretest also made room to perform changes of the manipulation before the main study if needed.

3.3.1 Development of the Presentations

The presentations were crafted in Microsoft Power Point Version 14.6.1, which is a commonly used tool for consulting industry when developing presentation material. In line with Dahlén et al. (2008) and Ambler and Hollier (2004), the intent was to create presentations that only differ in the manipulated variable, in this case effort in terms of design. Thus, in contrast to Dahlén et al. (2008), the actual content of the presentations was chosen to being held constant.

The different versions was designed with the authentic presentation material from BTS as a starting point, where it simply got dressed up and dressed down for the purpose of creating three different levels of perceived effort. The more well-designed presentation included more visual cues, colors and pictures than the less well-designed ones, whereas the actual text, message and font were kept constant in all three presentations. This was motivated by Kirmani's (1990) previous study of advertising, showing that colors, size, etc. can increase perceived effort. Moreover, as the message in the original presentation template provided by BTS was targeted towards clients, the message got neutralized to fit with the purpose of the study and the chosen target group, whom also act as potential employees.

Summarizing, the pretest aimed to verify and choose two of the three presentations to be representable for the main study - one presentation that is perceived to be more well-designed, and consequently a higher level of effort and one less well-designed with a lower level of effort. See appendix 7.1-7.3.

3.3.2 Method and Result of the Pretest

The pretest was performed by distributing and analyzing the result from the online-questionnaire made using the survey software Qualtrics. Three groups of participants got exposed to one of the different presentations, where each group included a minimum of 30 respondents in order to be able to perform the necessary analytical work (Malhotra, 2004). In total 120 respondents, with varying age and equal distribution in terms of gender completed the online survey. This was chosen deliberately, mainly for pragmatic reasons, as the number and type of respondents were considered to be satisfying for the purpose of the pretest and a relatively easy amount to gather. Therefore, a broader audience than the target group of the main study was chosen for the pretest. Furthermore, as design and effort are relatively abstract constructs it was important to make sure that the manipulation represented the intended variable, and also that other constructs had not been manipulated unintentionally (Perdue & Summers, 1986).

Initially, the respondents were randomly exposed to one of the three presentations, which they were asked to flip through briefly. After the exposure a set of questions followed about their perceived level of effort, design and interpreted message of the presentation. The intent was to make sure that the presentations communicated the same message, i.e. that content was perceived the same, but differed in perceived effort and design. All questions except the one regarding the communicated message were measured on a seven-point Likert scale, where 1 = Do not agree and 7 = Agree completely. The message was measured using a multiple-choice question with five different alternatives.

The pretest was analyzed in the statistical analysis program SPSS, by comparing means through an ANOVA Sheffe test. The analysis showed that there were no significant differences between the comprehension of the message. The differences in level of design were significant ($p < 0.05$), Presentation 1 = 4.93, Presentation 2 = 3.46, Presentation 3 = 3.53. The difference in items measuring perceived level of effort (i.e. *Time*, *Energy* and *Money*) was also significant ($p < 0.05$). The results are fully presented in Table 1.

Variable	Presentation 1	Presentation 2	Presentation 3	Diff .1 vs. 2	Diff. 1 vs. 3	Diff. 2 vs. 3
Responses Message	42 90%	35 89%	43 88%	N/A	N/A	N/A
Impression, (\bar{x})	4,93	4,14	4,14	0,79	0,79	0,00
Design, (\bar{x})	4,93	3,46	3,53	1,47	1,40	-0,07
Time, (\bar{x})	4,88	4,03	4,07	0,85	0,81	-0,04
Energy, (\bar{x})	5,10	3,89	3,95	1,21	1,15	-0,06
Money, (\bar{x})	3,40	3,06	3,30	0,34	0,10	-0,24

Table 1: Result from pretest

Based on the results, presentation 1 and 2 were chosen for the main study, as they fulfilled the requirements of not differing in message comprehension and had the largest differences in the *Design* variable. The difference in perceived effort was relatively the same between presentation 1 and the other two presentations, but since design differed the most between Presentation 1 and 2, these were selected. All three presentations are included in Appendix 7.1.

3.5 Main Study

The main study serves as a tool to gain empirical data for analyzing the selected variables and their respective hypothesis. In turn, the results will be used to answer and form a conclusion of the research question “*Can the design of presentation material affect perceived effort and can this, in turn, lead to positive effects for the firm?*”

3.5.1 Study Design

In the main study an experimental approach was used, where participants were randomly exposed to either the more well-designed or the less well-designed version of the presentations.

All participants were asked to briefly flip through the presentation and were specifically informed that they did not have to read the text carefully. This was because the first impression rather than a conscious evaluation was of interest for the purpose of this study. Furthermore, informing the respondents with instructions reduces the risk of inconsistencies of the responses (Söderlund, 2010). In line with Söderlund (2016, Lecture at Stockholm School of Economics), the participants were not informed of the purpose of the research. This in order to avoid hypothesis guessing, as this can make a person biased when answering the questions and threaten the validity of the research.

The survey was distributed both online, using Qualtrics, and physically, with printed questionnaires. Distributing the two versions randomly and having the same set of questions for both versions made it possible to study the cause relationship of increased effort and possible signaling effects, as the differences in answers ought to be derived from the manipulation.

3.5.2 Design of the Questionnaire

The questions for the experiment were designed using the same tool as in the pre-test, Qualtrics. The questionnaire was kept reasonably short and comprehensible, so the participants would not perceive it as being too long and extensive. This decrease the risk of causing biased responses (Söderlund, 2005). Moreover, the survey was divided into three parts: Introduction and instructions, exposure to one of the presentations, and lastly the questionnaire. More explicitly, the questionnaire consisted of 22 questions, which were divided into three sections:

- Five groups of questions relating to the five research variables
- One control question about the perceived level of design and a question about the respondent's previous knowledge/familiarity of the firm, BTS
- One last group of questions, giving some basic, descriptive information about the respondent

The questions had closed answers and the respondents could only choose between already given statements, with exception for one open question about the respondent's age. As recommended by Lange et al. (2003) a 7-point Likert scale with "Do not agree" to "Agree completely" and a 7-point bipolar semantic scale ranging from e.g. "Negative" to "Positive", were used. These types of 7-point scales were chosen as they are considered to be efficient for questions of this kind and in the context of social research (Likert, 1932; Lange et. al., 2003; Spear & Singh, 2004; Malhotra, 2004). Also, as Söderlund (2005) suggests, the lower value of the scale, e.g. "Do not agree" or "Not appealing", was placed on the left hand side and the higher value of the scale on the right hand side. Please see 3.5.3 for a detailed description of the construction of the questions.

To further ensure the quality of the study, multi-items were used to measure the variables (Söderlund, 2005). This intended to increase reliability and was later tested by examining the Cronbach's alpha for

each multi-item set in order to create an index for the variable in question (Bryman & Bell, 2011), see section 3.5.3 below. Before distributing the survey, it was tested by individuals from the chosen data sample to ensure the quality of the final survey. Moreover, since BTS is a global firm and due to the internationalization of students in the university environment, the questions were written in English. See the final version of the survey in appendix 7.4.

3.5.3 Research Variables

The following variables are the basis of this study's analysis and constitute the outcome measurements; *effort*, *brand attitude*, *ability in brand*, *perceived product quality* and *employer attractiveness*. An index was created based on two to four items related to each variable from in the questionnaire, and got accepted only if Cronbach's alpha exceeded 0.7 in order to ensure the reliability of this study (Malhotra, 2004).

Design (Manipulation check): To confirm that the manipulation of design was successful as in the pretest, a manipulation check was conducted in the main study as well. *Design* was measured on a Likert scale from 1 (Very poorly designed) - 7 (Very well designed): *What do you think about the design of the presentation?*

Effort (H1 and Manipulation check): Based on the result from the pretest, the items money and energy were replaced with thought and effort, since there were no relevant effects on money, and energy as an item has not been previously tested. Hence, in the main study *effort* was measured on three items with a Likert scale ranging from 1 (Very little) - 7 (Very much): *How much... time do you think BTS spent on making the presentation, effort do you think BTS has put into making the presentation, thought do you think BTS spent on making the presentation?* These measurements were also used by Kirmani and Wright (1989) and Dahlén et al. (2008). Cronbach's alpha for the index was 0.915. A manipulation check was performed to confirm the results from the pretest, i.e. that the more well-designed presentation was perceived to have been created with more *effort* than the less well-designed presentation.

Brand Attitude (H2): *Brand attitude* was measured by using three items on a bipolar scale with 7 grades: *Overall opinion of the consulting firm BTS... Good/Bad, Positive/negative, Appealing/Not appealing*, which was in accordance with previous researchers (Dahlén et al., 2008; Spears & Singh, 2004; Söderlund, 2001; Kirmani & Shiv, 1998). Cronbach's alpha for the index was 0.923.

Brand Ability (H3): *Brand ability* was measured by four items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = do not agree/ 7 = agree completely): *BTS is credible, BTS is good at solving customers' problems, BTS is smart, BTS is professional in their way of working*. These questions were used also by Dalhén et al. (2008). Cronbach's alpha for the index was 0.912.

Perceived Product Quality (H4): *Perceived product quality* was measured by three items on a 7-point Likert scale, (1 = do not agree/ 7 = agree completely), *The services offered by BTS...are of high quality, ...are*

better than competitors' services, ...would make me satisfied, which was in accordance with previous researchers (Dahlén et al., 2008; Kirmani, 1997). Cronbach's alpha for the index was 0,896.

Employer Attractiveness (H5): Three items on a 7-point Likert scale measured *Employer attractiveness*, (1=Do not agree/7 = agree completely), *BTS would be a good place to work at*, *BTS is an attractive employer*, *BTS offers good development opportunities for its employees*. These items were also used by Rosengren and Bondesson (2014). Cronbach's alpha for the index was 0,905.

3.5.4 Quantitative Data Sampling

The total sample size for the main study was 225, which satisfies the requirements for the performing statistical analysis and increases the quality of the data and the generalizability of the results (Rice, 1995).

The participants, i.e. students, were approached mainly through private messages, using online messaging tools. The respondents were sent the same pre-written message where they were kindly asked to take part in a survey for a bachelor thesis. The message included a link to the Qualtrics survey, which contained either the high-effort or low-effort version of the presentations. To ensure random assignment of the manipulation, which is one of the prerequisites of experiments (Lynn & Lynn, 2003), the sender did not know to which of the versions the link led to. Data was also gathered physically, by letting students view a printed version of the presentation and fill in the answers by hand. In this case, a first page covered the presentations so that they could be randomly distributed.

3.6 Data Analysis

The collected data was analyzed using the statistics software program IBM SPSS version 23. The data was documented in Qualtrics and thereafter directly exported to SPSS. After faulty and missing cases were removed, a final sample size of 200 respondents was generated, with 100 respondents in each group. Subsequently, SPSS was used to test the five hypothesis of this research and yield empirical results. As the purpose was to examine the effect of the manipulated variable on the dependent variables, most of the tests were based on comparing mean values for the two different groups. Additional analysis was conducted where the mediation effect of *brand ability* for *effort* on *employer attractiveness* was examined.

Firstly, manipulation checks were performed, where *design* and *effort* were tested, as well as checking for descriptive differences between the two groups. Since the hypothesis relies on the participants' ability to observe a higher level of design and accordingly perceive that more effort has been invested into making the presentation, this also had to be confirmed in the main study. For this reason, the first part of the analysis was to assess the validity of *design* and *effort*, and confirm the results from the pretest. This was done by performing independent t-tests to compare the means for the high-effort versus low-effort presentations for both variables. To ascertain that there were no relevant differences between the

groups other than the manipulation, the groups were tested for differences in gender distribution, age and familiarity of the brand (Lynn & Lynn, 2003). This was also done by conducting independent t-tests.

Secondly, a MANOVA test was performed in order to investigate the overall effect of the independent variable on the dependent variables. That is to say, did exposure to either of the two presentation versions generate differences in the outcome measures?

Thirdly, *brand attitude*, *brand ability*, *product quality* and *employer attractiveness* were examined. To compare the mean values for the two presentations independent t-tests were performed for all four variables. Lastly, a mediation analysis was performed, where *brand ability* was tested if it could mediate the effect of *effort* on *employer attractiveness*. The mediation analysis was conducted by creating a dummy-variable of the manipulation, i.e. exposure to the more/less well-designed presentation, and performing linear regressions in three steps with the variables in question. All analyses were conducted with a 95% level of significance, consequently no hypotheses under this level were accepted.

3.7 Data Quality

When conducting a quantitative study it is important to analyze the accuracy of the data by assessing its validity and reliability (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Reliability indicates how reliable the results are in a research study, in other words, if there is discrepancy between the observed value and the actual value (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Söderlund, 2005). In turn, validity refers to the extent to which a measure is exempted from random and systematic errors and comparable with the actual value (Söderlund, 2005).

3.7.1 Reliability

High reliability of the study indicates that the results are replicable and generates consistent results with minimal random variation (Malhotra, 2004; Söderlund, 2005). Thus, it is often recommended to conduct studies at two different points in time. However, due to the limitation of this thesis, the study was only tested once but the pretest aimed to ensure the quality of the main study. Furthermore, the questionnaire included control questions about the participants' gender and age to ensure a good spread in the data. Their previous knowledge about the firm BTS was also registered in order to observe potential biased results. As described in 3.5.3, established measurements were used when indexing the variables and all index variables were above or equal to a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.9, which indicates a high reliability.

3.7.2 Validity

Validity has several dimensions. Firstly, if chance can be eliminated as an explanation for difference between the two groups, the results from an experiment are believed to have statistical-inference validity (Lynn & Lynn, 2003). To rule out randomness as an explanation for the results, large sample sizes

were used ($n=200$), since these are less vulnerable to be affected by chance, along with an acceptance level of the hypothesis of $p<0.05$.

Secondly, if there is strong certainty that the manipulated variable caused the differences in results, and not some other, unintended factor, the results from an experiment has high internal validity (Lynn & Lynn, 2003). To assess for this, confounding of the groups were examined, in order to make sure that there were no differences between the groups that could affect the outcome measures. Gender distribution, age and brand familiarity were tested. In addition, random assignment of the presentation versions were used when distributing the questionnaires, so that each participant had the same chance of being exposed to either of the presentations.

Moreover, construct validity, i.e. that the variables represent what they are supposed to represent, was considered both for the manipulation and the dependent variables. All dependent variables included in this research have been previously tested and were chosen in accordance with theory. They were measured on multi-item scales on established measurements in line with their definitions. The pretest and the manipulation checks tested the construct validity of the manipulation (Perdue & Summers, 1986).

Finally, a conclusion has external validity if it can be generalized in broader terms than the context of the specific experiment (Malhotra, 2010). The study used university students as participants in the conducted experiment. Indeed, most experiments try to test theory that is supposed to be relevant among all human beings. This speaks for the possibility to use students in the experiment, which in this case also can be seen as potential employees and clients. However, students' reactions may not represent those of for example professional purchasers with a lot of experience. Thus, this constitutes a limitation of this study and the conclusions may be more generalizable on how human beings react on a general level (Söderlund, 2016, Lecture at Stockholm School of Economics).

4. Result and Analysis

This chapter will present the result of the main study and based on the analyses the hypotheses will be supported or rejected.

4.1 Manipulation Check of Design

The result from the manipulation check of design indicated that the manipulation was successful and confirmed the results from the pretest. Participants perceived the difference in design, giving the more well-designed presentation a mean value of 5.11, whereas the less well-designed presentation scored 3.36 on the 7-point scale (see table 2). The difference between the presentations was significant ($p < 0.001$) and relatively high (1.75), which is also similar to the result from the pretest (1.54). Consequently, the result from the manipulation check of the design-variable was satisfying and thereby allows further testing and analysis of the hypothesis.

Variable	More Well-designed, \bar{x} (SD)	Less Well-designed, \bar{x} (SD)	Significance
Design	5.110 (0.931)	3.360 (1.352)	0.000***
* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$			

Table 2: Mean comparison of design

Furthermore, a confounding check revealed that there were no significant differences in brand familiarity or descriptive measures (age and gender) between the groups. Consequently this should strengthen the cause relationship between effort and the dependent variables, and thereby the validity of this study. For both groups, the mean age was 23 years and brand familiarity 1.68. The gender distribution and age are presented in figure 8 below.

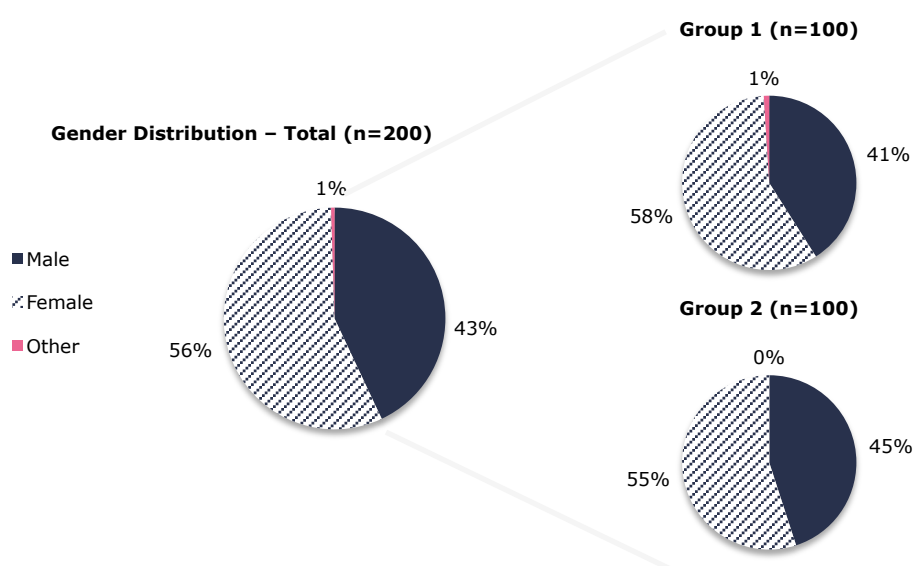


Figure 8: Gender distribution and age mean

4.2 The Effect of Design on Perceived Effort

Previously, design had never been tested to affect perceptions of effort. Therefore, it was crucial to ensure that a more well-designed presentation could be assimilated with a higher level of effort. The result imply that this condition holds as there were significant differences ($p < 0.001$) between how much effort the participants perceived had been put into the more well-designed presentation, in relation to the less well-designed presentation, with mean values of 5.107 and 3.576 respectively (see Table 3). Thereby this provides evidence that H1 is supported.

Variable	More Well-designed, \bar{x} (SD)	Less Well-designed, \bar{x} (SD)	Significance
Effort	5.107 (1.091)	3.576 (1.392)	0.000***
* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$			

Table 3: Mean comparison of perceived Effort

H1: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) perceived effort → SUPPORTED

4.3 Brand Attitude, Brand Ability, Perceived Product Quality and Employer Attractiveness as Measures of Signaling Effects

It had previously been demonstrated that increased effort can lead to positive signaling effects in several other contexts, such as advertising, personal meetings and store environments (Dahlén et al., 2008; Morales, 2005). Based on the theories presented in this framework, hypotheses 2-5 assume that this concept could be applied in other marketing contexts using a suitable communication tool, for this purpose – presentation material. Thus, the effect from the independent variable effort, was tested on the four chosen outcome measures. The results are presented in the sections 4.3.1-4.3.6.

4.3.1 The Overall Effect of the Independent Variable on the Dependent Variables

The results from the MANOVA test revealed that there are significant differences between the independent variable and the dependent variables. The Pillai's Trace algorithm was significant ($p < 0.001$) for the difference in the dependent variables generated by which version of the presentations the participant had been exposed too. See table 4.

	Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
Intercept	Pillai's Trace	,962	993,075 ^b	5,000	194,000	,000
	Wilks' Lambda	,038	993,075 ^b	5,000	194,000	,000
	Hotelling's Trace	25,595	993,075 ^b	5,000	194,000	,000
	Roy's Largest Root	25,595	993,075 ^b	5,000	194,000	,000
Version	Pillai's Trace	,377	23,431 ^b	5,000	194,000	,000
	Wilks' Lambda	,623	23,431 ^b	5,000	194,000	,000
	Hotelling's Trace	,604	23,431 ^b	5,000	194,000	,000
	Roy's Largest Root	,604	23,431 ^b	5,000	194,000	,000

Table 4: MANOVA – Multivariate tests

In addition, as the partial eta squared value was significant ($p < 0.001$) for all dependent variables, the between-subjects effect test of the MANOVA implied that the independent variable explained between 26.8% - 32.7% of the variations in brand attitude, brand ability, perceived product quality and employer attractiveness respectively. See table 5.

Source	Dependent Variable	Partial Eta Squared	Noncent. Parameter	Observed Power ^f
Corrected Model	Brand Attitude	,327	96,221	1,000
	Brand Ability	,297	83,526	1,000
	Perceived Product Quality	,268	72,364	1,000
	Employer Attractiveness	,275	75,013	1,000
Intercept	Brand Attitude	,953	4048,703	1,000
	Brand Ability	,953	3987,350	1,000
	Perceived Product Quality	,947	3562,670	1,000
	Employer Attractiveness	,944	3326,596	1,000
Effort (more/less well-designed presentation)	Brand Attitude	,327	96,221	1,000
	Brand Ability	,297	83,526	1,000
	Perceived Product Quality	,268	72,364	1,000
	Employer Attractiveness	,275	75,013	1,000

Table 5: MANOVA – Test of between-subject effects

4.3.2 Brand Attitude

Marketing signals have been shown to affect brand attitude (Kirmani et al., 1993), which the second hypothesis aims to show. The effect of effort on brand attitude was measured by comparing the means from the indexed questions for the variable. The result from the independent t-test is presented in the following table:

Variable	More Well-designed, \bar{x} (SD)	Less Well-designed, \bar{x} (SD)	Significance
Brand Attitude	5.153 (0.946)	3.777 (1.037)	0.000***
* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$			

Table 6: Mean comparison of Brand Attitude

The brand attitude towards BTS is significantly higher ($p < 0.001$) from the group that got exposed for the presentation that was more well-designed (5.153) than for participants that got exposed for the presentation made with less consideration to design (3.777). The result is in line with theory and supports that a more well-designed presentation leads to more positive attitudes towards the firm's brand.

H2: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) positive attitudes towards the firm's brand → SUPPORTED

4.3.3 Brand Ability

The third hypothesis aims to test to if increased perceived effort has an impact on brand ability in this context. As the brand works as an indication to stakeholders of what the selling firm can deliver, it makes it highly important for firms to signal relevant information (De Chernatony, 2002; Harris & De Chernatony, 2001). The result from the comparison in mean values of the two presentations is presented in the following table:

Variable	More Well-designed, \bar{x} (SD)	Less Well-designed, \bar{x} (SD)	Significance
Brand Ability	5.013 (0.794)	3.745 (1.137)	0.000***
*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001			

Table 7: Mean comparison of Brand Ability

The result implies that using a higher level of effort, in terms of design, when developing a firm's presentation material significantly ($p<0.001$) increases an individual's perception about the brand's ability (5.013), compared to a less well-designed presentation (3.745). Thus, the results show that a more well-designed presentation increases perceived ability in the brand, and therefore support is found for accepting H3:

H3: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) perceived ability in firm's brand → SUPPORTED

4.3.4 Perceived Product Quality

The fourth hypothesis states that a more well-designed presentation leads to an increase in perceived product quality compared to a presentation with a lower level of design. As previously described, soft aspects, such as the brand or how the firm communicates, can have an impact on perceptions of product quality (Kirmani & Zeithaml, 1993). The results from this study indicate that putting more effort in terms of design into presentation material, positively influence perceived product quality, which is in line with results from numerous researchers (e.g. Kirmani & Rao, 2000; Kirmani & Wright, 1989; Lohse & Rosen, 2001). The result of the difference in mean values for the two versions of the presentation is presented in the table below:

Variable	More Well-designed, \bar{x} (SD)	Less Well-designed, \bar{x} (SD)	Significance
Perceived Product Quality	4.646 (0.876)	3.433 (1.093)	0.000***
*p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001			

Table 8: Mean comparison of Perceived Product Quality

The mean for perceived product quality is 4.65 for the more well-designed presentation, compared to the less well-designed presentation, with a mean of 3.43. Since there is a positive significant ($p < 0.001$) difference between the two presentations, this indicates that a more well-designed presentation yields a higher perceived product quality. Thereby hypothesis 4 is supported.

**H4: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) perceived product quality
→ SUPPORTED**

4.3.5 Employer Attractiveness

The fifth hypothesis states that a more well-designed presentation increases employer attractiveness for the firm. As outlined in sections 2.2.2 and 2.5, marketing signals have also shown to have extended effects, hence not only affecting consumers. Several studies have shown that potential employees can be influenced by a firm's marketing activities (Joshi & Hanssens, 2010; Gilly & Wolfinbarger, 1998; Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014). The results from the conducted experiment imply that extended effects also can be derived from the level of design of presentation material and affect potential employees. The result is presented in the table below:

Variable	More Well-designed, \bar{x} (SD)	Less Well-designed, \bar{x} (SD)	Significance
Employer Attractiveness	4.837 (0.805)	3.630 (1.168)	0.000***
* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$ *** $p < 0.001$			

Table 9: Mean comparison of Employer Attractiveness

Participants rated employer attractiveness to 4.84 after being exposed to the more well-designed presentation, compared to 3.63 for the less well-designed presentation. As the difference is positive and significant ($p < 0.001$), the results demonstrate that a more well-designed presentation leads to positive signaling effects for the attractiveness of the firm as an employer. Hence, hypothesis 5 is supported.

H5: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) potential employees' perception of firm attractiveness → SUPPORTED

4.3.6 Summary of Hypothesis

Hypothesis	Result
H1: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) perceived effort.	SUPPORTED
H2: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) positive attitudes towards the firm's brand.	SUPPORTED
H3: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) perceived ability in firm's brand.	SUPPORTED
H4: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) perceived product quality.	SUPPORTED
H5: A more (less) well-designed presentation increases (decreases) potential employees' perception of firm attractiveness.	SUPPORTED

Table 10: Summary of hypothesis

4.4 Additional Analysis

To further elaborate on the results, an additional analysis was conducted where possible mediation effects between the manipulation and employer attractiveness were examined, using brand ability as a mediator¹⁹.

4.4.1 Brand Ability Mediates the Effect on Employer Attractiveness

The extended effects of effort on employer attractiveness are a new finding within the scope of this thesis. Therefore it was considered interesting to investigate this relationship and explore the underlying mechanisms by which effort influences employer attractiveness. A mediation analysis was thus conducted in order to examine if a third, mediating variable could further explain the connection between effort and this dependent variable.



Figure 9: Brand ability as a mediator for employer attractiveness

In previous analysis, partial eta squared showed that there was a direct effect of 0.275 on employer attractiveness (see table 5). The mediation analysis served to investigate if it also existed an indirect effect between the variables. A theory-driven reasoning concluded that brand ability would be suitable to test as a mediator. A high level of perceived brand ability signals that the firm is smarter, professional, good at solving customers' problems and credible (Dahlén et al., 2008). It is thus an indication of that the brand will be successful in the future and presumably something that current and potential employees want to identify themselves with. That is, individuals are more likely to want to be associated with a firm

¹⁹ See Definitions

comprising higher brand ability. Consequently this should attract more talent in the form of potential employees, thereby meaning that the firm is more attractive as an employer.

The mediation analysis was conducted by performing linear regressions in three steps. A dummy-variable of the manipulation was created, where 1 = exposure to the less well-designed presentation and 2 = exposure to the more well-designed presentation. In the first step a regression of the manipulation on employer attractiveness, without the mediator (brand ability), was conducted. The regression was significant ($p < 0.05$) with a beta of 0.134 and t-value of 2.108. The second step examined the regression of the manipulation on the mediator, brand ability. The regression was significant ($p < 0.05$) with a beta of 0.458 and t-value of 2.822. In the final step a regression with both the manipulation and brand ability (independent variables) on employer attractiveness (dependent variable) was conducted. The results were significant ($p < 0.001$) with beta of 0.12 and 0.745 respectively for the manipulation and brand ability. The manipulation-variable was not significant in this step ($p > 0.05$), and thereby brand ability should have a mediating effect on employer attractiveness. See table 11.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	1,007	,252		3,997	,000
	Manipulation	,028	,114	,12	,249	,804
	Brand Ability	,747	,049	,745	15,305	,000

Table 11: Mediation analysis - Independent variable: Manipulation, Mediator: Brand ability, Dependent Variable: Employer attractiveness

5. Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter will further explain and discuss the results based on the underlying purpose, research question and the theoretical framework of this thesis. The hypothesis will be connected to the research question and be discussed based on the results from the conducted study. There will also be an additional discussion about implications for managers, as well as suggested future research. Lastly, a final section will consider a more critical view of the results.

5.1 Overview of Findings

The aim of this research was to investigate if more well-designed presentation material could generate positive signaling effects that influence a firm's stakeholders. The intention was to shed light on the question whether it is beneficial for firms to put effort in making their presentation material, i.e. if there is any return on the resources invested that could favorably affect a firm's performance, or if it is simply wasteful. This research attempted to test several new notions within the existing theoretical framework of marketing signals and effort, namely (1) if design can be used to affect perceived effort, (2) if presentation material as a communication tool can generate signaling effects, and (3) if other stakeholders, such as potential employees, get affected by these marketing signals. The results from this study show that design, indeed, can be used to alter the recipients' perception of effort. In turn, and in line with previous research, higher perceived effort leads to positive signal effects. The results further indicate that more well-designed presentation material has extended effects and positively influences potential employees perception of the firm as an employer.

5.2 The Design of Presentation Material Affects Perceived Effort

Previous research related to perceived effort and marketing communication has primarily focused on expense (Kirmani & Rao, 2000) or creativity (Dahlén et al., 2008). In that sense, using design to express effort in a communication tool is something that had not been tested before. Comparing the well-designed presentation with the less well-designed version, the results demonstrate that a more well-designed presentation leads to higher perceived effort. Accordingly, this research shows that the design of presentation material can be used to affect the perception of effort. Design in itself is an abstract concept and the intention with this research was not to elaborate on factors that contribute to a better design, instead part of the purpose of this research was to establish if design as a signal itself could increase the perception of effort, which now is reasonable to conclude.

In a sense, this result was fairly foreseeable, as crafting something that is more well-designed should logically require more effort, in terms of time and thought. In conclusion, design can be used to affect

perceptions of effort put into presentation material. It is important that this premise holds, as it is a crucial foundation for the research of this thesis and a first step in the right direction of answering the research question.

5.3 Presentation Material Can Generate Signaling Effects

Using presentation material as a communication tool to signal effort is also something new within this theoretical frame. The comparison of the more well-designed presentation and the less well-designed shows that higher perceived effort in presentation material generates more positive signaling effects in terms of brand attitude, brand ability, perceived product quality and employer attractiveness. Moreover, the results from the MANOVA test showed that effort, in terms of design, had an effect size of approximately 30% on the dependent variables. That is, effort explains around 30% of the variation in the dependent variables. This relatively low explanatory value should, however, not be considered unsatisfying as it would have been strange if effort could explain all variations in these outcomes. In that case marketers could practically have implied that marketers should quit all other marketing activities and focus solely on effort. Nonetheless, these outcomes confirm results from previous studies within the theoretical frame of effort and signaling effects, stakeholders can also interpret non-explicit, indirect information from presentation material in their evaluation of a brand or a firm. Thereby it is plausible to say that more well-designed presentation material can generate positive marketing signaling effects that influence the stakeholders included in this research. Thus, it should not be considered wasteful to put time, thought and effort in the design of presentation material. Accordingly the main purpose of this study has been fulfilled.

On the one hand, these results might come across as somewhat surprising – does it really take that little to affect our brains into evaluating the same content so differently? On the other hand it is a reasonable reaction in a context where the product offered is intangible, experience-based and, besides that, from an unfamiliar brand. As presentation material is a frequently used communication tool in the consulting industry, not only *what* is presented but also *how* something is presented seems to be of importance.

Assessing the outcomes, a positive attitude towards a brand or a product in this setting can be beneficial in many ways, especially since the quality of the service is hard to evaluate both before and after a purchase. A positive brand attitude implies a more positive evaluation and increases the likelihood of purchase intention and an actual purchase (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975). For consulting firms this also implies that anything that can generate signals of quality is crucial as stakeholders absorb signals and form conclusions. Moreover, for a consulting firm with an unfamiliar brand, displaying ability is a way to showcase that the firm has something interesting and valuable to offer, which should likely be positively perceived by stakeholders. Lastly, for firms relying on human capital as their main source of input in production, attracting talented and relevant employees should, evidently, be beneficial. Therefore,

evaluating the results in regard of these aspects, it is justified to say that they have made valid contributions to theory and practicalities regarding the construction of communication tools in this setting. Obviously a more well-designed presentation, perceived to be made with more effort, will not revolutionize the entire performance of a firm. Presentation material is only one of many touch points between a firm and its stakeholders. However, the larger extent of a firm's total exposure to its stakeholders comprised by presentation material, the higher the impact ought to be. Thus, if relatively simple actions like this significantly can enhance the effects measured in this study, they should be seriously considered.

5.4 Potential Employees Can Get Affected by Marketing Signals When Evaluating a Firm and the Effect is Mediated by Brand Ability

Interestingly, the results display strong indications that marketing signals also affect potential employees, as the firm was perceived as a more attractive employer in the case of the more well-designed presentation. These findings could bear contributory value to the employer branding literature. However, it should be noted that this is a relatively unexplored area within this context and needs to be further tested to strengthen the results.

Furthermore, it was found reasonable to believe that the effect on employer attractiveness was also mediated by some other factor. The results showed that brand ability could mediate the effect of effort on the perceptions of the firm as an attractive employer. Connecting the concept of employer attractiveness and brand ability is in a way a logical line of reasoning, particularly for a consulting firm that provides intangible and abstract products. If a firm in this setting is perceived as being more interesting and valuable as a brand, it makes sense that this should also affect potential employees perception of the firm to be able to deliver value and offer more interesting work tasks. Thereby, this could indicate that the aggregated perception of the firm and the brand, together with effort, has an impact on potential employees. With that being said, the design of presentation material can induce positive effects for the employer in recruiting and attracting new employees. Altogether, these results are in line with previous research from similar contexts, yet it is still an interesting area to investigate further.

5.5 Summary of Conclusions

This research has extended the literature on elements that can affect perceived effort by showing that design is one such factor. In line with Dahlén et al. (2008), positive signaling effects can also be derived from presentation material in a B2B market, using effort as a catalyst. That is, individuals can absorb and interpret signals from communication tools in other contexts than from e.g. advertising in a consumer market, which had been shown previously. In addition, other stakeholders than those directly targeted with the communication may be affected too and draw conclusions regarding their specific interest in the

firm. More specifically, potential employees appear to include signals, like design, from presentation material when evaluating the firm as an employer. Accordingly, this finding supports Rosengren and Bondesson's (2014) research about employer attractiveness.

To summarize, appearance matters - even for firms. How a firm dresses and treats its touch points with stakeholders can generate valuable outcomes. Based on the demonstrated results of this study, this research thus suggests that putting effort and resources in the design of presentation material is not wasteful.

The answer to the research question within the limitations of this study is:

Yes, the design of presentation material can affect perceived effort, and can, in turn, lead to positive effects for the firm.

5.6 Managerial Implications

This thesis has contributed with empirical results and insights about how stakeholders, such as buyers and potential employees can get affected by marketing signals due to a perceived difference in the level of design, and consequently in effort. The most important implications for the consulting industry is to be aware of how design influences their presentation material and how it is perceived. Hence, those actions should not be considered unnecessary or wasteful.

In order to gain a deeper understanding regarding what exactly in design that signals effort, eight deep interviews were conducted with previous participants of the main study. In four of the interviews, the interviewee got exposed to the more well-designed presentation, and the other four to the less well-designed version. See questions in appendix 7.5. Four main findings were found, which could guide and support managers in designing presentation material.

Colors

All of the interviewees exposed to the high effort presentation reacted on the coloring, both positively and some more skeptical. The two interviewees that were more skeptical towards the coloring thought, despite their professional impression of the presentation that a lot of colors implied that they were less competent as a typical consulting firm, and rather more specialized for creative and playful tasks. Also, a lot of colors complicated the identification of the firm's graphical profile due to inconsistency use of colors. In contrast, the other two interviewees believed that different colors had different messages and helped the reader to stay on track, which facilitated understanding and was an indication that a lot of thought was behind the presentation. The less well-designed presentation version got criticism for not using colors in harmony or without purpose, and the white background gave a poor impression of effort.

Consequently colors can be used to display effort, but should be used with consistency and managers should beware of what the colors are associated with.

Symbols

In the more well-designed presentation symbols and illustrations appeared to have been more time consuming to create, and thus made with more effort. Interviewees mentioned that the symbols acted as supporting cues for understanding and connecting the visual illustrations to the actual content. Furthermore, the copyright symbol and the firm's logo enhanced the professional impression of the firm.

Consistency

Based on all of the interviews, the importance of continuity and a good overall impression were recurrent. It was not good enough to simply add colors and symbols to the content, it also had to be dynamic and in harmony. The more well-designed version was easy to follow, visually pleasant, easy to absorb and appeared to have a clear theme. In contrast, the interviewees exposed to the less well-designed presentation thought least effort was put in consistency. It lacked alignment (e.g. arrows, headlines, shapes in illogical order), accuracy and a general harmonized impression.

Conclusions About the Firm Based on Design

A very interesting finding was that the interviewees drew conclusions about the firm, beyond what appeared in the presentation. For instance, one interviewee concluded, that the firm appeared to be non-hierarchical, and not a typical strategy-consulting firm based on the presentation. Several interviewees perceived the firm to be clever in a creative way, which is beneficial when solving customers' problems demanding that outcome. However, participants viewing the more well-designed presentation thought that the firm could be taken as less professional as they appeared too "colorful" and less corporate. Thus, interviewees thought that this could indicate that the firm is more or less able to solve their clients' problems depending on the type of problem (e.g. marketing or financial).

Implications

Based on these findings, how can this be more efficiently applied on a daily basis when creating presentation material?

It is already common sense to use the same font within organizational communication, but consistency in coloring, adding symbols and to make an aligned impression appears not to be. Managers should carefully consider what kind of associations they want to for their firm. For instance, a creative designed presentation is desirable and could have positive signaling effects for i.e. PR firms, but could constrain an investment bank due to prioritizing creativity over accurate numbers. Preferably presentation material could be used to convey associations that are necessary in order to be taken seriously in the industry (e.g. creative for PR firms or professional for investment banks), but also specific associations that are

unique for the brand. Thus, the design of presentation material should be a part of a firm's brand building.

Altering the level of design does not necessarily imply that the presentation material have to be made by a professional, but rather it should display an action of effort from the firm's side and could be powerful when used to send out desirable signals about the firm. Managers should note that it appears to be *perceived effort* and not effort in absolute terms that matters. Thus increasing perceived effort could potentially be a one-time action, e.g. by developing a well-designed presentation template in line with the firm's brand associations.

Furthermore, the result from the main study indicates that the design of presentation material also has an important impact on employer attractiveness. The deep interviews also confirm this fact as the interviewees easily drew other conclusions about the firm beyond the actual content of the presentation. By investing more effort into designing presentations and signaling relevant characteristics, managers could benefit by improving the attractiveness of the firm as an employer. As a growing concern among firms, and especially in the consulting industry, is to retain and attract talent, actions that can favorably influence employer attractiveness should thus be of interest. By attracting more relevant applicants, a firm can lower its acquisition costs. With relatively small actions, like improving the design of presentation material, firms could be more attractive to potential employees.

In conclusion, these actions can cause positive signal effects and therefore leverage a firm's marketing expenses better.

5.7 Future Research

Four interesting areas have been identified for future investigation; (1) other B2B industries where presentation material is an important communication tool, (2) other touch points than presentation material that possibly could generate signaling effects, (3) other stakeholders that could be affected, (4) what elements in design that triggers the perceived effort.

First, the conducted experiment tested the hypothesis of this research on a consulting firm and its industry, the results are thus limited to this area. A next step for research would be to seek more generalizable results by testing these specific theories in other industries and sectors of the B2B market, where presentation material is an important communication tool. Second, this research was limited to one firm's presentation material as it was one of the most central tools for communicating. Thus, it would be interesting to further investigate the power of increased effort and in other important touch points between a firm and its stakeholder, such as a firm's website, office interior or annual reports.

Third, the results in this study indicate that increased effort have an effect on potential buyers, potential users of the service, and potential employees. Will other stakeholders such as decision makers, employees and investors be affected in similar way?

Finally, effort, the manipulated variable, was controlled by altering the level of design in the presentations. However, it is out of scope for this thesis to say exactly what it is in the design that triggers the perceived effort to increase or decrease. For practical reasons it would be of interest to research this area further and to see if other elements of design, than our definition, can have an affect on perceived effort.

5.8 Critical Commentary and Limitations

It was necessary to make limitations, due to time and resource of this thesis. Furthermore, the data collection for the major study was both collected by distributing an online link and physically with printed versions. As the respondents did not have the opportunity to answer in what way they took the survey, it cannot be assured that there is no significant difference between the ways. In addition to this, it could also be questioned whether the situation was realistic enough, as the respondent were aware of taking a survey.

In terms of limitations of method, the study took a quantitative approach. However, in order to gain a deeper understanding in what it is in design that triggers perceived effort, a qualitative approach was taken by conducting eight deep interviews. That approach gave a more descriptive explanation, yet, it could give biased answers as people generally do not behave accordingly to what they say. Thus, a combination of a both qualitative and quantitative data collection could have facilitated a deeper discussion and understanding of the results.

Lastly, this study demonstrated how human beings react on a general level when exposed more/less well-designed presentation material. Thus, the results may not represent all specific groups of individuals, e.g. professionals with numerous years of experience in the industry.

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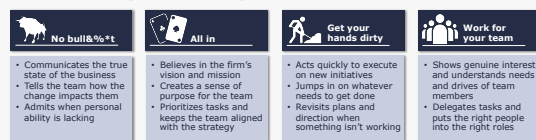
7. Appendix

7.1 Presentation I (More well-deigned)

BTS Group – How We Are Different



We develop “great” profiles



- **Focused on strategy and business model** and the most critical behaviors right now
- **Simple & real** Written in your company's language
- **Your unique culture** Communicates your secret sauce for leadership
- **“Great” is the expectation** Defines what it takes to be “great,” no need to define novice, average, etc.



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Our approach is different and honors what is unique



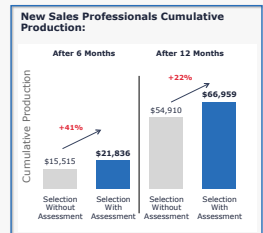
- We codify what your great performers and leaders do in a role/level, and enhance with an external perspective
- We evaluate leader's approaches, behaviors & mindsets to give feedback, define development focus, select HIPOs and select for jobs
- We create powerful experiences that enable people to experiment with new approaches, tools, behaviors and actions
- Reinforce, support and measure how people put learning into action



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How can you best assess for “great”?

- We believe in objective **assessment using your great profile** and your playbook of “great” versus “not so great” behaviors.
- We evaluate your leader's **approaches, behaviors and mindset** as they make leadership decisions in real or simulated challenges.
- We select great leaders based on what they do, **how** they think and **who** they are, not who they know and **what** they say.
- We have seen this yield **better results**



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This is how we help leaders experience “great”:



We know **people need to see, experience, and try out new ideas, new skills, and new mindsets** before they believe in them, master them, and become “great”.

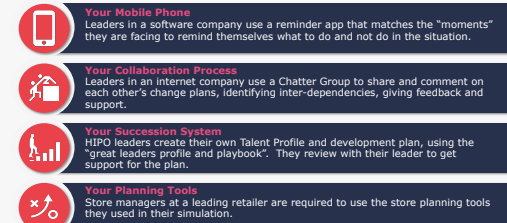
Our goal is to **increase the practice to performance ratio** and shorten the time it takes to produce “great” performance.

We know from research **experience is the greatest teacher**.



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We embed support tools where work gets done



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How we are differentiated:

Essence	Differentiator
World Leading Clients	• We focus on the people side of strategy , helping the world's leading companies turn strategy into action and results
Powerful Experiences™	• We design fun, powerful experiences™ that have a profound and lasting impact on people and their careers — inspiring new ways of thinking, building critical capabilities and unleashing business success.
Business-Centric	• We bring exceptional business and industry experience to every client, so we are able to make an immediate impact
Deep Customization	• We know deep customization is important to getting the best results for our clients, and we have the people, process and technology to do it better and faster
Business Simulations & Experiential Learning	• We know people learn best by doing. We are the world leader in simulating new strategies and ways of working, empowering people to make better decisions



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We can't wait to work with you

Our global team of business-centric and fun experts are looking forward to working with you to execute your strategy. Our footprint makes it possible to scale our programs and work with you anywhere across the globe.

Through our vast network, we assemble the perfect team to partner with you.

Connect with us: www.bts.com

7.2 Presentation 2 (Less well-designed)

BTS Group – How We Are Different



Strategy made personal

Presented by:
Miriam Gant
Ted Wester
Erik Williamsson
Sara Baker

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Our approach is different and honors what is unique

Define Great

- We codify what your great performers and leaders do in a role/level, and enhance with an external perspective

↓

Assess Great

- We evaluate leader's approaches, behaviors & mindsets to give feedback, define development focus, select HIPOs and select for jobs.

↓


Experience Great

- We create powerful experiences that enable people to experiment with new approaches, tools, behaviors and actions.

↓

Execute Great

- Reinforce, support and measure how people put learning into action



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We develop "great" profiles DEFINE GREAT

"Great Profile" for pivotal roles

Focused on strategy and business model

and the most critical behaviors right now

Simple & real


Written in your company's language

Your unique culture

Communicates your secret sauce for leadership

"Great" is the expectation

Defines what it takes to be "great," no need to define novice, average, etc...



VALUES	GREAT EXPECTATIONS, BEHAVIORS & MINDSET
No bull& %*t	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicates the true state of the business • Tells the team how the change impacts them • Admits when personal ability is lacking
All in	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Believes in the firm's vision and mission • Creates a sense of purpose for the team • Prioritizes tasks and keeps the team aligned with the strategy
Get your hands dirty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acts quickly to execute on new initiatives • Jumps in on whatever needs to get done • Revisits plans and direction when something isn't working
Work for your team	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows genuine interest and understands needs and drives of team members • Delegates tasks and puts the right people into the right roles

3

How can you best assess for "great"? ASSESS GREAT

We believe in **objective assessment** using your **great profile** and your **playbook** of "great" versus "not so great" behaviors.

We evaluate your leader's **approaches, behaviors and mindset** as they make leadership decisions in real or simulated challenges.

We select great leaders based on **what** they do, **how** they think and **who** they are, not who they know and what they say.

We have seen this yield **better results**.



New Sales Professionals
Cumulative Production

After 6 Months



After 12 Months



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This is how we help leaders experience "great" EXPERIENCE GREAT

We know people need to **see, experience, and try out** new ideas, new skills, and new mindsets before they believe in them, master them, and become "great".

We know from research **experience** is the greatest teacher.


Our goal is to **increase the practice to performance ratio** and **shorten the time** it takes to produce "great" performance.

"Great" Leadership Profile and Playbook criteria

Business and leadership Challenges and Choices™

Real practice and feedback on performance

A multi-factor simulation where leaders perform in the future state



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We embed support tools where work gets done EXECUTE GREAT

Your Mobile Phone

Leaders in a software company use a reminder app that matches the "moments" they are facing to remind themselves what to do and not do in the situation.

Your Collaboration Process


Leaders in an internet company use a Chatter Group to share and comment on each other's change plans, identifying inter-dependencies, giving feedback and support.

Your Succession System

HIPO leaders create their own Talent Profile and development plan, using the "great leaders profile and playbook". They review with their leader to get support for the plan.

Your Planning Tools


Store managers at a leading retailer are required to use the store planning tools they used in their simulation.



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How we are differentiated

Essence	Differentiator
World Leading Clients	We focus on the people side of strategy, helping the world's leading companies turn strategy into action and results.
Powerful Experiences™	We design fun, powerful experiences™ that have a profound and lasting impact on people and their careers — inspiring new ways of thinking, building critical capabilities and unleashing business success.
Business-Centric	We bring exceptional business and industry experience to every client, so we are able to make an immediate impact.
Deep Customization	We know deep customization is important to getting the best results for our clients, and we have the people, process and technology to do it better and faster.
Business Simulations & Experiential Learning	We know people learn best by doing. We are the world leader in simulating new strategies and ways of working, empowering people to make better decisions.



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7.3 Presentation 3 (Used in Pretest)

BTS Group – How We Are Different

Presented by:
Miriam Gant
Ted Wester
Erik Williamsson
Sara Baker

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Strategy made personal

Our approach is different and honors what is unique

Define Great

- We codify what your great performers and leaders do in a role/level, and enhance with an external perspective



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EXPERIENCE GREAT

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EXECUTE GREAT

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7.4 Questionnaire – Main Study

	Very poorly designed				Very well designed		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
What do you think about the design of the presentation?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What is your overall opinion of the consulting firm BTS?

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
Negative	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Positive
Not appealing	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Appealing
Bad	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	Good

How well do these statements correspond to your impression of BTS?

	Do not agree				Agree completely		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
BTS is credible	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
BTS is good at solving customers' problems	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
BTS is smart	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
BTS is professional in their way of working	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

The services offered by BTS...

	Do not agree					Agree completely	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
...would make me satisfied	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...are of high quality	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
...are better than competitors' services	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Very little					Very much	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
How much time do you think BTS spent on making the presentation?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How much effort do you think BTS has put into making the presentation?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
How much thought do you think BTS spent on making the presentation?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Do not agree					Agree completely	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
BTS offers good development opportunities for its employees	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
BTS would be a good place to work at	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The salary at BTS is higher than average	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
BTS is an attractive employer	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

	Not at all familiar					Very familiar	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Prior to viewing the presentation, how familiar were you with BTS?	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

What is your current main occupation?

- ☐ Student
- ☐ Employed
- ☐ Other
- ☐ Retired
- ☐ Unemployed

Gender:

- ☐ Other
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Male

How old are you? (E.g. 27 years)

7.5 Questions – Deep Interviews

The interview were restricted to only talk about what it is in the design of the presentations, that is signals higher relatively lower effort.

Questions for interviewees:

(Effort)

- What is your overall opinion of the design?
- What in the design do you think most/least effort have been spent in the presentation?
- What in the design do you think took most/least time to craft in the presentation?
- What in the design do you think most/least thought have been spent in the presentation?

(Brand Ability)

- What do you think could be perceived as most/least professional in the design of the presentation?
- Is there something in the design that indicates that the firm is better or less capable to solve clients' problems?