

## **Understanding the Impact of Social Influence on Social Media Advertising**

*A quantitative study of social media job advertising in the clothing industry*

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Social Medias are growing fast with consumers and employees shifting larger parts of their media consumption towards the new medium. This causes advertisers to follow and to spend lots of money on social media advertising to attract customers and talent. While social media is a great opportunity for advertisers, it also comes with the new component of social engagement that can affect how users perceive the original content. With an increased “war for talent”, employers now seek to create attractive job advertisement campaigns on social media to attract the best talent at the cheapest cost. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of weak-ties social influence on employer attractiveness in a social media setting.

In a quantitative experiment with 137 survey respondents, this study explores how social influence on social media, in the form of social engagement with likes, comments and shares, affects the attractiveness of a brand as an employer. To further deepen the theoretical contribution and provide for more interesting managerial implications, the concept of ethics in the form of corporate social responsibility was included as a moderating variable in the former relationship.

The results showed how weak-ties social influence on social media did not impact employer attractiveness and that this relationship was not moderated by the level of ethics of the employer. Instead, the study could show how the two mediating variables of perceived ethics and third-person effect could significantly mediate the relationship in opposite directions to offset each other's effects. This in turn explained the non significant relationship between social influence and employer attractiveness.

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*Keywords: Social Media, Social Influence, Employer Attractiveness, Ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility*

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## **Definitions**

### *Social Media*

“Mobile and web-based technologies that create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content” (Kietzmann et al. 2011). An example of a social media is Facebook, which is the social media platform used in this study.

### *Social Media Engagement*

Engagement on social media occurs when users engage with content.. Facebook allows likes, comments and shares as their primary engagement possibilities.

### *Social Influence*

In the field of social psychology this is considered to be the essence of what is called conformity, that is “a change in one’s behavior due to the real or imagined influence of others” (Aronson et al., 2005). In this study social influence is in the form of social media engagement on social media.

### *Tie Strength*

Family and friends serve as examples of strong ties, while acquaintances exemplifies weak tie relationships (Van Hoya & Lievens, 2007). This experiment employs social influence from weak ties on social media.

### *Employer Attractiveness*

“The envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization” (Berthon et al., 2005)

### *Ethics*

An old concept in philosophy that serves to explain right and wrong moral behavior, language, justice, virtue and duty. This study uses Corporate Social Responsibility as an the business application of ethics.

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# 1 . Introduction

Social Media has come to dominate the way we use the internet (Smith, 2009), by changing how we interact with other people, how we judge people and companies, and how we consume information and news. In the beginning of the era, social medias were used to socialize with peers over the internet. Today, Facebook has more than 1.7 million monthly active users and social medias in general have grown to become so much more (Statista, 2016). With consumers shifting large parts of their time and media consumption towards social media, companies follow in order to stay relevant and to reach consumers by pouring money into the new platforms (eMarketer, 2015). While many social media platforms offer marketers tremendous opportunities to define narrow target audiences to reach the exact right consumers with their advertising message, social media advertising also comes with the completely new component of social engagement.

Advertisement that is posted in the feed of social media platforms can usually be engaged with by users with reactions such as likes, shares and comments. This social media engagement generates a source of social influence that impacts how the advertisement is received, the perception of it, how it is spread and thereby also its reach and effectiveness. In traditional media, such as newspapers or television commercials, marketers have the option of including social influence with for example celebrity endorsers or existing customers. In the new landscape, marketers need to understand that social media marketing is fundamentally different in its nature to traditional alternatives, since on social media, social influence is a big involuntary part of the advertising message. By understanding the effects of social influence on social media, marketers will be able to tailor their content and audiences to utilize its power to maximize advertisement reach and return on investment.

Understanding the dynamics and impact of social influence on social media is not only important for marketers, but for many functions of society. Social influence, defined as “a change in one’s behavior due to the real or imagined influence of others” (Aronson et al.,

2005), has been around for as long as humans. We have always listened to friends and family when considering decisions and behaviors, but with the rise of the digital age these influencing networks have been able to grow to include influence from many more people than the ones in our physical surroundings. Allowing users to communicate with each other, social media is described as “an extension of traditional word of mouth communication” (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Global marketing research firm Nielsen reports how 92% of consumers trust recommendations from friends and family to a greater extent than any form of advertising (Whitler, 2014). When social influence is a part of all content on social media, what happens when consumers now increasingly turn to social media to consume news and information that forms opinions and shapes behavior? A result can be that the relative importance of facts decrease, which could have been the case during the 2016 United States Presidential Election where Russia was accused of manipulating social media with false content and propaganda (Timberg, 2016).

Social influence impacts many decisions and behaviors, with one of them being where people want to work and what employers are considered to be attractive (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Liden & Parson, 1986; Van Hove & Lievens, 2007). This fact, together with the recent surge in employee recruiting on social media (Kasper, 2014), makes employer attractiveness a very suitable concept to apply theories of social influence on social media to. This study applies theories of social influence on social media to focus on the implications this has for marketers of employer brands.

Attracting talented and skillful employees has become increasingly important and do, for most companies, serve as a primary source of competitive advantage (Pfeffer, 1994; Teece, 1997; Turban & Greening, 1996; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Schlager et al., 2011). Globalization and a growing service sector can be mentioned as examples of factors that have contributed to the fierce competition in the war for talent, making the employer attractiveness a crucial factor in order to cope with competition and reach success (Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014). When employees dedicate a larger chunk of their time and

media consumption to social medias, recruiters follow. Since the perceived attractiveness of an employer brand is a normative concept vulnerable to influence from others, social media job advertisers should have good knowledge about how their advertisement's messages can be affected by social media engagement.

Social influence is a concept whose impact depends on other variables. For example, social influence yields a stronger effect when inserted into an ambiguous situation (Aronson et al., 2005). Company ethics, or more specifically corporate social responsibility, is another factor impacting the perceived attractiveness of an employer brand (Turban & Greening, 1996). As a result, by changing the level of ethics of an employer, the level of ambiguity can possibly be manipulated to in turn to determine the effect of the social influence. In addition, studies have shown how social influence also impacts ethics in itself, by affecting people's decision-making when under exposure of social influence in unethical situations (Aronson et al., 2005). This makes ethics an interesting concept to study in relation to social influence on social media in the field of corporate recruiting. If social influence on social media is effective enough it can possibly impact how employees interpret and build their ethical perceptions of employer brands.

### 1.1 Purpose & Research Question

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of social influence on social media advertisement. More specifically, it explores this relationship in the field of employee recruiting to provide for deeper understanding of how involuntary social media engagement (social influence) impacts the perception of an employer brand. Existing literature on the area of employer attractiveness depict how social influence is an integral part of job choice decisions and job offer acceptance rates, but very limited research has tried to explore if this relationship still holds in the context of social media.

Higher company ethics, in the form of higher corporate social responsibility, has proved to positively impact employer attractiveness. Social influence is stronger when a situation is



ambiguous, and by playing with the level of ethics and thereby the ambiguity of the situation, ethics can possibly be a moderator to the relationship between social influence and employer attractiveness. The following research question is formulated to lead the work in answering how social influence on social media affects employer attractiveness and what role ethics has in this relationship:

Research question:

*Does weak tie social influence on social media impact perceived employer attractiveness and is this relationship affected by the level of ethics?*

## 1.2 Expected Contributions

The study aims to contribute to the literature base on social media advertising and more specifically to the role social influence plays in this type of media. Since social media is a relatively new type of media, and due to the complexity of the concept of social influence, the area is in need of more extensive research to bone out effects and implications. This study aims at contributing to the existing literature by experimenting with weak tie social influence applied on the field of employee recruiting.

Employee recruiting is a research field with an extensive amount of research, probably due to its size, complexity and importance for companies and recruiters. A large number of factors affect what constitutes an individual's perceived employer attractiveness, with social influence and perceived corporate social responsibility being two of them. While it has been easy to study how strong tie social influence affects job choice decisions, such as close friends and family, it has been more difficult to understand how other people in the broader surroundings could impact perceived employer attractiveness. Social media provides a great base for conducting this later type of research, since it is a platform that can illustrate what other people think without telling that is the experiment, which opens up possibilities for new types of experiments in the field. This study contributes to the field of employer

attractiveness by examining how the previously identified factor social influence impacts employer attractiveness when put in form of weak ties in the context of social media.

The level of company ethics, in the form of corporate social responsibility, has proven to impact the degree of employer attractiveness. More ethical companies, with a higher corporate social responsibility, in general attracts more talent and are perceived as more attractive. This study iterates on these findings to test how ethics impact employer attractiveness when the employer uses social media as the platform for recruiting. In addition, both history and research have shown how social influence can impact ethical decision-making and behavior. The implications generated from that relationship are important for companies, but also for many other functions of society. This study contributes to the research on social influence impact on company ethics by exploring this relationship in the context of social media.

### 1.3 Delimitations

In order to concretize and facilitate the study, and due to constraints in time and resources, certain delimitations were made. Firstly, the experiment was limited to only include one company in a specific industry and was limited to one social media platform. With more time at hand, the experiment could have been tested on a wider set of social media platforms, various industries and companies of varying size. This would likely have resulted in more generally applicable empirical findings and managerial implications.

The study only included weak tie social influence, and not strong ties, in order to be able to measure the isolated effect of weak ties. With more time a second study including strong ties, and excluding weak-ties social influence, could have been conducted as there is reason to believe that the impact of strong- and weak-ties differs and a comparison of the two studies would have resulted in interesting findings.

The sample of respondents were limited to business students on a bachelor- or master level, as a student sample is suitable for our research as they are likely to soon apply for jobs (Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014). However, more time and extended resources would have allowed a larger sample including students from various fields and from different geographical regions. A sample containing different categories of students would have allowed a comparison of the results, which would have provided further insights.

#### 1.4 Thesis Outline

This thesis consists of five different sections. The first introductory section includes a background to the research field and discusses the purpose and research questions, expected contributions and delimitations of the study. The second section explains relevant theoretical frameworks related to the research questions. The third section explains and discusses the scientific approach and how the experiments were conducted, while the fourth section reports the statistical results. The last section discusses the results, managerial implications, limitations and suggestions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In recent years social media has become increasingly important as a marketing platform for companies (eMarketer, 2015). What distinguishes social media advertising from traditional advertising is that social influence, in the form of social media engagement, is an involuntary part of the advertisement message itself. Furthermore, attracting and retaining highly skilled employees serves as an increasingly important competitive advantage for companies (Pfeffer, 1994; Teece, 1997; Turban & Greening, 1996; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Schlager et al., 2011). In the following theoretical framework, section 2.1 summarizes relevant research made within the field of employer attractiveness and employer branding. Section 2.2 discusses the research of social influence and how it relates to the concepts of social media and employer attractiveness. Section 2.3 lifts the concept of business ethics and corporate social responsibility and finally, section 2.4 introduces the concept of third-person effects.

### 2.1 Employer Attractiveness & Employer Branding

Before diving into the activity of *employer branding*, let us understand the concept of an *employer brand*. In 1996 Ambler and Barrow (1996) first invented the concept of employer brand by defining it as “the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company” . A concept similar to the employer brand is Berthon et al’s (2005) concept of *employer attractiveness*, which is defined as “the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization”. Since the employer brand, or the employer attractiveness, is important for employers in attracting and retaining employees, the activity of creating an employer brand that is perceived as favourable by current and potential employees have increased broadly over the years. Activities related to this type of employer brand building is known as *employer branding* (Edwards, 2010). While the two concepts of employer brand and employer attractiveness are used similarly in previous research and are set out to measure almost the same things this study will, for the sake of simplicity and consistency, solely use

the term employer attractiveness from here on when measuring the degree of attractiveness held by an employer brand.

The starting point for researchers creating models of employer attractiveness and employer branding has usually been to look at similar models for consumers to understand how these can be modified to instead be suitable for current and potential employees. An example is Erdem and Swait's (1998) consumer-based brand equity model that was later modified by Wilden et al. (2010) to function as an employer brand model. Berthon et al.'s (2005) research also use brand equity theory in order to create a model for employer branding.

Employer branding activities aimed at increasing employer attractiveness are usually focused on recruitment activities such as job postings, employee endorsements, recruitment advertising and sponsorships for students (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Highhouse et al., 2003; Berthon et al., 2005; Knox & Freeman 2006; Wilden et al., 2010). While the type of recruitment activities above impact employer attractiveness and recruiting success, it is also important to incorporate other factors outside of the recruitment activity itself to fully understand what constitutes the measured level of employer attractiveness.

Studies have shown that employer attractiveness is higher when the companies are perceived as familiar (Gatewood et al., 1993; Cable & Turban 2003), have more known products (Collins, 2007), are socially responsible (Turban & Greening, 1996) and profitable (Cable & Graham, 2000). Another factor also affecting employer attractiveness is *social influence*. In a purchasing setting, research shows that consumers reduce potential risks associated with their purchase by consulting friends and other people with relevant expertise (Cobb-Walgren et. al., 1995). In an employer branding setting, normative sources of social influence have shown to have a significant effect on employer choice whereas other informational sources of influence do not (Higgins, 2001). Social influence is a wide concept and while the majority of the literature focuses on social influence with strong ties,

little light has been shed on how social influence by weak ties affects employer attractiveness.

## 2.2 Social Influence

The history of mankind is full of examples when social influence have made people changed their behaviors, not seldom to the worse (Aronson et al., 2005). In the field of social psychology this is considered to be the essence of what is called conformity, that is “a change in one’s behavior due to the real or imagined influence of others” (ibid.).

Deutsch and Gerard (1955) describes two types of conformity motivations - informational and normative. *Informational social influence* occurs when a person lets other’s behavior serve as guidelines for the appropriate course of action (Aronson et al., 2005). Cialdini and Goldstein (2004) describes how informational social influence is “based on the desire to form an accurate interpretation of reality and behave correctly”. Furthermore, Aronson et al. (2005) describes how the ambiguity of a situation is an important determinant of to what extent people will conform to informational social influence. Higher uncertainty regarding what is to be considered an appropriate behavior or opinion, tend to makes us more open to influence from others. *Normative social influence*, on the other hand, enters into force when one conform in order to get liked and accepted by others (ibid.).

Related to social influence is the concept of social identity, which is defined as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978). Gender, age, ethnicity, communities, and the organization one work for may serve as examples of social groups and categorical labels that, as Banks et al. (2016) put it, “are more readily apparent to interacting others than are unique individual characteristics and thus provide a heuristic means for selecting normed and behavioral standards likely to be functional even when little can be known about unique aspects of other social groups”. Furthermore, social identity theory suggests that individuals distance

themselves from social groups that negatively reflect on their self-concept (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010).

### 2.2.1 Social Influence on Social Media

Social media has come to dominate the way we use internet (Smith, 2009). Kietzmann et al. (2011) describes how social media “employ mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content”. Recent years social media ad spending has increased steadily (eMarketer, 2015), and in today’s situation Facebook is the largest social media platform with approximately 1,71 billion monthly active users (Statista, 2016).

Allowing users to communicate with each other, social media is described as “an extension of traditional word of mouth communication” (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). Word of mouth has been proven to affect both product evaluations (Bone, 1995), sales (Chevalier & Mayzilin, 2006) and employer attractiveness (Van Hove & Lievens, 2007), and may be defined as “an interpersonal communication, independent of the organization’s marketing activities, about an organization or its products” (Van Hove & Lievens, 2007). Global marketing research firm Nielsen reports how 92% of consumers trust recommendations from friends and family to a greater extent than any form of advertising (Whitler, 2014). However, social media consists of many weak tie relationships, which may not hold social influence (Bond et al., 2012). Studies even imply that online-communication is an ineffective tool for influence (Nickerson, 2008). Granovetter (1973) defines tie strength as “a (probably linear) combination of the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and reciprocal services which characterize the tie”. Family and friends serve as examples of strong ties, while acquaintances exemplifies weak tie relationships (Van Hove & Lievens, 2007). Studies show how persons to which one have strong tie relationships are perceived as more influential than those to which one has a weak tie relationship. This may be explained by that strong ties are considered as more credible sources of information (Brown & Reingen, 1987). However, a more recent study have

shown how weak tie sources of information occasionally is considered more influential than strong tie, in an internet context (Steffes & Burgee, 2009).

### 2.2.2 Social Influence, Social Media and the Third-Person Effect (TPE)

The concept of the *third-person effect* states that “a person exposed to a persuasive communication in the mass media sees this as having a greater effect on others than on himself or herself” (Davison, 1983). Because receivers of persuasive communication expects the communication to have a larger impact of others, it may also lead to them taking some sort of action (ibid.). Thus, Dahlén et al. (2013) describes how the third person effect involves both a perceptual element, defined as “beliefs that a message affects others more than oneself”, and a behavioral element, defined as “actions based on such anticipation”. Furthermore, Dahlén et al. (ibid.) argue that the reactions, based on the belief that others are more affected and influenced by a mass media message, are based on a presumed effect on others. In other words, the belief itself is of greater importance than the accuracy of it. Several studies have found that the third-person effect is varying with the respondents perceived social distance to “others”. When “others” are defined as a group close to the respondent (e.g. a close friend) the estimated third person effect was smaller than when “others” were defined as a more distant group (e.g. an average person) (Connors, 2005)

Dahlén et al. (2014) showed how an intended target group’s overestimation of an unintended target groups negative reaction, negatively affected the attitudes and behaviors of the intended target group. Furthermore, Gunther (2005) and McLeod et al. (1997) provide evidence for the perceptual and behavioral elements of the third person effect. Gunther (2005) showed how people perceive others to be more influenced by pornography than themselves, and how the “support for pornography restrictions parallels the discrepancy they perceive between effect on self and effect on others”. McLeod et al. (1997) found a similar pattern among university students regarding censorship of rap lyrics. Social influence on social media in the form of likes and positive comments can be regarded as a proof that the advertisement (the media message) is indeed greatly affecting others. As a result, it is



argued that social influence on social media could generate a larger third-person effect, compared to the case without any social influence, *ceteris paribus*.

### 2.2.3 Social Influence & Employer Attractiveness

As mentioned, social influence do affect one's perceived attractiveness of an organization as a potential employer (Collins & Stevens, 2002). Accordingly, pressure from parents and friends affects the job acceptance intentions (Liden & Parson, 1986). Studies show how positive word of mouth relates to positive employer attractiveness (Van Hoya & Lievens, 2007), and how positive word of mouth can mitigate the effects of negative publicity (Van Hoya & Lievens, 2005).

However, outside of Van Hoya and Lievens' studies, little research have tried to describe the effect informational social influence has on the perceived attractiveness of an employer (Van Hoya & Lievens, 2005; Van Hoya & Lievens, 2007). In order to adapt the concept of word-of-mouth to a recruitment context, Van Hoya and Lievens (2005) defines word-of-mouth as involving "an interpersonal communication, independent of the organization's recruitment activities, about an organization as an employer or about specific jobs". In recent years the use of social media, as a tool for recruitment and employer brand campaigns has increased (Sivertzen et al., 2013). However, there is a limited amount of research examining how social influence affects the perceived employer attractiveness on social media.

There have been several attempts to examine how social identity relates to job applicants' attraction to an organization (Banks et al., 2016). As an example it can be mentioned how Turban and Greening (1996) found that high level corporate social performance resulted in higher employer attractiveness, where a suggested explanation was that potential applicants believe working for an employer with high corporate social performance will lead to a more positive self-concept. However, as social identity theory suggests that individuals distance themselves from social groups that negatively reflect on their self-concept, it can not be

excluded that a job endorsement from groups that negatively reflect on one's self concept can decrease the perceived attractiveness of a brand as an employer.

## 2.3 Ethics

*Ethics* is an old concept in philosophy that serves to explain right and wrong moral behavior, language, justice, virtue and duty. The literature surrounding the concept of ethics answers questions regarding the "greatest good" and as a result elaborates on different behaviours for groups and individuals that would fulfill this ideal (MacIntyre, 1998). In a business context, academic literature in moral philosophy seem to ignore or reject the basic mission of business (Robin, 2009). Accordingly, this study will focus on the concept of *business ethics* (Baumhart, 1961), which is a form of *applied ethics*, as it is more suitable in a business setting (Robin, 2009).

Raymond Baumhart is usually regarded as an important forerunner in the academic discipline of business ethics by discussing the concept in several studies back in 1960. Since then the literature has proposed many different definitions to business ethics and how it can be achieved (Robin, 2009). In an attempt to synthesize all these perspectives on the business ethics concept, Lewis (1985) concludes that business ethics not only involves virtue, integrity or character, but also includes the understanding of what is right and wrong from a moral perspective at the time of the ethical dilemma. The finding by Lewis is particularly interesting in this study as it suggests that external effects can alter the level of business ethic in a given situation by changing the decision maker's degree of understanding of what is right and wrong.

### 2.3.1 Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Employer attractiveness

Business ethics is one component in the concept of *corporate social responsibility (CSR)*, as Carroll (1979) defines CSR with "the social responsibility of business encompasses the economic, legal, ethical, and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time". Corporate social responsibility, measured in *corporate social performance (CSP)*, has proven to be correlated with companies' financial performance

(Cochran & Wood, 1984) and employer attractiveness (Turban & Greening 1996). The correlation between CSR and employer attractiveness is particularly strong among high-level workers (Albinger & Freeman 2000).

If business ethics in the form of corporate social responsibility can affect the level of employer attractiveness, what does then constitute the level of corporate social responsibility? Carroll (1979) observes that the level of CSR is dependent on how well a company aligns with economic, legal and discretionary expectations. On a parallel route, social psychology claims that social influence impacts ethics in decisions making (Aronson et al., 2005), thus provoking an idea that the perceived ethics of a company could also be dependent on social influence. Little economic research has been done on the potential impact social influence can have on ethical concepts in business such as perceived business ethic of an employer.

With social influence impacting ethics in decisions (ibid.), and with ethics being a critical component of corporate social responsibility (Carroll, 1979) which in turn correlates positively with employer attractiveness (Turban & Greening, 1996), it is suggested that social influence might impact employer attractiveness mediated by increased perceived company ethics.

## 2.4 Theoretical Conclusion & Hypotheses Generation

This study aims at contributing to the existing literature base on employer attractiveness, social influence and ethics by conjointly studying these interrelated concepts in the context of social media. As mentioned, social influence do affect one's perceived attractiveness of an organization as a potential employer (Collins & Stevens, 2002). Accordingly, pressure from parents and friends affects job acceptance intentions (Liden & Parson, 1986) and positive word of mouth relates to positive employer attractiveness (Van Hoya & Lievens, 2007). Allowing users to communicate with each other, social media is described as “an extension of traditional word of mouth communication” (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). While

Collins and Stevens (2002), and Liden and Parsons (1986) studies focus more on social influence in the form of strong ties, a recent study have shown how weak tie sources of information occasionally is considered more influential than strong tie, in an internet context (Steffes & Burgee, 2009), thus leading up to the first hypothesis:

**H1:** Positive social influence on social media impacts positively on the attractiveness of a brand as an employer

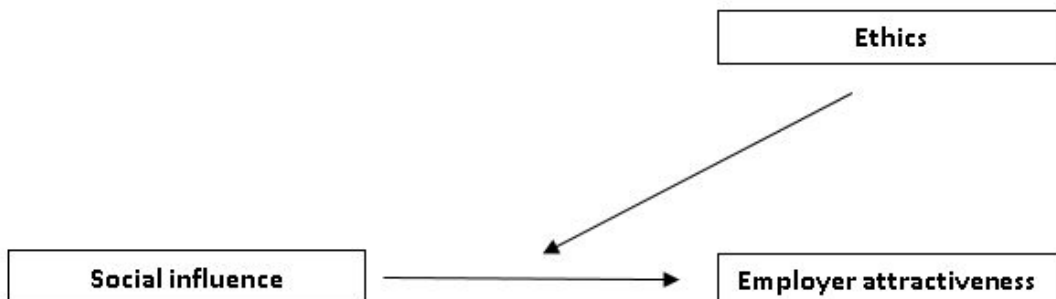
**Figure 1:** Hypothesis 1



Social influence has been proven to be of importance regarding individuals' behaviors and decisions. According to Aronson et al. (2005), higher uncertainty regarding what is to be considered an appropriate behavior or opinion, tend to makes us more open to influence from others. Ethics do serve as an example of where the influence and behaviors of others is of importance (ibid.). Thus, it is hypothesized that:

**H2:** Ethics moderate the relationship between positive social influence on social media and the attractiveness of a brand as an employer

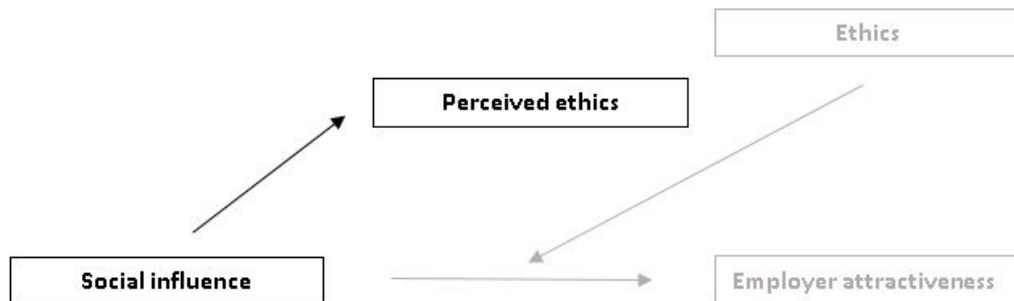
**Figure 2:** Hypothesis 2



Studies have shown how social influence impacts ethical decision making (ibid.) and how ethics, in the form of corporate social responsibility, in turn affect employer attractiveness (Turban & Greening, 1996). Literature suggests that weak tie social influence on social media may have little effect (Bond, 2012), whereas Steffes and Burgee (2009) showed how weak tie social influence can in fact have a larger effect than strong tie influence in certain situations. The third hypothesis developed combines Aronson et al's (2005) finding with that of Steffes and Burgee (2009) to suggest that social influence in social media will affect the perceived ethics of the employer brand.

**H3:** Positive social influence on social media impacts positively on the perceived ethics of an employer brand

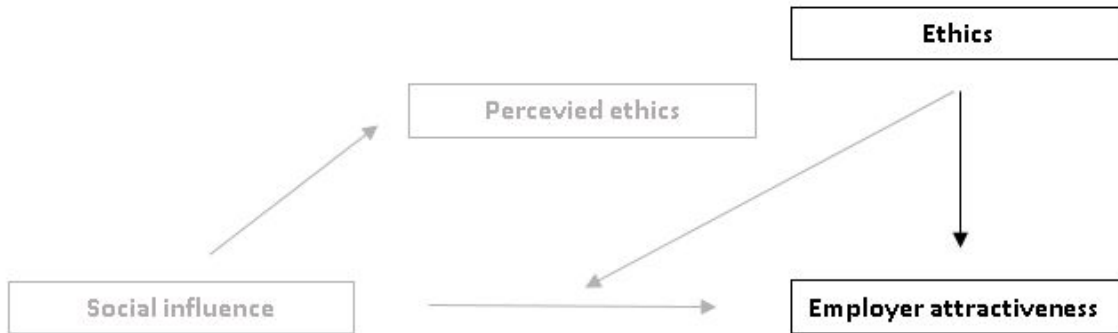
**Figure 3:** Hypothesis 3



Corporate social responsibility, measured in corporate social performance, has proven to be correlated with companies' financial performance (Cochran & Wood, 1984) and employer attractiveness (Turban & Greening, 1996). The correlation between CSR and employer attractiveness is particularly strong among high-level workers (Albinger & Freeman, 2000). The fourth hypothesis tests whether ethics in the form of corporate social responsibility impacts employer attractiveness when job is advertised through social media.

**H4:** Higher ethics impacts positively on the attractiveness of the brand as an employer

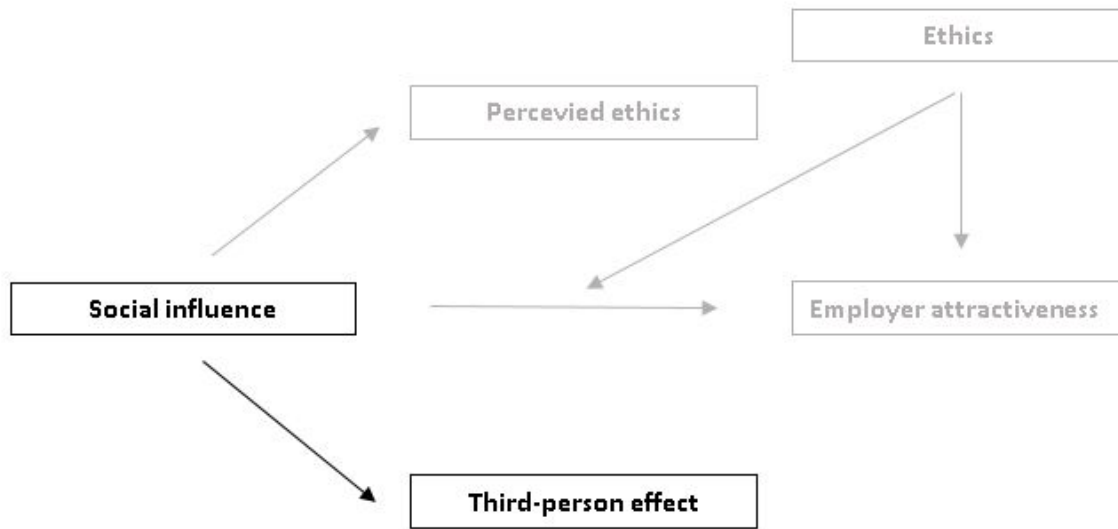
**Figure 4:** Hypothesis 4



Informational social influence occurs when a person lets other's behavior serve as guidelines for the appropriate course of action (Aronson et al., 2005). In the field of employer attractiveness, social influence do affect one's perceived attractiveness of an organization as a potential employer (Collins & Stevens, 2002). As a result, it is argued that the level of employer attractiveness should depend on the level of social influence, as stated in hypothesis one. The concept of the third-person effect states that "a person exposed to a persuasive communication in the mass media sees this as having a greater effect on others than on himself or herself" (Davison, 1983). In this case, social influence is regarded as the "persuasive communication". If the outcome expected by the third-person effect theory is present in this study, it would mean that when social influence is high, respondents will see the high social influence as having greater effect on others perception of the attractiveness of the employer, compared to their own. The following hypothesis is set out to test if this theoretical analysis hold up with the empirics in this experiment.

**H5a:** Positive social influence on social media results in an increased third person effect

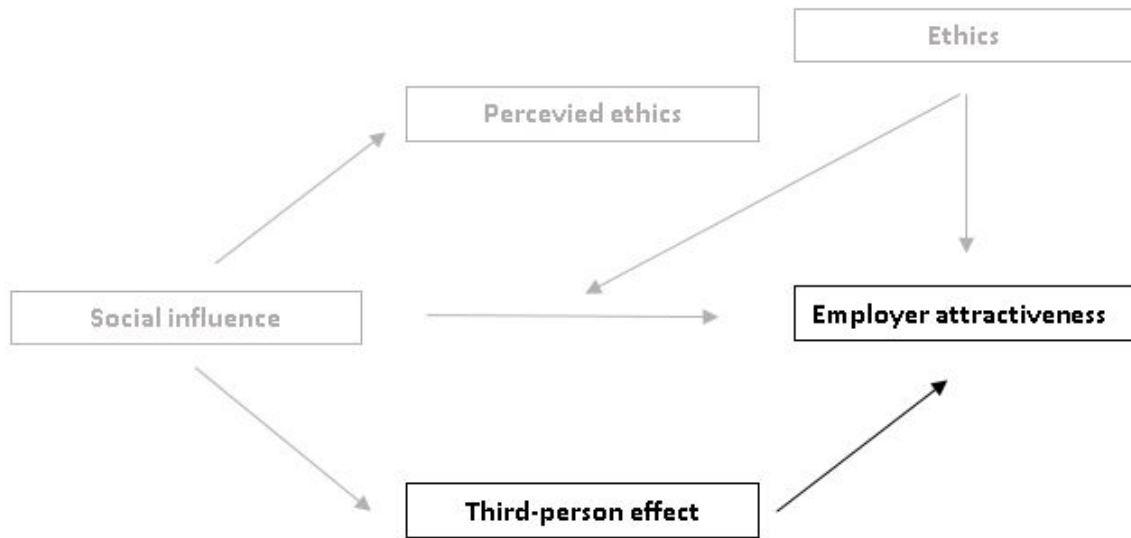
**Figure 5:** Hypothesis 5a



If hypothesis 5a above is accepted, it is also of great interest to analyze the potential effects increased third-person effect will in turn have on the employer attractiveness. Davison (1983) argues that receivers of persuasive communication expects the communication to have a larger impact on others, which leads to them taking some sort of action. Social identity theory suggests that individuals distance themselves from social groups that negatively reflect on their self-concept, and since the study includes weak ties not known to the respondent, the respondents might distance themselves from the endorsed employer. This would lead the third-person effect negatively affecting employer attractiveness.

**H5b:** An eventual third-person effect correlates negatively with the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer

**Figure 6:** Hypothesis 5b

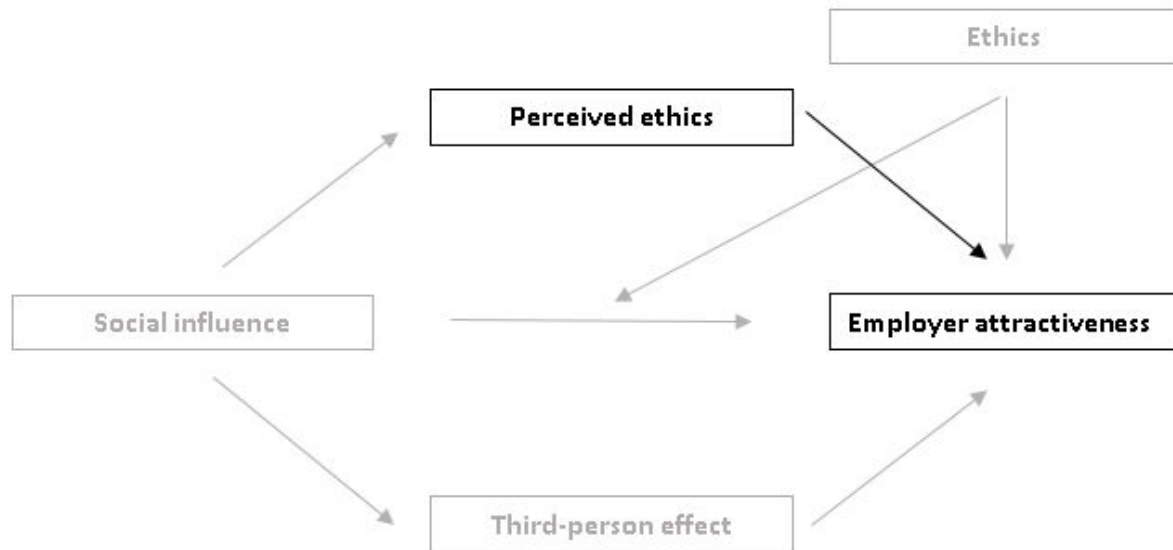


Turban and Greening (1996) have shown how corporate social responsibility is positively related to a company's reputation and attractiveness as an employer, and may serve as a competitive advantage in the war for talent. Furthermore, Albinger and Freeman (2000) describes how the correlation between corporate social responsibility and employer attractiveness is particularly strong among high-level workers. This implies that there are reasons to believe that, also in this study, there is a positive correlation between perceived ethics and the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer.

**H6:** Perceived ethics of the employer brand correlates positively with the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer



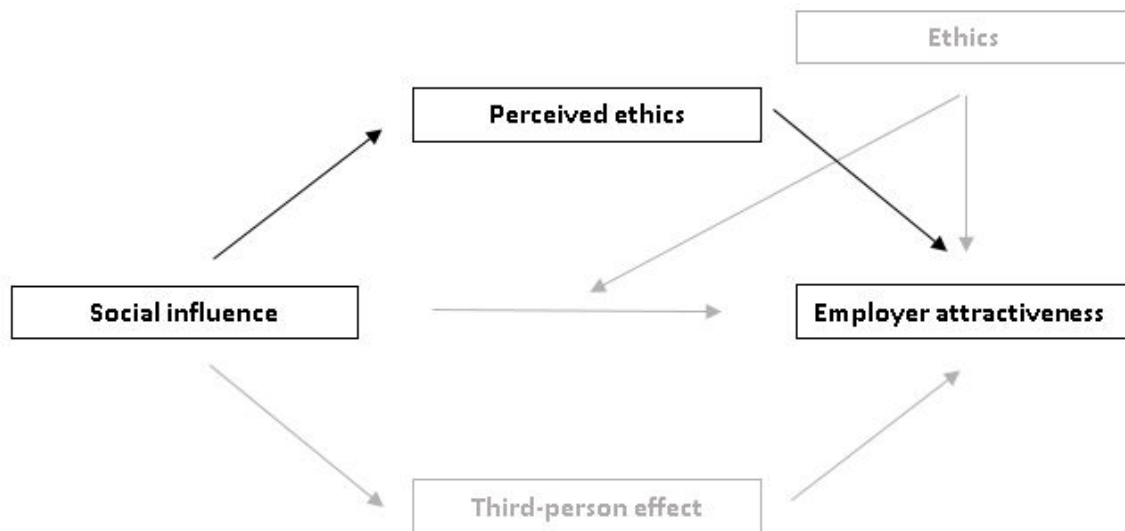
**Figure 7:** Hypothesis 6



As positive word of mouth positively relates to higher employer attractiveness, and since social media may be considered as “an extension of traditional word of mouth communication” (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), research suggests that positive social influence has a direct effect on the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer. However, studies have also shown how social influence impacts ethical decision making (Aronson et al., 2005), and that corporate social performance is positively related to a company's reputation and attractiveness as an employer. This implies that positive social influence, in addition to its direct effect, could have an indirect effect on the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer, mediated by perceived ethics.

**H7:** Perceived ethics of an employer brand mediates a positive indirect effect between positive social influence and the perceived attractiveness of a brand as an employer

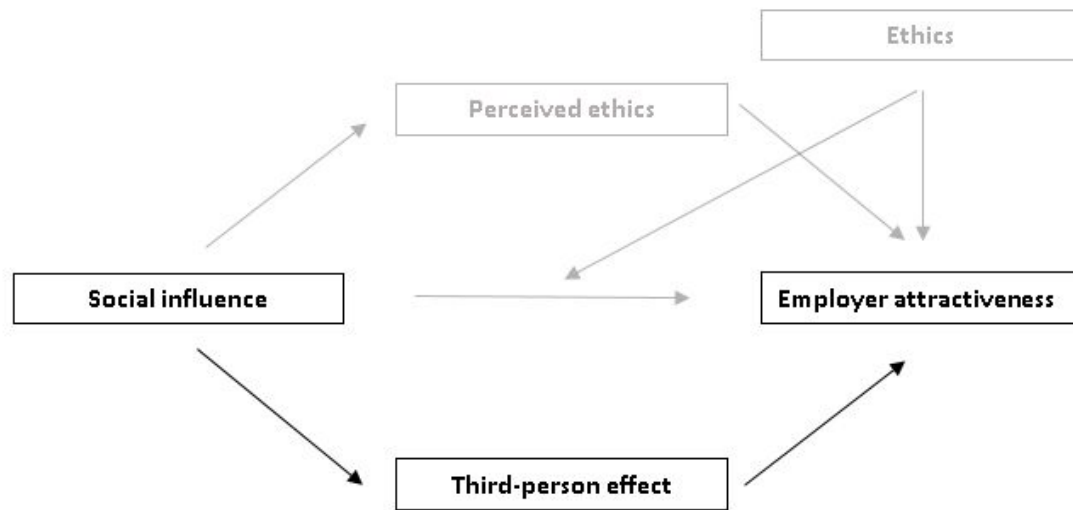
**Figure 8:** Hypothesis 7



Similarly, if H5a and H5b are accepted, the third-person effect can possibly mediate a negative indirect effect between social influence and the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer. This effect moves in the opposite direction from hypothesis seven since it generates a negative-, instead of positive, indirect effect.

**H8:** An eventual third person effect mediates a negative indirect effect between social influence on the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer

**Figure 9:** Hypothesis 8



### 3. Methodological Approach

The following section presents the methods and scientific approach for the pre- and main studies. The research design, reliability, validity and measures used in the main study will be discussed. Finally, the results from the Cronbach's alpha tests, conducted to ensure the validity and internal consistency of the measures will be reported and discussed.

#### 3.1 Purpose and Choice of Topic

Social media's adoption is constantly increasing around the world and have come to play a significant part of people's lives in the connected society. From a business perspective, it is important to understand how this shift in media consumption affects consumers and brands, to be able to successfully navigate the new landscape. Social medias and traditional medias are significantly different in that users on the former can interact with brands and advertisements, leading to potential alterations of the media message itself by visible social engagement. Given the large impact social influence has proved to have on people in other contexts, it is of utmost importance to research how social influence, or social media engagement, in the form of likes and comments affects consumers and employees on social media. Is it desirable to have users like and/or comment on a job advertisement or could it potentially be harmful for the employer attractiveness? Will likes and comments change the way other users perceive your company? Without knowing the answers to these questions, advertisers and employers will fall short in extracting maximum return on their social media investment.

This study will make a deep dive into these ideas in an experiment testing how ethics and social influence on social media affects perceived ethics and attractiveness of an employer brand.

### 3.2 Scientific Approach

The purpose of this study is to explore several potential effects and relationships to generate a set of managerial implications, which is why specific hypotheses and relationships between variables are tested conclusively and causally (Malhotra, 2010). More specifically it is tested how the causal variables (independent variables) of ethics and social influence affect a predefined set of dependent variables such as perceived ethics, brand ability, ad attitude and employer attractiveness. As the main method of causal research is experimentation (Malhotra, 2010), and since experimentation is typically performed through quantitative methods (Malhotra 2010; Söderlund 2010), this study executes a quantitative individualistic experiment based on a deductive research approach.

A deductive research approach best describes the procedure since expectations and hypotheses were developed by analysing existing academic theories and concepts, to then be analyzed empirically with the use of collected data (Bryman & Bell, 2011). It is important to keep the limitations of a deductive approach in mind when searching for theories and in formulation of hypotheses as the deductive thinking can lead to a bias where the authors are looking for information that aligns with the expected results. This downside of the employed scientific approach has been discussed by the authors and taken into consideration in the process of collecting and analysing academic theories and data to provide for an as unbiased view as possible.

An individualistic approach is suitable since data on a large sample of individuals was collected to then be analyzed to output collective behaviours and responses (Jacobsen et al., 2002). Data was collected with a mix of both paper based and online questionnaires in a quantitative format as respondents were presented with given response options. The quantitative format has a strong upside since it generates a data output in numbers that is easy to analyse with statistical methods to explore relationships and effects between variables. A limitation with quantitative-, compared to qualitative-, research methodology is

that the quantitative format offers less flexibility to tailor the analysis to the situation of the research object (Jacobsen et al., 2002), which was taken into consideration by the authors in the questionnaire design process.

### 3.3 Research Design

The study was conducted in two separate parts with first a pre-study and then a main study. The process and design of the two parts were similar as the primary purpose of the pre-study was to assure that the manipulation of stimuli was received correctly by the respondents, which the manipulation checks proved them to be. Both the pre-study and the main study were in the form of anonymous self-completing questionnaires, thus eliminating possible interviewer bias. All information and all questions were presented in English language.

#### 3.3.1 Selection of Social Media Platform

When determining the most suitable social media platform to conduct the experiment on, several factors such as size and social engagement compatibilities were taken into consideration before the decision was made. Size is an important factor since the larger the platform is in terms of number of users, brands and advertising spending, the larger possible managerial implications of the findings. With a larger size there is also a greater chance that the respondents are familiar with the platform in use to better understand the context to provide for more accurate results. The social media platform used in the experiment also needs to be a natural platform for the type of content (in-feed job advertisement) used in the study. Similarly, it needs to include measurable social engagement possibilities on posts to be able to host manipulations of the social influence stimuli. After consideration of these factors, Facebook was decided to be the most suitable social media platform to use in the experiment.

#### 3.3.2 Company- and Brand Creation

A fictional brand was created to assure the respondents did not have prior opinions about the brand strong enough to potentially outweigh the effect caused by the manipulation of the independent variables. This is particularly true for the manipulation of social influence as

Aronson et al. (2005) points out that social influence has a larger effect in situations where the object possesses less information. On the other hand, the use of a fictional brand also limits the managerial implications of the findings' applicability on well-known brands. The fictional brand named "LPK" was constructed to as closely as possible resemble a real global clothing brand for the study to generate as reliable results as possible. With LPK being a multinational clothing retailer it makes a great case for students as it provides interesting career opportunities post graduation. Therefore, much inspiration was retrieved from Acne and H&M in the brand creation process that finally resulted in the following company description used in the study:

*"LPK is an international fashion company that has more than 80 stores over the world including flagship stores in Stockholm, London, Paris, New York, and Tokyo. The company has an annual turnover of more than 240 MEUR and a total number of staff exceeding 900. LPK operate offices in Paris, Stockholm, New York and Tokyo, and is aiming at increasing their global presence even further. Furthermore, LPK is known to offer their employees attractive career opportunities with above industry average salaries and compensation packages. They are now looking to hire young business-driven people."*

The brand name "LPK", the logo, the picture in the post and the recruiting text were all constructed by the authors to look and feel as real as possible with inspiration from, once again, H&M and Acne. The picture used in the job advertisement was from a professional blogger and was suitable in a job advertisement for a clothing company as it was in high quality and consisted of fashionable jeans and shoes. The recruitment text "Join our growing team at LPK! We are looking for new graduates and interns for 2017!" was constructed to convey a positive feeling to make the employer seem attractive (see appendix for full job advertisement).

### 3.3.3 Stimuli Development

Ethics and social influence were the two stimuli manipulated in the study. Ethics was present in the form of a description of LPK's corporate social responsibility, in between the general company description presented in *section 3.3.3* and a Facebook in-feed job advertisement. The manipulation of the ethical stimulus was performed by altering the CSR

description to show high or low corporate social responsibility. To make the level of CSR the only difference between the manipulations, the length of the CSR description was kept constant between the two cases.

Ethical (High CSR) description:

*“LPK has recently been praised for their environmental consciousness and work against global warming. Furthermore, during 2015 LPK was nominated as one of the top companies in the clothing industry in providing good labor conditions and a safe work environment in their factories.”*

Unethical (Low CSR) description:

*“LPK has recently been criticized for working with factories not living up to the International Labour Standards. In addition, LPK has also received critique for promoting bad ideals, using seemingly unhealthy-thin female models in their advertising campaigns. “*

The second stimulus of social influence was present in the form of Facebook likes, shares and comments on the LPK in-feed Facebook job advertisement excerpt that followed the company- and CSR description. The manipulation of social influence was constructed by in one case excluding likes, comments and shares completely from the post whereas in the other case including 564,351 LPK brand likes, 3,500 likes post likes, 127 post shares and two visible positive comments. A lot of emphasis and designing efforts were dedicated to making the post (job advertisement) look as real as possible so that respondents would not detect that the likes, shares and comments were the means of stimuli, which in turn could affect dependent variables consciously instead of subconsciously. Similarly to the manipulation of the ethical stimulus, all other factors in the job-advertisement were kept constant.

In the company description, a few factors meant to impact the perceived employer attractiveness were included. This in order to increase the ambiguity of the situation in the unethical scenario. In other words, the ethical case included an ethical scenario and a company description containing positive traits driving employer attractiveness, while the unethical case include an unethical scenario and company description containing the same traits positively affecting the employer attractiveness. The employer traits included was *an*



*above average basic salary and an attractive overall compensation package*, whom are both proven to relate positively to the employer attractiveness (Berthon et al., 2005).

### 3.4 Pre-study

A pre-study was conducted in order to ensure that the manipulation of the ethics variable was noticed and operated properly, in other words that the cases in which the company was depicted as ethical and socially responsible was perceived as more ethical than the unethical scenario. Furthermore, the pre-study helped us assure that the questions were correctly understood, and the survey instructions adequate.

#### 3.4.1 Experimental Design

The main reasons for why a pre-study was conducted was to ensure that the manipulation check operated properly. The pre-study included a company description and a job advertisement on a social media platform, which was manipulated to either contain or not contain social influence, and to be perceived as either ethical or unethical. These manipulations formed the basis for four different test groups, exposed to different combinations of CSR (high/low) and social influence (high/low) (see figure 10).

**Figure 10:** Four Groups of Respondents in Pre-study

	Ethical (high CSR)	Unethical (low CSR)
No Social Influence	n: 9	n: 9
Social Influence	n: 9	n: 9

The pre-study did, in addition to asking questions to check effectiveness of the manipulations, contain question questions regarding *perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer*, and numerous questions to measure whether a potential third person effect existed.

### 3.4.2 Data Collection

The answers were collected at Stockholm School of Economics and the sample consisted of business students on a bachelor or master level. This may be described as a convenience sample with regard to the samples accessibility (Bryman & Bell, 2011). However, a student sample is suitable for our research as they are likely to soon apply for jobs (Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014).

The paper surveys were handed out and completed by students in the Stockholm School of Economics atrium. To ensure a random allocation of surveys, the four survey types were all put in one pile so that there was no way for the distributors of the surveys to know which respondent received which survey. Surveys were also distributed in chunks to multiple respondents at a time sitting at the same table, and then collected all together to make sure the respondents felt certain that the distributors did not know which survey was answered by which respondent to have respondents answer as honestly and truthfully as possible.

The sample consisted of a total of 36 respondents, with nine respondents in each group. Even though this may be considered a rather small sample, the size of the sample was found to be sufficient in order to test the effectiveness of the manipulations. Furthermore, our pre-test sample is to be considered relatively homogenous, which decreases the variation and, in turn, the necessity of a large sample (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

### 3.4.3 Analysis

In order to examine whether the manipulation of ethics operated properly, a mean analysis was conducted with the use of an independent samples t-test between the groups exposed to the different ethical manipulations (i.e. unethical- or ethical CSR description). The results showed how the perceived ethics was significantly higher ( $p < 0,01$ ) in the ethical (high CSR) scenario. In addition, an independent samples t-test showed that the test company's perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer was significantly higher ( $p < 0,01$ ) in the ethical scenario, and that a positive third-person effect did exist. However, this is of less

importance as these measures aimed to serve as preliminary indicators, rather than final evidence, due to the limited size of the sample.

### 3.5 Main Study

The follow sections will in greater detail explain and describe the experimental design, method for data collection, measures used, and statistical analysis of the main study.

#### 3.5.1 Experimental Design

Bryman and Bell (2011) describes how an experiment implies that different groups of respondents are exposed to different manipulations of certain independent variables. Furthermore, the concept entails that the respondents are randomly allocated to the different groups (Söderlund, 2010).

Having two different stimulus (i.e. ethics and social influence) our main study can be described as a four-cell experiment. The groups of respondents could either be exposed to a job advertisement containing social influence or no social influence, and a company description where the company was depicted as either ethical or unethical, resulting in four different test-groups (see Figure 11). However, our analysis did also include what can be described as a two cell analysis comparing the groups that were exposed to social influence compared to no social influence, and the groups that were exposed to an ethical company descriptions versus those that were exposed to an unethical company description.

#### 3.5.2 Data Collection

Similar to the pre-study, the main study sample consisted of university students on different levels. A student sample suits our study as many of the respondents are in the situation of soon applying for a job (Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014). The survey was successfully answered by 136 respondents, and were distributed as follows:

**Figure 11:** Four Groups of Respondents in Main Study

	<b>Ethical (high CSR)</b>	<b>Unethical (low CSR)</b>
<b>No Social Influence</b>	n: 31	n: 34
<b>Social Influence</b>	n: 37	n: 34

Surveys were distributed both in a paper version and electronically online. The paper surveys were handed out and completed by students in the Stockholm School of Economics atrium. To ensure a random allocation of surveys, the four survey types were all put in one pile so that there was no way for the distributors of the surveys to know which person received which survey. Surveys were also distributed in chunks to multiple respondents at a time sitting at the same table, and then collected all together to make sure the respondents felt certain that the distributors did not know which survey was answered by which respondent to have respondents answer as honestly and truthfully as possible.

The online questionnaire was 100% randomly distributed with the help of a Qualtrics randomizer set-up to ensure respondents were not systematically presented with a specific questionnaire. The link with the randomized questionnaire was sent out in private Facebook messages to students in the authors' social networks and in Facebook student groups connected to the Stockholm School of Economics.

In order to ensure the accuracy of the data analysis each group contained more than 30 respondents. Also in this study (compare with pre-study) the sample may be considered as relatively homogenous which decreases the necessity of a large sample size (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Furthermore, the respondents were randomly allocated to the four different groups, which implies that individual differences between respondents will cancel each other out (Söderlund, 2010).

### 3.5.3 Measures

The following section aims at explaining what measures were used in order to test the different variables. All measures were either taken directly, or developed from, well-established existing literature from their respective areas.

#### 3.5.3.1 Employer Attractiveness

In order to measure the *perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer*, a three item seven point likert scale was used (1 = Do not agree/7 = Agree completely): *For me LPK would be a great place to work*, *A job at LPK is very appealing to me*, and *LPK is attractive to me as a place for employment*. This scale is well established in the employer branding literature, and was initially used by Highhouse et al. (2003), and in turn by, for example, Rosengren & Bondesson (2014). Furthermore, we chose to, as Rosengren & Bondesson, use the three items with the highest factor loadings. Cronbach's alpha was a satisfying 0,952 between the items.

#### 3.5.3.2 Perceived Ethics

The measure was developed with the aid of Valentine & Fleischman's (2008) scale for corporate social responsibility, which they measure on a seven point likert scale, and Reidenbach & Robin's (1990) ethics scale development in which they use a seven point likert scale anchored with ethical/unethical. By combining these two scales and scale development processes, perceived ethics was measured using a two-item seven point likert scale (1 = Do not agree/7 = Agree completely) with the statements "*I perceive LPK as ethical*" and "*I perceive LPK as socially responsible*". Cronbach's alpha showed a satisfying 0,949 between the items.

#### 3.5.3.3 Employer Perception

The *Perception of the brand as an employer* was measured in line with Rosengren and Bondesson's (2014) measuring, by asking to what extent the respondents agreed with the statement *LPK offers good development prospects for its employees* (1 = Do not agree/7 = Agree completely). This measure was used by Berthon et al. (2005), and similar to

Rosengren and Bondesson, the factor that had the strongest overall influence on employer attractiveness was used.

#### 3.5.3.4 Third-Person Effects (TPE)

The third-person effect, described in more detail in section 2.2.2, states that receivers of advertising believe that the advertising message has a bigger impact on others than on themselves. To measure this concept in this study, it was tested whether respondents on average believed that others would be more inclined to work at LPK, or perceived LPK as a more attractive employer, than the respondents did themselves. If respondents on average believe that this is the case, after having looked at a job advertisement from LPK, it is argued that a third-person-effect is indeed present. Two different measures were used to test whether this type of third-person effect was present in the study.

#### 3.5.3.5 Employer Attractiveness Others

First, the third-person effect was investigated by measuring whether the respondents perceived others as more attracted to the brand as an employer, using the same three item, seven point likert scale (1=do not agree/7=Agree totally), used to measure the respondents' *perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer*. However, in order to measure how the respondents believed other students' *perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer* the questions were changed accordingly: *Other students perceive LPK as good place to work, Other students perceive a job at LPK as very appealing, and Other students perceive LPK as an attractive place for employment*. With one measure for the respondent's own employer attractiveness, and this measure for the respondent's perceived employer attractiveness of others, a new variable was constructed with the difference of the two (the latter minus the former). The new variable, named *TPE attractiveness*, shows whether the third person effect is present measured in terms of employer attractiveness. If TPE attractiveness is zero or close to zero, it would imply that there is no third-person effect, and if it has a high value it would imply a large third-person effect. A one-sample t-test showed that the mean of TPE attractiveness ( $=0,576$ ) was significantly different from zero ( $p<0,01$ ), implying that TPE attractiveness exists.

**Figure 12:** TPE attractiveness

$$TPE\ attractiveness = Employer\ attractiveness\ others - Employer\ attractiveness$$

#### 3.5.3.6 Employer Perception Others

The second measure for a potential third-person effect was investigated with the use of the measure for employer perception. The same one item, seven point likert scale, used to measure the respondent's *perception of the brand as an employer* was used to in this case measure the respondent's belief about other students' perceptions. The measure was changed accordingly: *Others students believe LPK offers good development prospects for its employees* (1 = Do not agree/7 = Agree completely) Similarly to the construction of the new variable TPE attractiveness above, a new variable was constructed to measure the difference between employer perception others and employer perception (self). The new variable, named *TPE perception*, shows whether the third person effect is present measured in terms of employer perception. If TPE perception is zero or close to zero, it would imply that there is no third-person effect, and if it has a high value it would imply a large third-person effect. A one-sample t-test showed that the mean of TPE perception (=0,228) was significantly different from zero ( $p < 0,05$ ), implying that TPE perception is in force.

**Figure 13:** TPE perception

$$TPE\ perception = Employer\ perception\ others - Employer\ perception$$

#### 3.5.3.7 Manipulation Check

The measure for *perceived ethics* described in section 3.5.3.2 was also used as a manipulation check for ethics as an independent variable. The manipulation check showed

that the perceived ethics was indeed higher in the ethical compared to the unethical condition ( $M_{\text{ethical}} = 4,95$  vs  $M_{\text{unethical}} = 2,66$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ).

#### 3.5.4 Analytical Tools

All statistical analyses were performed using the statistical program IBM® SPSS® (version 23). The online questionnaires were directly imported from the online survey tool Qualtrics and data from the paper surveys were put into SPSS manually. A significance level of 5% (0,05) were used for all tests.

The hypotheses 1, 3 and 4 all test an individual independent variable's causal effect on one single dependent variable. In this case, it is interesting to test if there are any significant differences between the means of the two groups. To test these hypotheses, means were compared with the use of an independent samples t-test. In a similar way, the manipulation of ethical and unethical was tested with the use of an independent sample t-test to compare the means between the groups on the dependent variable of perceived ethics.

Since there are two categorical independent variables in the experiment (ethics and social influence), which results in four study groups, it is also of interest to run a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA). The two-way ANOVA tests the main effects of the two independent variables separately (similar to the independent samples t-test), but can also show if there are any significant interaction effects between the two independent variables. If an interaction effect is present, the effect one of the independent variables has on an dependent variable depends on the level of the other independent variable. A two-way ANOVA was performed in order to investigate hypothesis two. However, in order to run a two-way ANOVA, a few assumptions first have to be met.



**Figure 14:** Assumptions for Performing a Two-Way Anova

<p><b>Assumption #1:</b> The dependent variable is measured at a continuous level (i.e. interval or ratio)</p>	<p><b>Assumption is met:</b> For all dependent variables a seven-point likert scale was used.</p>
<p><b>Assumption #2:</b> The independent variables each consist of two or more categorical, independent groups</p>	<p><b>Assumption is met:</b> Both in the case of social influence and ethics there were two categorical and independent groups.</p>
<p><b>Assumption #3:</b> Independent variables, meaning that there is no relationship between the observations in each group or between the groups themselves.</p>	<p><b>Assumption is met:</b> There was no relationship between the observations in each group or between the group themselves.</p>
<p><b>Assumption #4:</b> There are no significant outliers.</p>	<p><b>Assumption is met:</b> As all questions were binary or measured with a seven-point scale no significant outliers are presumed to exist.</p>
<p><b>Assumption #5:</b> The dependent variable is approximately normally distributed</p>	<p><b>Assumption is met:</b> Each group consisted of more than 30 respondents, meaning normal distribution could be assumed.</p>
<p><b>Assumption #6:</b> The variances for each combination of the groups of the two independent variables are homogenous.</p>	<p><b>Assumption is met:</b> The result of Levene's test (<math>p=0,327&gt;0,05</math>) implied that homogeneity could be assumed.</p>

To assess hypothesis 5a independent sample t-tests were conducted. The following two hypotheses, 5b and 6, are both concerned with the relationship between two dependent variables, respectively. These relationships are tested with the use of a bivariate (pearson) correlation analysis in SPSS with a significance level of 5%. The correlation output shows a correlation coefficient between -1 and 1 where the variables can be either positively or negatively correlated, or not correlated if the correlation coefficient is close to zero.

Hypotheses 7 and 8 are testing possible mediator relationships that lie in between the independent variable of social influence and the dependent variable of employer attractiveness. A mediation model is employed to identify possible mechanisms that can explain the relationship between the independent variable and the dependent variable by including a third variable, known as the mediator (perceived ethics in H7 and third-person effect in H8). Instead of the independent variable causally affecting the dependent variable, it is possible that the independent variable affects the mediating variable that in turn affects

the dependent variable, which this mediator model is set out to test. In this study two different mediators are proposed to underlie the same relationship between social influence and employer attractiveness, but with different pathways (see figure 9).

In order to test these two mediation hypotheses statistically the PROCESS plug-in for SPSS, developed by Andrew F. Hayes, was installed (version 2.16). The PROCESS plug-in is estimating direct and indirect effects, in this case with a single mediator model, using an ordinary least squares or logistic regression-based path analytic framework. Bootstrap confidence intervals were implemented for inference about indirect effects, including different measures for the sizes of the effects. The number of bootstrap samples for bias corrected bootstrap confidence intervals was set to 5000.

### 3.6 Data Quality

The concepts of reliability and validity helps to evaluate quantitative research's data quality (Bryman and Bell, 2011). Reliability is described as "the extent to which a scale produces consistent results if repeated measurements are made" (Malhotra, 2010). Validity refers to "whether or not a measure that is devised of a concept really does reflect the concept that it is supposed to be denoting" (Bryman & Bell, 2011).

#### 3.6.1 Reliability

The reliability of a study is best described as "whether the results of the study are repeatable" (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Multi-item scales measuring the same construct were used to increase the reliability of the dependent variables, in similar to Söderlund's (2010) approach. The internal consistency of the variables were tested with Cronbach's alpha, which indeed ensured high reliability for all constructs. The online questionnaire was 100% randomly distributed with the help of a Qualtrics randomizer set-up to ensure respondents were not systematically presented with some specific questionnaire.

### 3.6.2 Validity

In research experiments, internal validity refers to whether the experimental treatments actually caused the effects on the dependent variables (Malhotra, 2010). As a result, manipulations of the two stimulus were carefully performed to minimize the risk that other confounding variables would account for differences in the measured results. Except for the manipulations, all other content was kept identical between the questionnaires such as brand name, logo, picture, text, text length, font style etcetera. A manipulation control was also included to make sure the manipulation of the ethical/unethical stimuli was in fact interpreted by the respondents, which it significantly proved to be ( $p < 0,01$ ).

Measurement validity refers to “whether or not a measure that is devised of a concept really does reflect the concept that it is supposed to be denoting” (Bryman & Bell, 2011). To ensure measurement validity, mainly well-established measures used by existing literature were used to measure effects on the dependent variables.

External validity refers to "whether the cause-and effect relationships found in the experiment can be generalized" (Malhotra, 2010). Students from several universities in the country, and not only Stockholm School of Economics, were included in the study to make the findings more generalizable across schools and regions. The significance level used when analysing the results also impacts the external validity of the results as a lower significance level increases the generalizability of the findings. This study employs 5% as the accepted significance level but allows a 10% significance level to be the grounds for discussion as it can still show relevant findings although with a poorer external validity (Jacobsen, 2002). On the other hand, the use of a fictional company together with the size and type of the company somewhat limits the external validity.

At last, ecological validity “is concerned with the question of whether or not social scientific findings are applicable to people’s everyday, natural, social settings” (Bryman & Bell, 2011). The experiment was conducted through a questionnaire, that also included an excerpt

from a social media cut out of its natural context, which could affect the ecological validity of the experiment. These concerns were taken into consideration in the stimuli construction process to make it as real-life resembling as possible and to make the content to look natural and genuine.

## 4. Empirical Findings

The study included 137 respondents, of which one was excluded for not fulfilling the whole questionnaire. The main study was conducted in order to examine our research question:

*Does weak tie social influence on social media impact perceived employer attractiveness and is this relationship affected by the level of ethics?*

### 4.1 Manipulation Check

In order to ensure that the manipulation of the company's ethics and CSR was noticed the respondents were asked to what extent they perceived the company as ethical and socially responsible. An independent samples t-test, between the group exposed to an ethical (high CSR) or unethical (low CSR) company description, showed that *perceived ethics* was significantly higher in the group exposed to an ethical (high CSR) company description ( $M_{\text{ethical}} = 4,95$  vs  $M_{\text{unethical}} = 2,66$ ,  $p < 0,01$ ). This shows that the manipulation operated properly.

### 4.2 Descriptive Statistics

The manipulations of the two independent variables resulted in four different test groups. Descriptive statistics of the results from the four groups showed that the *perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer* was higher in the groups exposed to an ethical company description, than those exposed to an unethical one. Furthermore, the groups exposed to job advertisements that included social influence showed higher values on *TPE attractiveness* and *TPE perception*. This may be a logical consequence of that the social influence, in the form of likes, comments, and shares serve as an indicator that the company is highly rated among other people in the terms of employer attractiveness and perception. The descriptive statistics are summarized below.

**Figure 15:** Descriptive statistics Employer Attractiveness

	Ethical		Unethical	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Social influence</b>	4,33	1,68	3,28	1,36
<b>No social influence</b>	4,37	1,56	3,97	1,72

**Figure 16:** Descriptive statistics TPE attractiveness

	Ethical		Unethical	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Social influence</b>	0,62	1,55	0,98	1,73
<b>No social influence</b>	0,35	1,23	0,32	1,64

**Figure 17:** Descriptive statistics TPE perception

	Ethical		Unethical	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
<b>Social influence</b>	0,51	1,17	0,41	1,48
<b>No social influence</b>	0,16	0,93	-0,21	1,32

### 4.3 Assessing the Hypotheses

The main study consists of eight main hypotheses, which were assessed using a wide set of analytical tools such as independent samples t-test, two-way ANOVA, bivariate correlation analysis, and mediation analysis.

Hypothesis 1 was investigated by performing an independent samples t-test, in order to measure whether the means were significantly differing and if a main effect existed. The test showed how *positive social influence* did not have a significant effect on *the perceived*

*attractiveness of the brand as an employer* ( $M_{\text{social influence}} = 3,83$  vs  $M_{\text{no social influence}} = 4,16$ ,  $p=0,243>0,05$ ).

For hypothesis 2, a two-way ANOVA was conducted in order to investigate whether there was an interaction effect between the level of *ethics* in the CSR description and the *positive social influence*, with regard to the *perceived attractiveness of an employer*. The result of the two-way ANOVA showed that there was no significant interaction effect between level of *ethics* and *positive social influence* ( $p=0,233>0,05$ ).

Also hypotheses 3, 4 and 5a were investigated by performing independent samples t-tests, in order to measure whether the means were significantly differing and if main effects existed. In the case of hypothesis 3, an independent samples t-test was conducted to examine whether *social influence* had a main effect on *perceived ethics*. In the case of hypothesis 4 and 5a, independent samples t-tests were conducted in order to investigate if *positive social influence* had a main effect on *perceived ethics* and the *third person effect*.

In the case of hypothesis 3 an independent samples t-test showed that *positive social influence* did have a significant main effect on *perceived ethics* ( $M_{\text{social influence}} = 4,17$  vs  $M_{\text{no social influence}} = 3,42$ ,  $p<0,05$ ). Furthermore, higher ethics had a positive impact on *perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer* ( $M_{\text{ethical}} = 4,35$  vs  $M_{\text{unethical}} = 3,63$ ,  $p<0,01$ ). Moreover, the third person effect was measured by two variables (*TPE attractiveness* and *TPE perception*). Performing an independent samples t-test between the groups in which job advertisement did include social influence versus did not include social influence, showed that social influence had a significant positive effect on *TPE Perception* ( $M_{\text{social influence}} = 0,465$  vs  $M_{\text{no social influence}} = -0,031$ ,  $p<0,05$ ), and a marginally significant effect on *TPE Attractiveness* ( $M_{\text{social influence}} = 0,793$  vs  $M_{\text{no social influence}} = 0,339$ ,  $p<0,10$ ), which proved to be in line with the formulated hypotheses.

After performing independent sample t-tests in order to investigate whether the means of the different groups were significantly differing it was concluded that empirical support was found for hypotheses 3, 4, and 5a, while no empirical support was found for hypothesis 1. Moreover, a two-way ANOVA showed that there is no interaction effect between the level of ethics and social influence, with regard to the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer. As a result, hypotheses 3, 4 and 5a were accepted while hypothesis 1 and 2 were rejected. The results are summarized in Figure 18.

**Figure 18:** Results on hypotheses 1-5a

<b>Hypothesis 1:</b> Positive social influence on social media impacts positively on the attractiveness of a brand as an employer	<b>Rejected</b>
<b>Hypothesis 2:</b> Ethics moderate the relationship between positive social influence on social media and the attractiveness of a brand as an employer	<b>Rejected</b>
<b>Hypothesis 3:</b> Positive social influence on social media impacts positively on the perceived ethics of an employer brand	<b>Accepted</b>
<b>Hypothesis 4:</b> Higher ethics impacts positively on the attractiveness of the brand as an employer	<b>Accepted</b>
<b>Hypothesis 5a:</b> Positive social influence on social media results in an increased third person effect	<b>Accepted</b>

In conclusion, mean analysis provided empirical support for the hypotheses that *positive social influence on social media* impacts positively on the *perceived ethics of the employer brand* (H3), *higher ethics* impacts positively on the *perceived attractiveness of the brand as a potential employer* (H4), and *social influence* results in a *third person effect* (H5a).



However, the mean analysis showed no empirical support for the hypothesis that *positive social influence on social media* impacts positively on the *attractiveness of the brand as a potential employer* (H1), which results in the hypothesis being rejected.

#### 4.3.1 Correlation Analysis

Hypotheses 5b and 6 were tested by performing a bivariate correlation analysis in order to measure to what extent the *third person effect* and the *perceived ethics* correlates with the *perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer*, and if this correlation is significant. The bivariate correlation analysis showed how *TPE Attractiveness* (-0,672,  $p < 0,05$ ), and *TPE Perception* (-0,267,  $p < 0,05$ ) correlated negatively with the *perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer*. However, the correlation analysis showed a significantly positive relationship between *perceived ethics* and the *perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer* (0,469,  $p < 0,05$ ). The results from the correlation analysis thus provided empirical support for both hypotheses 5b and 6. As a results, both the hypothesis that *a third person effect* correlates negatively with the *perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer* (H5b), and that *perceived ethics* correlates positively with the *perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer* (H6) were accepted. The findings are summarized in Figure 19.

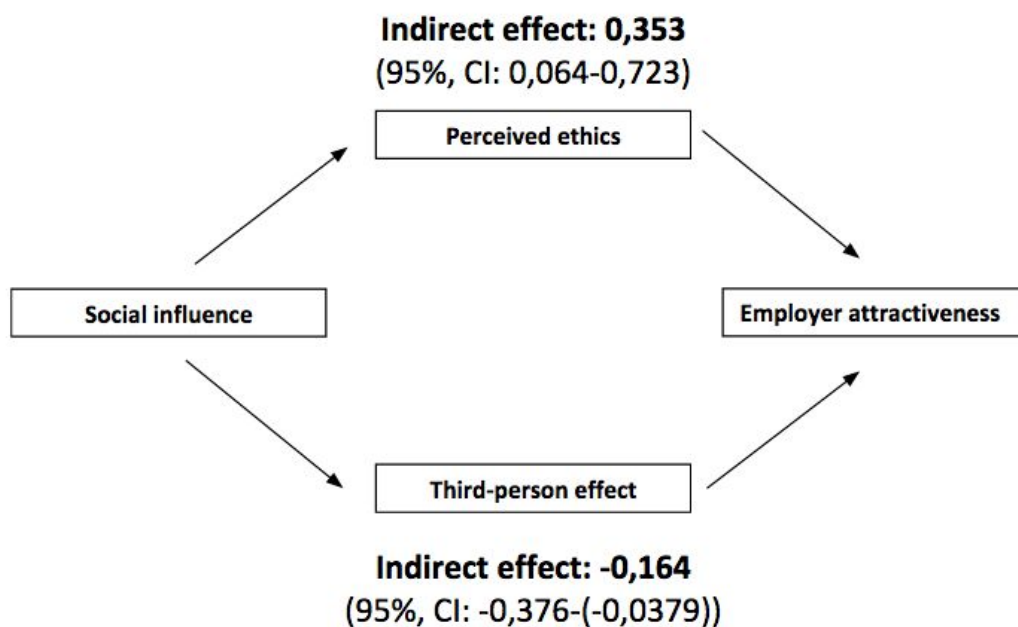
**Figure 19:** Results on hypotheses 5b and 6.

<b>Hypothesis 5b:</b>  An eventual third-person effect correlates negatively with the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer	<b>Accepted</b>
<b>Hypothesis 6:</b>  Perceived ethics of the employer brand correlates positively with the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer	<b>Accepted</b>

#### 4.3.2 Mediation Analysis

The mediation effects of *perceived ethics* and *third person effects*, aimed at clarifying the relationship between social influence and employer attractiveness, were examined by performing a mediation analysis using the Preacher-Hayes approach (cf. Rosengren & Bondesson, 2014). The analysis showed how *perceived ethics* indeed mediated the relationship between social influence and employer attractiveness with a mean indirect effect of 0,353 (95%, CI: 0,064-0,723). The mediation analysis for *third-person effects* showed how *TPE perception* also significantly mediated the relationship with a mean indirect effect of -0,164 (95%, CI: -0,376-(-0,0379)). The mean indirect effect of *TPE attractiveness* showed a marginally significant mean indirect effect of -0,319 (90%, CI: -0,639-(-0,012)). Figure 20 below illustrates the results produced in the mediation analysis.

**Figure 20:** Results from mediation analysis



The results show how higher social influence leads to higher perceived ethics, and higher perceived ethics in turn leads to higher employer attractiveness, which calls for the acceptance of Hypothesis 7. On the other hand, higher social influence leads to a larger

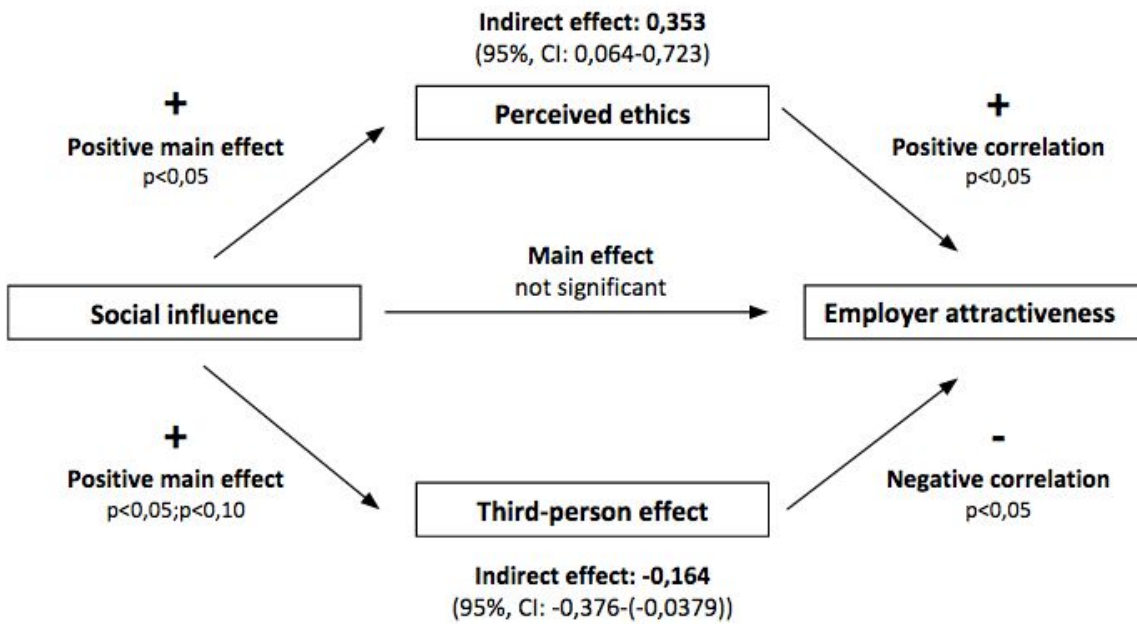
third-person effect, and a larger third-person effect in turn leads to lower employer attractiveness, thus resulting in the acceptance of Hypothesis 8. Figure 21 below summarizes results from hypotheses 7 and 8.

**Figure 21:** Results on hypotheses 7 and 8.

<b>Hypothesis 7:</b>  Perceived ethics of an employer brand mediates a positive indirect effect between positive social influence and the perceived attractiveness of a brand as an employer	<b>Accepted</b>
<b>Hypothesis 8:</b>  An eventual third person effect mediates a negative indirect effect between social influence on the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer	<b>Accepted</b>

The fact that the two mediator variables tested are positively affected by social influence, but in turn affects employer attractiveness in different directions, is in this case a reasonable and expected outcome since the total effect of social influence on employer attractiveness is not significant in any direction. A concluding illustration of the results are presented in Figure 22 below.

**Figure 22:** Overview of results and relationships



## 5. Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to examine to what extent the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer is affected by weak ties social influence on social media. Furthermore, it was investigated whether weak ties social influence also affected the perceived ethics of the company, and in turn, if the perceived ethics mediated the effect of social influence on the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer. It was also hypothesized that social influence would increase the third person effect, and that this possibly could have a negative impact on the perceived attractiveness of the employer, and that also the third person effect served as a mediator of the social influences impact on the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer. To conclude, hypotheses 1 and 2 were rejected, while the rest of the hypotheses (3, 4, 5a, 5b, 6, 7 and 8) were accepted.

This implies that, in contrast to parts of the literature regarding social influence, weak ties social influence on social media may indeed help people to form opinions. In other words, weak ties may serve as a strong enough source of informational social influence. Social influence did also result in an increase of the third person effect that negatively correlates with the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer, thus making the effect of weak ties social influence two-folded. On one hand, it seems to serve as a source of information in order to form opinions, which in this study result in an indirect increase of the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer, mediated through an increase of the perceived ethics of the company. On the other hand, the weak tie social influence seems to increase the third person effect, which negatively correlates with the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer. However, positive social influence did not have a stronger impact in the unethical scenario as hypothesized, even though it may be considered a situation with higher uncertainty and thereby ambiguity regarding what is to be considered an appropriate behavior or opinion, in comparison to the ethical scenario.

The following sections will in greater detail analyze our main findings and how they relate to current research within the field.

### 5.1 The Impact of Social Influence on Employer Attractiveness

The study examined how social influence, in the form of weak tie positive engagement on a job advertisement on social media, would affect the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer. It was hypothesized that increased social influence would positively impact the employer attractiveness, which is in line with the majority of the previous literature in the field (cf Collins & Stevens, (2002); Liden & Parson, (1986); Van Hoya & Lievens, (2007)). Furthermore, it was hypothesized that ethics moderates the relationship between social influence and employer attractiveness. According to Aronson et al. (2005) the ambiguity of a situation is an important determinant of to what extent people will conform to informational social influence. In other words, higher uncertainty regarding what is to be considered an appropriate behavior or opinion, tend to makes us more open to influence from others. A critical difference between this study and previous studies regarding social influence and employer attractiveness, is that the majority of the existing literature is concerned with social influence in the from strong ties (family, friends etc), while this study instead focuses on social influence with weak ties on social media.

The results generated by the study showed that social influence by weak ties on social media could not significantly impact the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer, and that positive social influence did not have a significantly stronger impact in an unethical scenario. Why is it the case that the results in this study fail to accept the hypothesis that was developed to be in line with previous research? While there are several possible explanations to that question, the most likely ones are probably connected to the fact that this experiment is conducted on social media and that it uses weak ties instead of strong ties.

A user active on a large social media network, such as Facebook, will be exposed to a large quantity of likes, comments and shares by other users since all content can be engaged with.

This can result in that each engagement (comment, like or share), will have a lower impact on the user in terms of social influence because there are so many of them, which could be a possible explanation to why social influence on social media in this experiment fails to make the respondent act upon it.

Secondly, in this study the engagement on the job advertisement was from random Facebook users, making them weak-ties not connected to the respondent in any way. According to Brown & Reingen (1987), weak ties have less impact on the actions of the recipient, compared to strong ties social influence. However, research from Steffes & Burgee (2009) suggests otherwise by stating that weak ties can in fact have a larger social influence than strong ties in certain situations. This schism is particularly interesting in this study since the type of social influence generated is likely dependent on the strength of the ties. Weak ties can be regarded as a source of informational social influence since the respondent lacks a personal connection to the ties and would only use them for increasing their own informational knowledge. Strong tie influence on social media, on the other hand, can be regarded as a source of both informational- and normative social influence. The normative part comes into play since respondents would possibly want to conform in order to get accepted by others, since “others” in that case are strong ties to which the respondents have an actual relationship. The results could thus have been different if the experiment had included strong ties, but not only because strong ties are more trustworthy as research suggests, but also because of the induced pressure social influence has on behavioural conformity.

## 5.2 The Two-folded Role of Ethics

The stimuli of ethics was manipulated by including two different descriptions of the company. One ethical with high CSR and one unethical with low CSR. The manipulation check showed that respondents interpreted the company as less ethical with the low CSR description and as more ethical with the high CSR description. In turn, the independent variable of ethics significantly impacted the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an

employer. Higher ethics, or higher CSR, resulted in higher attractiveness than lower ethics (lower CSR). These results are in line with Turban & Greening's (1996) findings and support the existing literature in the field (cf Albinger & Freeman 2000).

Secondly, the study showed how the perceived ethics of the brand as an employer in fact significantly depended on the independent variable of social influence. High social influence on the post resulted in the employer being perceived as more ethical and socially responsible, compared to the case without social influence. While this finding naturally has big implications in itself, it is also particularly interesting in this study since the social influence was in the form of weak ties on social media. As discussed above, such ties would probably only be able to convey an informational type of social influence as the social distance would be too far to hold translation of the normative part. The fact that likes, comments and shares from random Facebook users would make respondents perceive the company in the advertisement as more ethical and socially responsible is very interesting, but perhaps also alarming.

Previous studies, both in lab experiments and from real life studies, have shown how social influence affects ethical decision-making by successfully influencing subjects to conduct noxious unethical actions in certain situations (Aronson et al., 2005). These experiments not only differ in their type of social influence, but also in that they impact actual decision-making under pressure, and not the perceived ethics of that decision, which would be more similar to the variable of perceived ethics measured in this study.

A possible explanation to why social influence affected the perceived ethics of the company is that the likes, comments and shares holds information that implicitly tells the respondent that the company is a good company. But what is it in these likes, comments and shares that gives the respondent such hints since the engagement in itself only contains positive sentiment and no actual information? It seems straightforward that positive engagement signals that other users find the employer likeable and attractive, but not necessarily ethical.



The findings in this case implies that the respondents must assume that other users on social media have a positive attitude towards ethical companies, and by them engaging with the job advertising with positive sentiment, the company is indeed ethical and socially responsible.

It was hypothesized that social influence would affect employer attractiveness (rejected) and perceived ethics (accepted), and that perceived ethics could be a mediator to the relationship between social influence and employer attractiveness. The results tell us that there is no relationship between social influence and employer attractiveness, which could raise a question of what there is for perceived ethics to mediate. On the other hand, the fact that social influence affected perceived ethics positively, and that perceived ethics in turn affected employer attractiveness positively, suggests that social influence should have impacted employer attractiveness positively (everything else equal), which did not prove to be the case. Similarly, the mediation analysis indeed showed that perceived ethics significantly mediated the relationship between social influence and employer attractiveness. While these results, with perceived ethics significantly mediating an insignificant relationship, might seem strange at first further analysis down the road showed how the third-person effect would intervene in this causal relationship to work in an opposite direction to provide for a logical explanation.

### 5.3 The Third-Person Effect as Explanatory Variable

The statistical analysis showed that the third person effect did correlate negatively with the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer, and that the third person effect was indeed higher in the situations where the job advertisement did include social influence in the form of likes, comments, and shares. This implies that the third person effect would serve as a mediator of the effects of social influence on the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer, which was confirmed with the acceptance of final mediation hypothesis.

According to Davison (1983) “a person exposed to a persuasive communication in mass media sees this as having a greater effect on others than on himself or herself”. In this case, the social influence in itself is regarded as being a part of the “persuasive communication”, which makes it being a driver of an increased third-person effect. Moreover, Dahlen et al. (2013) describes how the third person effect involves both a perceptual element, defined as “beliefs that a message affects others more than oneself”, and a behavioral element, defined as “actions based on such anticipation”. Furthermore, social identity theory argues that individuals distance themselves from social groups that negatively reflect on their self-concept. As the social influence in the case of this experiment stems from weak ties, who are influencers that are unknown to the respondents, the respondents seems to react by distancing themselves from the unknown influencers and thereby also from the employer. Notice how this is visible only through the mediation analysis, as there is no significant total effect between social influence and employer attractiveness.

These findings may have several possible explanations. The study showed that social influence resulted in higher levels of third person effect than when no social influence was included. This may be explained by that the social influence serves as proof of that “third persons” indeed have a positive view of the company. Even though visible social influence may support the idea that the view of the company among other people is positive, this does not necessarily result in that the respondent adapt a similar view and increases the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer. Why? A possible explanation is because the social influence stems from weak tie relationships. These weak tie social influencers do not necessarily belong to a social group that relates positively to the self-concept of the respondent. It was hypothesized that the social influence should negatively correlate with the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer, as the group of social influencers were unknown to the respondent, and part of a social media herd that may not reflect positively on the self-concept of the respondent. In other words, social influence is not always beneficial in itself, but relying on the social identity of each individual. In order to achieve the desirable and positive effects of social influence this study implies that the

social influence should either stem from people within a social group that positively relates to the self-concept of the respondent, or from strong-ties relationships (that probably relate positively to the self-concept), which is proven to have more impact on individuals' actual attitudes and behaviors. However, these are questions that need to be further analyzed in order to be able to fully understand the dynamics of social influence and the third person effect that follows.

To conclude, weak-ties social influence on social media seem to have certain positive effects (e.g. perceived ethics of a company), but also a negative indirect effect that is mediated by the belief that others have a more positive perception of the company, which makes the respondent find it less attractive as an employer.

#### 5.4 Theoretical Conclusion

The study first showed how social influence did not impact the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer, which was one of the main hypotheses. If this would have been the only analysis conducted, the results of the study would have suggested that weak ties social influence on social media does not have an impact. With a few more tests and hypotheses, however, it was proven how this type of influence did in fact affect other variables such as perceived ethics and the size of the third-person effect, and how those variables in turn directly affected and indirectly mediated, the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer. The findings tell us that the concept of social influence, when put in weak ties on social media, will have many different effects on many different variables that can pull results in different directions, thus making fully generalizable conclusions hard to produce. The findings in this study instead adds to the literature that weak ties social influence can affect behaviors and opinions, which calls for more extensive research to be made on the area to generate a clearer picture of the explored relationships.

#### 5.5 Managerial Implications

The findings of this study provides a wide set of implications for business- and marketing managers. With the increasingly important role of social media in the marketing budget, and

since social influence is an involuntary part of the advertising message, it is crucial to understand the dynamics between social media advertising and (weak ties) social influence. This is particularly important in social media recruitment activities and employer branding as the war for talents implies that employing the right talent may serve as an important competitive advantage. The main findings of this study is that social influence did not have a significant effect on the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer, but that the effect of social influence is mediated through an increase in the perceived ethics of an employer, and an increase in third person effects.

One core implication of the findings is that it is possible to improve the perception of a company, at least in terms of its ethics, by purchasing or stimulating social media engagement. The managerial implications of this finding may be considered straight-forward, meaning that if managers want their company to be perceived as more ethical, and in turn more attractive as an employer, this can be achieved by increasing the social engagement on their social media posts. The finding also suggests that likes, comments and shares on social media may limit the damage of negative publicity. Social influence did not have strong enough impact to improve the perception of an unethical company to be on par with a more ethical one, however.

Secondly, the results of the study imply that a third person effect limits the positive result of social influence on employer attractiveness. This can possibly be explained by that weak tie social influencers that are unknown to the social media user may be part of a social group that do not reflect positively on the user's self-concept. For managers, this means that in order to increase the positive effects of social media it is necessary, if possible, to ensure that the social influencers are part of a group that do reflect positively on the self-concept of the targeted individual(s), to avoid having these individuals distancing themselves from the group of influencers, and in turn the company itself.

While listening to others is a natural part of how we gather information and create opinions, this can also be detrimental if the sources we listen to turn out to be fake or if the information we receive turns out to be false. In this case weak tie social influence affected the perceived ethics on an employer brand, but what if weak tie social influence has similar effects on perceived ethics of companies in general, public figures, countries and political parties? The speed of social media also makes this question particularly important since social media content can spread across the world over night. Also, if positive social engagement with likes and comments impacts the perception of the content, this positive perception can in turn generate even more likes and comments, thus creating a rapid snowballing effect.

This all boils down to a quite controversial, but nevertheless important, managerial implication that in the world of social media where social engagement is a part of every single post, the results of this study imply that the importance of facts is negatively related to the level of social media engagement. Not that facts do not matter, but since users form their opinions by interpreting real information (the description of the company's CSR in this case) and the implicit information that lies within the likes, shares and comments, the social influence part steals a chunk of the information pie, thus indirectly decreasing the relative importance of the real information. While this study alone does not provide sufficient grounds for such conclusions, the topic was heavily debated during the 2016 United States Presidential Election where Russia was accused of manipulating social media with false content and propaganda, which again calls for more research on the area to provide for broader conclusions that are more reliable than one study alone.

## 5.6 Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

As attracting the right employees is an important competitive advantage in the war for talent, and with social media becoming increasingly important, the results and limitations of this study proposes a few areas in need of more extensive future research.

As described in section 3.3.1, this study chose to examine the effect of social influence on Facebook, after having considered its size, social engagement possibilities, and because it serves as a natural platform for in-feed job advertisements. However, these characteristics are not exclusively limited to Facebook. While Facebook is the largest social media network and therefore suitable for representing the category of social media in an experiment, it would still be interesting to understand if the results would be similar if the same experiment was conducted on other social media platforms.

The study shows a job advertisement as an excerpt from the Facebook feed, without any surrounding content that is usually present in a real Facebook feed. All attention from the respondent will therefore be on the job advertisement as there is no other content surrounding it and no way to scroll. This could lead to that the job advertisement gets an unrealistic amount of attention from the respondent that in turn can make them react differently compared to if they only would have seen it quickly in a scroll. A solution to this problem is to perform the experiment with real paid Facebook advertising, which future research is encouraged to do.

In the stimuli, the job advertisement could include either no, or a fixed amount, of likes, shares and comments. In order to understand the impact and dynamics of social influence on social media, a similar study but with a varying amount social influence, in the form of likes, comments and shares, should be tested. It would be of great interest to examine whether the impact of social influence on social media is constant, increasing, or decreasing with more social influence. Also, it could be argued that the scenario in which the job advertisement does not have any likes is unrealistic. The company LPK was described as having thousands of employees and a global presence, but not a single like on its Facebook post (in that group), which is completely possible but perhaps also confusing. Successful future research would find a way to plot the possible relationship between social engagement and a set of dependent variables with the use of more measuring points than two.

In the context of social media, literature implies that weak tie social influence on social media may have a limited effect (Bond et al., 2012), whereas Steffes & Burgee (2009) showed how weak tie social influence can in fact have a larger effect than strong tie influence in certain situations. In this study the job advertisement included weak ties social influence, and it would be of great interest to examine the effect of instead including strong ties social influence.

Another potential limitation of the study, affecting the impact of the weak tie social influence may be that the unethical situation was not considered ambiguous and/or uncertain enough. The level of ambiguity is in turn an important determinant of to what extent people will conform to informational social influence according to Aronson et al. (2005). Higher uncertainty regarding what is to be considered an appropriate behaviour or opinion, tend to make us more open to influence from others. The company LPK was similar in style and size to Acne and H&M, which are two large companies with a high and stable level of general employer attractiveness, which can be seen as generating a generally low level of ambiguity to the situation. If this is the case, the impact of the social influence could perhaps have been larger if the respondents were presented with a company and setting that proposed a higher level of ambiguity to have the respondents rely more on informational social influence that in turn would have impacted the perceived attractiveness of the brand as an employer.

The fictional brand LPK was created in order to ensure that the respondents did not have prior opinions about the brand affecting the outcome of the results by potentially outweighing the effect caused by the manipulation of the independent variables. LPK was created to be in similar size, have a similar global presence and number of employees as Acne and H&M, but since LPK is a fictional company, it will still differ in soft factors such as brand recognition and brand strength. The importance and impact of social influence may be dependent on the industry, company size, brand recognition, brand strength etcetera,

which calls for more research to look at social influence on many different types of companies in different industries.

The experiment consisted of two manipulations - social influence and ethics. Ethics was included in order to examine whether social influence would have a stronger impact in a situation that may be considered more ambiguous, where individuals are more likely to be receptive for informational social influence (Aronson et al., 2005). However, a similar experiment may be conducted combining social influence with other stimulus than ethics. As an example inspired from Rosengren and Bondesson (2014), it would be of interest to investigate if and how the impact of social influence varies with the level of creativity of the advertisement.

With employer attractiveness being an important competitive advantage, this study investigated the impact and effects of social influence on a job advertisement. However, a similar experiment can be conducted using consumer advertising. This would further increase the understanding of the impact of social influence with a varying degree of business ethics, and possibly provide insights whether the impact and effect of social influence and ethics are differing depending on if it is recruitment- or consumer advertising.

## 5.7 Conclusion and Attempt to Answer the Research Question

In recent years social media has come to dominate the way we use internet. With consumers shifting large parts of their time and media consumption towards social media, companies follow in order to stay relevant and to reach consumers on these new platforms by pouring money into the new medium. Advertisement on social media do, in contrast to traditional advertising, contain social influence which has proven to affect individuals' behaviors and perceptions. Furthermore, there are reasons to believe that social influence will have a larger impact in a situation where uncertainty is high regarding what is to be considered an appropriate behavior or opinion. Therefore, the impact of weak tie social influence was applied on the field of employee recruiting with a job advertisement on social media, tested



in two scenarios. One where the company was depicted as attractive and CSR as ethical, and a more ambiguous situation where the company was still depicted as attractive, but the CSR as unethical. The discussion of previous literature and theories was rounded up by the formulation of eight different hypothesis aimed at answering the research question and to provide for deeper explanations of the results. The research question was:

*Does weak tie social influence on social media impact perceived employer attractiveness and is this relationship affected by the level of ethics?*

The results from this study alone suggest that the simple answer to the research question is no. Weak tie social influence on social media does not impact perceived employer attractiveness and it is not moderated by the level of ethics when put in the form of CSR. While this is the simple answer, the study could show a machinery behind this non-existing relationship to give an explanation of why and how this hypothesis failed empirically. What the study did prove, was how weak tie social influence on social media impacted the perceived ethics of the brand as an employer and how social influence also resulted in an increased third-person effect. When the job advertisement had likes, shares and positive comments, the company was perceived as more ethical and socially responsible compared to the exact same scenario without the social engagement. Higher perceived ethics in turn positively mediated the non-existing relationship between social influence and employer attractiveness through a significant indirect effect. In a similar way, an increased third-person effect also mediated the same relationship through a significant indirect effect, but negatively. These two mediating variables, working in opposite direction of each other, provided a neat explanation to why social influence did not significantly affect employer attractiveness, which was the research question and main hypothesis of the study.

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## 7. Appendix

### 7.1 Company Description (same for all groups)

#### ***Step 1: Read the following text about LPK***

*LPK is an international fashion company that has more than 80 stores over the world including flagship stores in Stockholm, London, Paris, New York, and Tokyo. The company has an annual turnover of more than 240 MEUR and a total number of staff exceeding 900. LPK operate offices in Paris, Stockholm, New York and Tokyo, and is aiming at increasing their global presence even further. They are now looking to hire young business-driven people.*

*LPK has recently been praised for their environmental consciousness and work against global warming. Furthermore, during 2015 LPK was nominated as one of the top companies in the clothing industry in providing good labor conditions and a safe work environment in their factories.*

## 7.2 Job Advertisement containing Social Influence

Suggested Page



**LPK**  
Sponsored

Join our growing team at LPK! We're looking for new graduates and interns for 2017!



**LPK**

Clothing

564,351 people like this

Like Page

Like Comment Share

סיגל בן דוד, Leiliny Hush and 3.5K others

Top Comments

127 shares



Write a comment...



Press Enter to post.



**Anna Mastilo** Andreas



Like · Reply · 4 · August 18 at 5:23pm

2 Replies



**Jonathan Prada** This is something for you my friend @jacoblooft

Like · Reply · 1 · August 23 at 8:19pm

2 Replies

View more comments

2 of 65

### 7.3 Job Advertisement without Social Influence

Suggested Page



**LPK**  
Sponsored

Join our growing team at LPK! We're looking for new graduates and interns for 2017!



**LPK**  
Clothing

Like Page