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FORMATION OF THE EMPLOYER BRAND IMAGE

Case Study

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to explore the employer brand image and its formation of a Finnish (yet international) service company in B2B sector. In the research qualitative case study method was used to explore the most preferred attributes in employer attraction, the employer brand perceptions towards the case company, and the effectors behind these brand perceptions among the prospective group of employees. The research was conducted through in-depth semistructured interviews among 23-30 undergraduate or graduate business students in Finnish universities close to their graduation. After deriving the attributes of an attractive employer, and exploring their relation to the case company, the employer brand image of the case company was determined and its attractiveness level evaluated. Moreover, the formation of the employer brand image was investigated and its sources detected. The most important factors for the target group in employer attractiveness were found to be company reputation and company culture/work atmosphere. Also career opportunities and international opportunities were seen important. The case company was found to hold a positive, attractive image on company culture and international opportunities, but failing to hold a good reputation as a fair employer. The main and most impactful source of employer brand image was former and current employees - directly or indirectly. Company's own actions played only small part in employer brand formation as credibility is a critical factor in brand image formation and corporate communication found not to be perceived genuine. Based on the findings, suggestions for further employer branding were made.

TIIVISTELMÄ

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Tämän tutkimuksen tarkoituksena oli tutkia suomalaisen, kansainvälisen B2B-sektorilla toimivan yrityksen työnantajamielikuvaa ja sen muodostumista. Tutkimuksessa käytettiin kvalitatiivista tapaustutkimusmetodia, jolla selvitettiin työnantajassa kohderyhmään houkuttavasti vetoavia attribuutteja, kohderyhmän brändihavainnot ja -mielikuvia kohdeyrityksestä ja vaikuttavia tekijöitä näiden mielikuvien synnyssä. Tutkimus toteutettiin syväluotaavilla haastatteluilla 23-30-vuotiaiden kauppatieteen opiskelijoiden ja vastavalmistuneiden keskuudessa. Kun yleisen tason houkuttavat tekijät työnantajassa oli selvitetty, niitä verrattiin tutkimuksessa kohdeyrityksen herättämiin mielikuviiin. Tämän perusteella kohdeyritykselle määriteltiin brändikuva ja sen houkuttavuustaso arvioitiin. Lisäksi tämän mielikuvan muodostumisprosessia tutkittiin ja sen tärkeimmät lähteet tunnistettiin. Kohderyhmän tärkeimmiksi houkuttavuustekijöiksi tunnistettiin yrityksen maine ja yrityskulttuuri. Myös uramahdollisuudet ja kansainvälinen työskentely koettiin houkuttavina. Kohdeyritys nähtiin positiivisessa valossa yrityskulttuurin ja kansainvälisten mahdollisuuksien puolesta, mutta koettiin epähoukuttavana epäreilun työnantajan maineen vuoksi. Tärkein lähde työnantajamielikuvan muodostumiseen osoittautui olevan selkeästi yrityksen omat nykyiset ja aiemmat työntekijät suorasti tai epäsuorasti. Yrityksen oma kommunikointi osoittautui olevan vain pienessä roolissa, sillä kriittinen vaikuttaja työnantajamielikuvan muodostumisessa on uskottavuus, jota ei yritysten omassa kommunikoinnissa koeta olevan. Tuloksiin pohjautuen kohdeyritykselle tehtiin ehdotuksia tulevaan työnantajabrändäykseensä.

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In Espoo March 14th, 2016

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	7
1.1. Background	7
1.2. Theoretical Framework	7
1.3. Research questions	8
1.4. Key concepts and definitions	9
1.5. Research Methods.....	10
1.6. Delimitations of the Study	11
2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND.....	12
2.1. Formation of brand image.....	12
2.1.2. Formation of Brand Perceptions and Brand Image.....	15
2.1.3. From corporate brand to employer brand.....	20
2.2. Employer branding - Making of an attractive employer.....	22
2.3. Summarizing the theory into a framework	26
3. METHODOLOGY	29
3.1. Case Introduction.....	29
3.2. Research Design	30
3.2.1. Research Approach.....	30
3.2.2. Data Collection	32
3.2.3. Sample Description	33
3.2.4. The Interview Design.....	34
3.2.5. Data Analysis	39
3.2.6. Reliability and validity	39
4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS	41

4.1. Research Question A.....	41
Interview question 1	41
4.2. Research Question B.....	45
Interview question 2	45
4.3. Research Question C.....	51
Interview question 3	52
Interview questions 4 and 5.....	54
Interview question 6	62
5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	64
6. CONCLUSIONS.....	69
6.1. Main findings.....	69
6.2. Managerial implications	70
6.3. Suggestions for future research	71
6.4. Limitations of the study	71
REFERENCES:.....	72
APPENDICES	75
APPENDIX I: The Interview Questions – English and Finnish.....	75

LIST OF FIGURES:

- Figure 1 Initial Theoretical Framework
Figure 2 Complete Theoretical Framework

LIST OF TABLES:

- Table 1 Brand Definitions
Table 2 Processes of belief formation (Fisbein & Ajzen 1975)
Table 3 Interviewee Background information
Table 4 The most significant factors affecting employer attractiveness
Table 5 The main factors affecting employer attractiveness (by interviewee)
Table 6 The most attractive employer attributes reflected on the case company
Table 7 The most important sources of information and their reliability
Table 8 Main touchpoints of the personal information paths
Table 9 Issues lowering employer attractiveness

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

Employees are one of the most valuable assets for a company. That is why attracting the best suitable candidates with the needed knowledge, capabilities, and personality traits, is essential for company's sustainable success. While the population ages and the transformation in the business field will continue along technological development, it is likely that the competition of the right, valuable knowledge and knowhow in the labor markets will get more and more intense. Employer branding is a strategy to attract these potential employees by intentionally positioning the company to be perceived as a great place to work. (Wilden, Gudergan, Lings 2010, 56-7)

Competing successfully of the best available employees, the employers need to understand the influencers behind career decision-making among their target group as well as understand the role of employer branding in the talent attraction (Wallace, Lings, Cameron & Sheldon 2013, 19). By exploring the existing brand image perceptions, organizations can find the improvement points for its brand development and communication. Also the identified unintentional brand signals can be better controlled and, thus, have more control over brand image perceptions in general.

This paper is a case study investigating an employer brand image of a case company in a B2B service business who wants to know the status of their own image as an employer among their ideal employee candidates and to recognize the sources of the brand image perceptions. The company is continuously developing its employer brand image and is, thus, conducting this research to give its development processes a clear background.

1.2. Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this study is to follow the process of employer brand image and attractiveness formation. The initial theoretical framework in the figure 1 sets the starting point for this study. From the literature it was drawn a path to describe the employer brand image formation. First the general corporate brand perceptions are developed and summarized into corporate brand image over differing time frame. Then the company is evaluated as an employer by the benefits employment in the company may offer. This leads to the perceived employer brand

image and the more generalized level of employer attractiveness. Throughout the process different external factors are affecting the potential employee by sending brand signals. These are delivered by the company itself (controlled) by their communications and by social factors that are uncontrolled. The framework is further developed as a part of the theoretical background and explained there in the section 2.3.

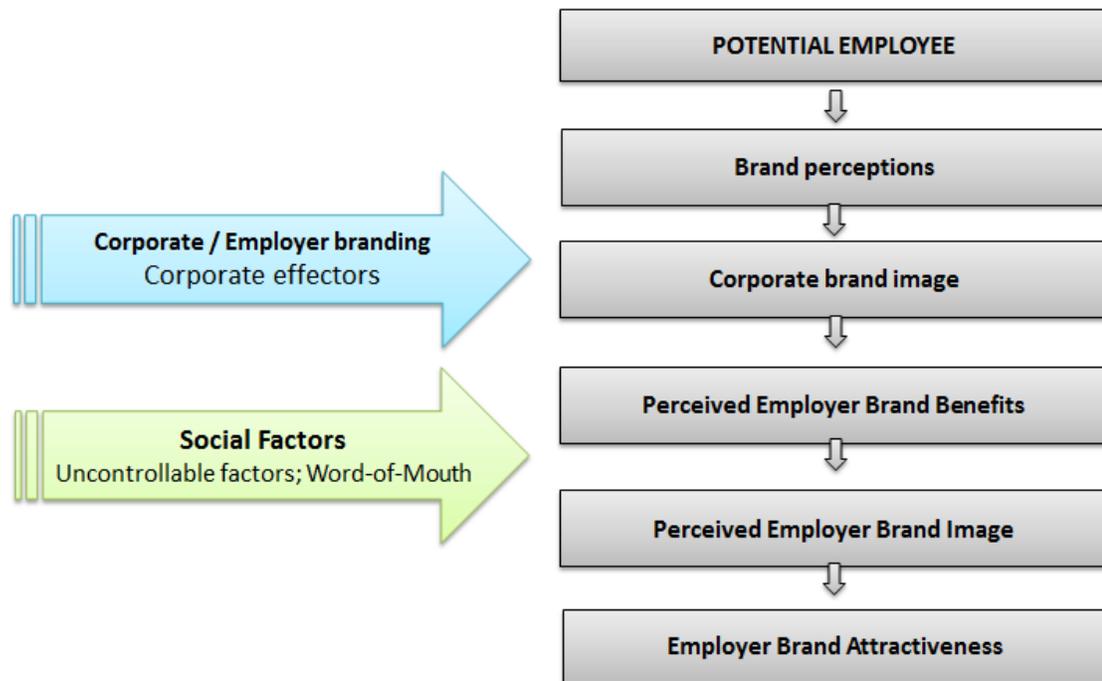


Figure 1: Initial Theoretical Framework

1.3. Research questions

This research is a case study and aims to investigate the effectors behind the company X's employer brand image among the prospective employee candidates.

The main purpose of the study is to investigate the different attributes affecting prospective employee candidates' employer brand perceptions and, based on these, evaluate the current state of attractiveness of the case company as an employer. In the research, the most important effectors in the development of these perceptions are explored to track the points the company should focus when planning its employer brand strategy and management to attract the talent more efficiently.

In the long run, the case company is to develop its employer brand to attract the best candidates to apply and, moreover, to maintain the talent for a long period of time (i.e. to lower the employee turnover rate). This research is done to set the starting point for the talent attraction and to define how the case company is seen and how it relates to the factors that are seen attractive by the employee candidates.

The research questions drawn from this are:

What is the current stand of the employer brand image of the case company and how is it formed?

- A. What are the most preferred attributes that make an employer attractive to an ideal employee candidate of the case company?
- B. What are the employer brand perceptions towards the case company?
- C. What are the effectors behind these employer brand perceptions?

The benefits of this study lies in revealing the perceptions about the case company as an employer but, more importantly, also the origin of these perceptions. Moreover, the study will provide current standing of the employer attractiveness criteria among the ideal target employee candidate group of the company.

Identification of these insights will help the case company to focus their brand communication on the attributes and effectors that truly make the difference when trying to reach the best employee candidates. Furthermore, as the study focuses on the employer brand perception (and, thus, employer brand image) formation throughout different communication channels, the case company receives important insights on how to better reach and attract their target employee audience and gets tools for improving the employer brand image. In the long run, the company may benefit from the information gained by taking steps towards decreasing the employee turnover rate and cut recruitment costs while getting the most suitable employees in easier and for a longer period of time.

1.4. Key concepts and definitions

The key concepts to support and give background for the research questions in this study are brand, brand perceptions, brand image, employer brand image, and employer attractiveness. Also in the theoretical background these concepts will be frequently used in discussion. The

following definitions are drawn from the literature and formed to simplify the terms in relation to each other.

Brand. A name or a symbol holding value for an organization by creating positive and/or negative associations in its perceivers' minds. (Keller & Lehmann 2006; de Chernatony & Riley 1998)

Brand perception. A primary or secondary observation of or experience with a brand which is associated with the former perceptions and experiences in the perceiver's memory and interpreted through the lens of his/her former knowledge and experience in life. (Keller 1993; Koubaa 2007)

Brand image. A set of perceptions of a brand that are (through association with the perceiver's existing knowledge, feelings, and beliefs) combined to build a comprehensive image of the brand. A company's brand image consists of the images held in consumers' minds. The level of positivity of a brand image is strongly linked to the value of a brand and, thus, to its financial performance. (Backhaus & Tujii 2004; Keller 1993)

Employer brand image. The brand image of a company as an employer held in the minds' of its perceivers. Employer brand image is built on the same principles as any brand image but the effectors and attributes affecting the formation differ from the company or product brand image. Employer brand image defines how attractive a company is perceived as an employer. Employer branding refers to the actions executed by the company to make the employer brand image positive. (Foster et al. 2010)

Employer attractiveness. Employer attractiveness is the result of positive (or negative) employer brand image and implements the level of potential employees' willingness to work in a company. It is based on the perceived benefits a potential employee sees in working for a potential employer. (Berthon, Ewing & Hah, 2005)

1.5. Research Methods

The research is a qualitative case study and conducted with semi-structured face-to-face interviews. In the interviews, the preferred employer attributes and the current employer brand perceptions of the case company are explored, and the reasons and the initiatives for

these perceptions investigated. The research approach, design, and methods are further explained in the chapter 3.

1.6. Delimitations of the Study

This paper is a case study reflecting the employer brand image of a specific company in a certain time, also concentrating on a quite narrow target group. For this reason, all the findings of this study are not generalizable for the processes of employer brand image formation in all cases. Moreover, the case study is only concentrating on the Finnish market of the case company. Thus, the results of the employer brand perceptions cannot be generalized to the other markets the company operates in.

The theoretical background of this study is strictly limited to the literature supporting the research questions: conceptualization of a brand, brand perception formation, and employer attractiveness. The literature on brand/marketing communications, brand construction or brand value measurement was left out from this study as they do not support the core of this study.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The theoretical background of this study is strictly limited on the main issues of the research questions: Brand image formation and employer branding along with talent attraction theme. These two topics are seen the most essential to support the empirical part of this case study. Based on the research questions, the literature review searches prior information on how the employer brand perceptions are formed and how they can be influenced.

2.1. Formation of brand image

In this section, the fundamental concepts of this branding are defined. The complex, abstract nature of brands makes it challenging to engage sustainable definition for the concepts of branding but their dimensions are explored to set a starting point for the present study. After defining the concept of brand, the discussion is taken further towards brand perception and brand image formation. At the end of this chapter, a specific attention is given towards the purpose of corporate and internal branding.

2.1.1. Defining a brand

Giving a solid definition for the concept 'brand' is a complex issue due to the variation of definitions available in the literature (de Chernatony & Riley 2011, 419). The common description of brands is the differentiation between a brand and a product. According to Keller (2008, 2-3), "a product is anything we can offer to a market for attention, acquisition, use, or consumption that might satisfy a need or want." Thus, a product may be a physical good, a service, a retail outlet, a person, an organization, a place, or an idea. (Keller 2008, 2-3) Zaichkowsky (2010, 549) has made a distinction between brands and products by stating that "products are produced in the factory, but brands are produced in the minds of the consumers". This describes well the branding essential: the brand is, in good and in bad, what is perceived by the receiver.

American Marketing Association, AMA, defines a brand to be "Name, term, design, symbol or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers" (American Marketing Association a, 2014). Zaichowsky (2010, 548) agrees by simplifying that brands are to distinguish the products or services of different producers from each other and as its simplest a brand is only a "name, term, sign or symbol", or all of them

together. In the article of Walvis (2011, 180), the brand is interpreted to be “a network of associations with a brand name in the brain of a person”. From this perspective brands are pieces of information, meanings, experiences, emotions, images, intentions, and so on. (Walvis 2011, 180)

Overall, during the past couple of decades the brand interpretations and meanings have transferred from a brand being a legal instrument, a shorthand device, a risk reducer, or just a logo to perceiving brands as more comprehensive wholes, such as a personality, an image, a vision, an identity, and even a relationship. (Jensen and Beckmann 2011, 469-70) The development of different brand approaches was collected from trade articles of 1980s and 1990s by Chernatony and Riley. These approaches were summarized into twelve themes representing a categorization of the most important propositions in the developing branding literature. These definitions and short explanations are presented in the chart below. (Chernatony & Riley 1998, 417) Nowadays, the central approach to brands and branding is the creation of a strong, sustainable bond between a brand and a specific customer group. (Jensen & Beckmann 2011, 469-70)

Table 1: Brand Definitions

Brand definitions <i>(collected from the article of de Chernatony & Riley 1998, 418-432)</i>		
	Definition	Explanation
1.	<i>a legal instrument</i>	The definition refers to the legal protection the brand offers to a firm against imitators. (418-9)
2.	<i>a logo</i>	The definition refers to the brand's logo and its visual features as a basis for differentiation. (419)
3.	<i>a company</i>	The definition refers to the borrowed equity that's been accrued by the corporate name. (419)
4.	<i>a shorthand</i>	The definition refers to seeing brand as a shorthand device of functional and emotional characteristics that enable rapid recall of information in memory and speed purchase decisions. (419-20)

5.	<i>a risk reducer</i>	The definition refers to brands' ability to instill consumer confidence. (420)
6.	<i>an identity system</i>	The definition emphasizes the brand not being a product but rather its abstract meaning and identity. (420)
7.	<i>an image</i>	The definition refers to the brand being an image in the consumer's mind. This relates to the thought originally presented by Boulding in 1956, that people do not react to reality. Instead they react what they perceive as reality. (421)
8.	<i>a value system</i>	The definition refers to the way consumers experience the brand's value to them as an individual, including the functional capability but even more importantly the symbolic dimensions of the brand. (422)
9.	<i>a personality</i>	The definition refers to brands seen as symbolic devices with psychological values, and as personalities. For example, a brand may be perceived with a human personality with exact characteristics. (422-3)
10.	<i>a relationship</i>	The definition is related with <i>brand personality</i> . Since brands have personalities, consumers may have relationships with them. De Chernatony and Riley elaborate that not only consumers have attitudes towards the brand, but brands have attitudes towards the consumer. (423)
11.	<i>an adding value</i>	The definition approaches a brand as a differentiator, competitive advantage generator, and a source for premium pricing. The term may refer to the value that the brand brings to a product, meaning the benefits beyond the functional characteristics. However, the term may also refer to some added concrete benefits, such as excellent customer service which adds value to a product. (423-4)
12.	<i>an evolving entity</i>	The definition refers to the evolution of the brand and the change of the brand by the stage of development. A brand is time-specific and holds different meanings for different people. (424, 426, 432)

All in all, brands are for differentiation and communication leading to increased brand equity. Since products cannot speak for themselves, brands are created to give them a meaning and to present them in the present time. (Kapferer 1992; 9, 13) They communicate the fundamental promises that the firm has to offer; reflect the complete experience that customers have with products and services; and are an asset in the financial sense. It is often stated that brands are the most valuable intangible asset firms have. (Keller & Lehmann 2006, 740)

Even though, the definition of brand in these referred articles mainly concentrates on the relationship between a company (its products/services) and a consumer, the more recent and sophisticated idea of a brand with its symbolic dimensions, human characteristics as well as its value adding capabilities are here interpreted as applicable definition and basis for 'brand' meaning between employer and employee candidate as well.

2.1.2. Formation of Brand Perceptions and Brand Image

Brand Image

The abstract nature of brands makes it hard to create one 'right' definition for its related concepts; 'brand image' being the one in discussion. American Marketing Association defines image as "the consumer perception of a product, institution, brand, business, or person, which may or may not correspond with reality" (American Marketing Association b, 2016). Dobni and Zinkhan (1990) analyzed 28 studies from a 35 year time period to investigate the definitions of brand image. Based on their research, there can be drawn four defining explanations for brand image: 1) Brand image is the concept of a brand held by the consumer, 2) Brand image is a subjective and perceptual phenomenon formed through consumer interpretation (reasoned or emotional), 3) Brand image is not based on concrete product attributes, it is rather affected by marketing activities, by context activities, and by the perceiver characteristics, 4) For brand image, the perceived reality is more significant than reality. Based on these conclusions, it can be stated brand image is very abstract, and affected by several factors, especially its perceiver's interpretation. (Dobni & Zinkhan 1990, 116)

Keller (1993, 3) has defined brand image as perceptions and associations about a brand held in consumer memory. These associations include attributes, such as the uniqueness,

strength, and favorability of the brand. Kapferer (1992) suggests the brand image results from the perceiver's decoding, extraction, and interpretation of brand signals (associations). Koubaa (2007) states that brand image perceptions are tied to brand associations and the past experiences with and former information of the brand (Koubaa 2007, 140) and, thus, the brand image perceptions can be strongly affected by the company. Also Faircloth, Capella, and Alford (2001, 71) found that brand associations can be manipulated to achieve a desired brand image. However, the perceiver's personal preferences, feelings, experiences, beliefs, and so on act a part in the formation of associations and, thus, brand image formation (Koubaa 2007, 140). Brand associations, instead, are all the thoughts, ideas, feelings, or other emotional responses and their combinations that a brand might evoke in a person. (Backhaus & Tujii 2004, 501)

Brand image and brand perceptions are discussed closely in the literature without a clear separation. It seems, a brand image is a set of perceptions a person builds on his/her former knowledge and experiences through associations. These associations are turned into beliefs of the brand. An applicable model for this process has been introduced by Fisbein and Ajzen (1975) and is presented in the following chapter.

Fisbein model: Theory of Belief formation applied into Branding

As discussed earlier, brand perceptions are the basis for brand image formation. These brand image perceptions are beliefs of the brand a person forms by connecting former and current experiences. In this section, a theory outside pure branding literature was decided to be investigated to better understand, how people form their beliefs on things, in this case, on brands.

Fisbein and Ajzen (1975) have explained that beliefs are the basis for attitude formation towards an object. According to them, beliefs refer to a person's subjective probability judgments concerning some aspect of his world with a specific definition being "subjective probability of a relation between the object of the belief and some other object, value, concept, or attribute". Beliefs can be formed through direct experience of the respective object, such as a brand, that are called descriptive beliefs, or through unobserved events. Through this kind of unobserved events, a person forms association of an object through

existing beliefs of an object (=inferential beliefs) or through outside sources (=informational beliefs) (Fisbein & Ajzen, 1975, 131-3)

Descriptive beliefs (1) originate from direct experiences with the product/brand whether it is seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or touching. Inferential beliefs (2) relate to one's personal experiences in life which affect, correctly or incorrectly, the inferences about the object/brand as the experiences relate to the present stimuli. Thus, the individual uses his/her logic and prior knowledge to create inferences based on the past experiences without direct connection with the object (e.g. brand). Informational beliefs (3) derive from outer sources which may be e.g. company marketing, word-of-mouth, media or whatever outside source of information. (Fisbein & Aizen 1975, 132-33)

Fisbein's and Ajzen's logic applies well to brand theory. Formation of a perception, opinion, i.e. brand image, of a brand is about beliefs. What is especially interesting in this specific theory for this paper is the notion that when forming a belief through an outside source, it can lead to a descriptive belief. Thus, a belief can be as strong whether it is based on a person's own observation or whether it is based on a secondary source, such as another person's statements. Thus, 'O is X' may equal with 'S said O is X'. This is not, though, always the case. Different factors, such as source factors (e.g. expertise, trustworthiness, likability, status, race, religion), message factors (e.g. order of arguments, type of appeal), and audience factors (e.g. persuasibility, intelligence, self-esteem, personality), effect on whether this kind of belief is formed or not. (Fisbein & Ajzen 1975, 133-4, 453)

Table 2: Processes of belief formation (Fisbein & Ajzen 1975)

Type of Belief	Belief formation process
Descriptive Belief	O is X
Inferential belief	O is X based on other beliefs of O
Informational belief (→ Descriptive belief)	S said O is X (may lead to a belief O is X)

Based on the literature, it can be concluded that brands are created and managed by their respective companies but their value is dependent on the perceptions of their audience: the

image people create in their minds. A brand is not a fixed object, it is an evolving abstract image perceived and formed by its receiver. Thus, a brand and a brand image seem to present two perspectives of one object: its creator's and its receiver's.

Brand Equity - The value of Brand Image

Brand equity is a concept often discussed both in business and academic research because of its ability to offer competitive advantage (Lassar, Mittar & Sharma 1995, 11). This is why the concept is also shortly presented in this paper. As its simplest brand equity refers to the value of a brand. Lassar et al. claim there are five key things defining brand equity. According to them 1) brand equity is about consumer perceptions instead of objective indicators, 2) brand equity is about the global value associated with the brand, 3) the global value is strongly associated with the brand name, 4) brand equity is relative to competition, and 5) brand equity affects financial performance. (Lassar et al. 1995, 12-13)

Kevin Lane Keller has created a brand equity model, also called customer-based brand equity. Keller (1993, 1) defines customer-based brand equity as "the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand". With differential effect, Keller refers to the phenomenon of consumers showing different responses to same marketing of a two different brand names of the same product. Brand knowledge refers to the awareness level of the consumers as well as the positive or negative brand image that the held brand associations have led to. Consumer response to marketing reflects the consumer perceptions, references and their behavior resulted from the marketing actions of the company. Keller's theory suggests that when a brand has high brand awareness level and a positive brand image, i.e. positive brand equity, it further increases the effect of the marketing actions of the company. Brand knowledge, which overall equals to brand associations, is critical in terms of differentiating the brand from others. (Keller 1993, 8-9)

In the context of this paper, the 'customer' is considered as any outside perceiver of a brand, such as a potential employee, and the concept of brand is widened to cover also company-level brands, not just specific product or service brands. Thus, the basis of the theory of customer-based brand equity is seen applicable as the basis for this study as well.

Can brand image be controlled?

If a brand image consists of perceptions of a brand in a person's mind on which a company can affect by direct or indirect ways, can these perceptions be controlled? According to Booth and Matic (2011, 185) they cannot be. During the time of the internet and social media, the brand reputation is in the hands of consumers. Even though, the brand reputation can be affected with, for example, "web design, e-mail marketing, microsite software development, viral marketing campaigns, banner advertising, search engine optimization, podcasting or widget development", Booth and Matic state that the only way to really make a difference is to cherish the relationship between the consumer and the company (2011, 185). Consumers are now the brand ambassadors – the story storytellers of the brand who should be leveraged in the company's social media strategy. By listening and monitoring different social channels, companies can gain understanding of the positive and negative perceptions and then act accordingly. This way companies can take part in enhancing their brand's reputation and protect it. (Booth & Matic 2011, 185-6)

Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold (2011) have come into similar conclusion in their study on online word-of-mouth communication regarding negative product reviews. They note that it is largely found in former studies that word-of-mouth influences consumer attitudes and behavior, is more influential than company-based marketing efforts, and holds significant amount credibility and trust. In their findings it was shown that word-of-mouth has damaging power for customer-based brand equity, even in the case of well-known, seemingly strong, high-equity brands. Bambauer-Sachse and Mangold seem to agree with Booth and Matic (2011) in terms of the uncontrolled nature of today's network technologies. They also highlight the access to the online reviews right at the point-of-sale through mobile technologies, which may have a noticeable effect on purchase decision-making. They suggest frequent tracking and evaluation of the negative word-of-mouth, and when needed, marketers should carry out compensation strategies (communications) to manipulate some of the negative brand associations. (Bambauer-Sachse & Mangold 2011; 38, 44)

All in all, in the era of the Internet, brand perceptions cannot be controlled but they can be influenced through effective brand management and effective, coherent brand communication. Our time is increasingly transparent and the brand promise really needs to be in line with the brand delivery as the disappointment spreads online in no time.

2.1.3. From corporate brand to employer brand

By far the literature has strongly relied on branding literature that has its focus on product brands and branding. In this chapter another branding perspective is shortly reviewed: corporate branding.

Corporate brand and internal branding - The basis of brand expression

According to Abratt and Kleyn (2011, 1050) corporate identity describes what the organization is about and what it seeks to be. Corporate identity includes the strategic choices of the organization, such as mission and vision statements, strategic intentions, company's values and corporate culture. (Abratt & Kleyn 2011, 1050) Balmer and Greyser (2006) claims that corporate identity is the company character, i.e. the factors that make it different from others. The character is built of the company assets (tangible and intangible), organizational activities, its markets, its structure, philosophy, and history. (Balmer & Greyser 2006, 735) Abratt and Kleyn further suggest that corporate identity also refers to another aspect: corporate expression. The corporate expression refers to the mechanisms the organization uses to express its identity to stakeholder groups. These expressions, the "conceptualization and communication of the visual identity, the brand promise and the brand personality" link the corporate identity to the corporate brand. (Abratt & Kleyn 2011, 1050)

A corporate brand is a promise made for its key stakeholder groups (Foster et al. 2010, 401). Balmer and Greyser (2006, 737) agree by referring to the corporate brand as a covenant on which its stakeholders may even hold a religious-like relationship. This promise, a clear brand proposition, should be applied throughout the organization. Thus, corporate branding is "systematic planned management of behavior, communication, and symbolism" that aims to build a favorable reputation for the respective organization. (Foster et al. 2010, 401-2)

Abratt and Kleyn (2011) take a broader approach to corporate brand by looking at it further from the point of view of the stakeholders and explaining its connection to corporate reputation. They define corporate brand as "expressions and images of an organization's identity". These images will, over time, turn into perceptions of the organization's reputation. The company reputation, instead, is based on stakeholders' evaluation on company performance, its products and services, citizenship, service, innovation, workplace, and governance. A corporate brand holds two aspects: corporate expression and stakeholder

images of the corporate identity. The first aspect, corporate expression was defined above being the linking communication tool between corporate identity and corporate brand. The second aspect of corporate branding refers to stakeholder perspectives of the organization's brand which means that stakeholder only interact with some aspects of corporate identity of which they build their perception of the corporate brand on. Very similarly to the description of the process of brand perception formation in the previous sections, the stakeholders develop brand images through their experiences and associations, and define the level of fulfillment of the brand promise as well as stakeholders' expectations and requirements. (Abratt & Kleyn 2011, 1050-3)

A brand promise is one of the expression methods of corporate identity among visual identity, brand personality and brand communications (tacit or explicit). They see the corporate brand as the interface between the stakeholders and the corporate identity. (Abratt & Kleyn 2011, 1053) According to Foster et al. (2010), the corporate brand promise is mainly executed through the employees of the organization. For this reason, it is significant to ensure the brand message is fully understood internally and the employees are showing commitment to it. Moreover, the alignment with the employees' personal values and the company values is important in terms of effective brand delivery. Due to the possibility of optimal value fit, the employees may offer a company a sustainable competitive advantage. Foster et al. highlight that the brand promise must take part in every action taken in the organization to make sure the brand associations and brand image perceptions stay consistent for external stakeholders. Especially in service brands, the personal interactions between the employees and customers and other stakeholders are the key in building the corporate brand. Thus, the clear communication plays an important role in successful brand management in a corporation. (Foster et al. 2010, 402)

Internal branding

As the staff has a significant role in delivering the corporate brand promise to the customers and other stakeholders, the staff influences stakeholders' brand perceptions while delivering functional (what is delivered) and emotional (how is it delivered) brand values. (Foster et al. 2010, 402) It is also widely recognized that employees and their behavior have a remarkable impact on how external people perceive a company and its brand (Punjaisri & Wilson 2011, 1522). To affect this process, internal branding is used to make sure that the brand promise is

transformed into reality during stakeholder encounters. In internal branding activities the brand values are communicated and educated to the employees to enhance their intellectual and emotional engagement with the corporate brand to improve the level of correct brand communication. Moreover, distinctive brand values may help the employees to better identify with the organization which, again, further enhances one's motivation to accomplish company's strategic interests. To achieve consistency in terms of the corporate brand, the internal branding strategy should be managed and implemented with the corporate branding strategy. (Foster et al. 2010, 402)

In the study of Punjaisri and Wilson (2011) it was found that employees' sense of belonging was most sensitive to internal branding. Internal branding was also found to have effect on employees' brand promise delivery as well as to brand loyalty which in employees' case is implemented in intentions to stay in the company. That is why internal branding should be seen as an engagement tool for employees but also as an enabler for coherent corporate marketing. What is especially interesting to this study is the finding that internal branding efforts do not always work the same way towards all the employees. Punjaisri and Wilson found certain hindering factors for the success of internal branding. They suggest a special attention should be given on how the employees perceive their work environment. Things such as relationships with co-workers and leaders, perceived level of autonomy, perceptions towards payment, as well as rewards and recognitions may play an important part in the success of internal branding. Instead, the satisfied employees are more likely to be affected by internal branding, and further deliver the corporate brand message outside the organization. (Punjaisri & Wilson 2011, 1531)

Another dimension of branding, which is tightly connected to corporate and internal branding, is employer branding. Employer branding with brand image formation is in the main focus of this study and a significant part of the theoretical background of the research. Employer branding with talent attraction essentials is presented in the following chapter 2.2.

2.2. Employer branding - Making of an attractive employer

Branding from an employer's perspective

Employer branding is a growing field at the border of Human Resources and marketing in which organizations attempt to attract the most suitable and competent employees to work for

them (Sivertzen, Nilsen, Olafsen 2013, 474) It is about recruiting and retaining the best possible human talent (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 513). Sivertzen et al. define employer branding as “the process of building employer identity directed at existing and potential employees, in order to differentiate the firm from its competitors” (2013, 474). While starting to realize the importance of value fit of employees recruited to an organization, companies have started to develop employer brands to create a perception of the company as a desired place to work. As well as in regular branding in corporate level, the employer brand is targeted to a specific group of talented and skilled employee candidates who possess similar values with the organization. (Foster et al. 2010, 403)

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) have also suggested that employer branding is about company efforts on painting a picture of how the company stands out in a positive way from other companies as an employer. However, according to them, building a desired employer brand requires promotions both within and outside the organization. Thus, employer branding is targeted to both internal and external audiences, whereas in corporate and product branding the audience is mainly outside the company. (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 501)

All in all, it can be generalized that employer branding is to differentiate an employer from the others and to compete for the best employees whether they are already in the company or just in the pool of prospective employees. In the same way the corporate brand proposition is a promise for the customers and other stakeholders, the employer brand proposition is a promise to be fulfilled for the prospective employees. To be successful, these promises, i.e. benefits, should be compatible with the expectations of the current and prospective employees. The fulfillment of employer brand promise is highly significant, and the realistic image of the organizational culture, identity and values should be actually delivered. It is shown that in case the promises and expectations are not met after the recruitment, the job performance is likely to be negatively affected. Moreover, the staff turnover is likely to increase. (Foster et al. 2010, 403) To conclude, employer branding is to increase employer attractiveness (Sivertzen et al. 2013, 474).

Employer brand image and employer attractiveness

The basic characteristics of consumer, corporate, and employer branding are rather similar. (Foster et al. 2010, 403) As mentioned before, brand image consists of consumer perceptions

and associations towards a brand and its attributes and perceived benefits. In case of products and services, consumers evaluate product-related attributes (functional benefits derived from using a product or service) and non-product-related attributes (symbolic benefits reflecting, for example, personal expression). In case of employer brand the functional and symbolic benefits are also evaluated but from a different angle. Functional benefits of employer brand are the desirable attributes from an objective perspective, such as salary and other benefits. Symbolic benefits relate to the more subjective experience the person believes she/he would feel if working in the company. (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 505)

According to Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005, 156) employer attractiveness is “the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization”. A person compares the perceived employer image with his/her own values and evaluate the perceived fit. The company is seen the more attractive the more it is believed the company provide with the desired functional and symbolic benefits. (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 505) Moreover, the same way as in product and company branding, the more positive image the employer has from the perspective of its potential employees, the stronger its employer brand equity is (Berthon et al. 2005, 156).

Other researchers have also investigated the value of different benefits in the context of employer branding. According to Foster et al. (2010), the brand needs to be “noticeable, relevant and resonant, and unique” but it also needs to provide the employees a promise of functional, economic and psychological benefits to be connected with the employing company. (Foster et al. 2010, 403) Also in the research of Lievens, van Hoye and Anseel (2007, 55) it was found that to make an organization attractive, it is important to communicate a wide range of benefits to the target audience. Lievens et al. investigated the correlation of employer attractiveness with instrumental attributes and symbolic attributes. According to them, instrumental attributes (opportunities for social activities and sports/physical activities, provision of good salaries, advancement opportunities, job security, task diversity, opportunity to work in a structured environment, and travel opportunities) are the attributes that are usually actively communicated by companies to their prospective employees. However, it was found that focusing only on these instrumental job- and organizational attributes (seen as parallel to the aforementioned functional benefits) a lot of attraction power of the employer is ignored. As the others, Lievens et al. also highlight that the symbolic attributes (here defined:

sincerity, excitement, competence, prestige, ruggedness) play an important role in attraction as well. (Lievens et al. 2007, 50; 54-55)

According to Foster et al. (2010) the prospective employees form a perception of the employer brand through their experience of both the corporate brand and the employer brand. That is why it is important that employer brand is aligned with the corporate brand. This comes back down to aforementioned internal branding. Corporate brand when delivered through the company employees (especially in the service sector) impacts the customers that often also are potential prospective employees. This brand image, learned through a personal experience (e.g. encounter) with the company representative, has more effective role in the formation of employer brand image perception than the intended and controlled recruitment actions and materials of the employer. Thus, the company to be consistent and successful, all the branding approaches should be aligned, having the corporate brand as a guide. (Foster et al. 2010, 403-4)

The attributes of an attractive employer

Berthon et al. (2005) have developed an employer attractiveness scale (EmpAt) for employer attractiveness measurement. The scale is a modification of a three-dimensional measurement model of Ambler and Barrow's (developed in 1996) with dimensions of psychological, functional, and economic benefits. Based on their study, Berthon et al. modified a five-dimensional model, the EmtAt scale. The scale consists of five main categories (with 32 sub-components) that were identified to implement the factors of employer attractiveness. The categories are 1) Interest value, 2) Social value, 3) Economic dimension, 4) Development value, and 5) Application value. The 'interest value' is about work environment and work practices. The 'social value' refers to the working environment in terms of work enjoyment and implements the values of good relationships and team atmosphere. The 'economic value' relates to salary and other compensation but also to job security and promotional opportunities. The fourth factor, 'development value', is about employer's perceived ability to provide recognition and confidence but also career advancing opportunities and future employment. The fifth category, 'application value' refers to employees' possibilities to use the knowledge they have learned and to teach others. (Berthon et al. 2005, 156-162)

Sivertzen et al. (2013) conducted a study in Norway applying also the EmpAt scale. They focused their study on exploring the dimensions between EmpAt scale, use of social media, corporate reputation, and intentions to apply for a job. Interesting to this study is that they were able to recognize certain factors employer should especially pay attention to in their employer branding implementation. In their findings attractiveness dimensions 'innovation value' ('Interest value' in the Berthon et al.'s original scale), 'psychological value', and 'application value' are positively connected with corporate reputation whereas 'economic value' and 'social value' did not show such significance. Overall, it was argued that the non-materialistic aspects of work are more important to the potential employees and factors such as salary is not as meaningful for attractive employer reputation. The lack of relation between attractiveness and social value was seen surprising as work climate is usually seen important for employees. Another interesting finding in the study of Sivertzen et al. was that the psychological value (a potential employee seeking e.g. self-confidence from working in a company) has a direct relation with applying for a job. This is suggested to be taken into account in the employer branding strategy of a company. (Sivertzen et al. 2013, 479)

EmpAt scale does not offer generalizable results as it has been deployed in several studies with differentiating results. In the original study of Berthon et al. (2005) the economic values as well as social values were found to be important whereas Sivertzen and al. 2013 showed them to be less important than factors such as innovation, personal growth, and self-confidence. (Sivertzen et al. 2013, 479) Factors affecting employer attractiveness seem to be culture-dependent and be also dependent on other factors such as age and industry. (Sivertzen et al. 2013, 479; Wallace, Lings, Cameron & Sheldon 2014, 23)

Even though the EmpAt scale with its employer attractiveness measurement categories is a quantitative model, its categories were seen highly applicable background for this study.

2.3. Summarizing the theory into a framework

The purpose of this study is to follow the process of employer brand image formation. The theoretical background is to set the starting point for the empirical phase of this study. In the introduction the initial theoretical framework was built for this study. Eventually, it was drawn two paths from the literature: one to describe the company perspective in employer brand

image formation, and one to describe the path of a potential employee while creating an employer brand image. The figure 2 presents the complete framework built for this study.

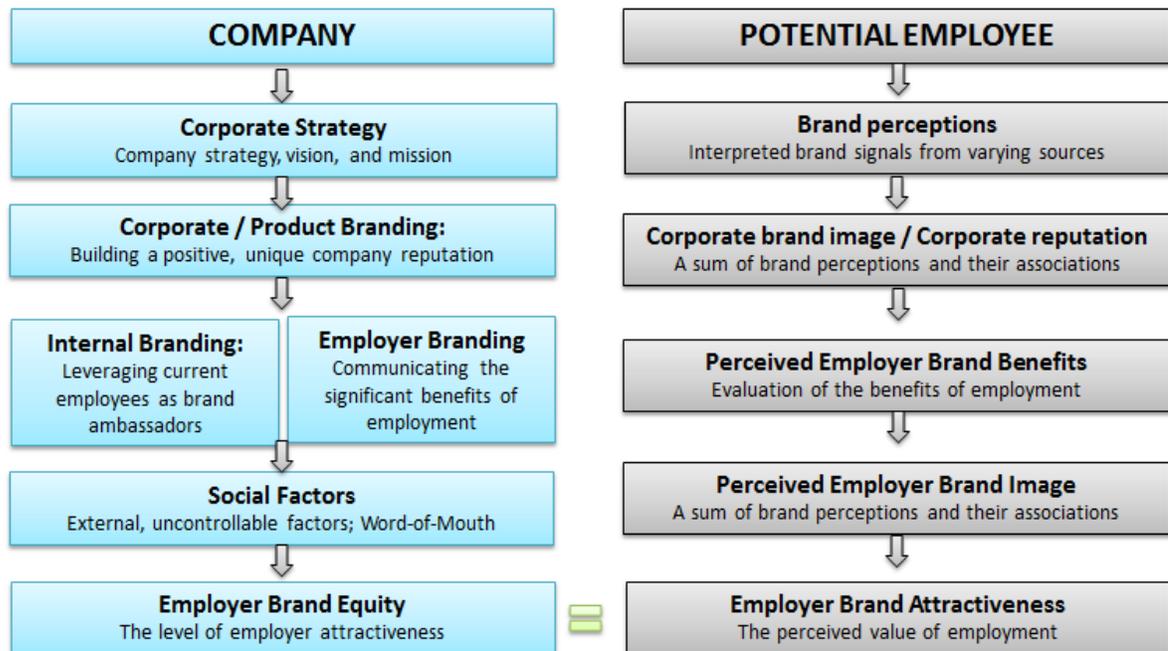


Figure 2: Complete Theoretical framework

From the company point of view, their employer branding activities are to attract the best talent and competencies to work for them. To do this they need to brand themselves as a great place to work. To be coherent and credible, employer brand needs to be aligned with the corporate strategy and values and, thus, with the corporate brand. The corporate reputation is the starting point for a high-valued employer brand.

To be seen as a great place to work, the company needs to be active in employer branding. This means, they have to be aware of the benefits, attributes and values their prospective, and also existing, employees are attracted to. Internal branding is an important part of employer branding and should be seen as an important touch point towards the external audience.

As we are living in the era of social media, a lot of brand building is in the hands of the external constituents. This needs to be taken into account in the branding strategy. The

employer brand image can be affected but not controlled. The ways to create and protect positive brand image are in a critical role in employer branding since when turned into negative, it is very hard to recover. The level of employer attractiveness defines the value of an employer brand, i.e. employer brand equity.

From the potential employee's perspective, the process is the following. The person have (or may not have) different direct or indirect touchpoints with a company from which he/she gets brand signals. These signals are turned into brand perceptions that are interpreted through the person's past experiences and associated with possible former experience with the brand. This varying set of information is built together as a coherent image in one's mind. These images of people create a generalizable corporate brand image which over time turns into company's reputation. Corporate brand image is a base for employer brand image.

To continue the process, the person also collects signals from the company as an employer. The potential employee builds an employer brand image for which he/she evaluate the benefits he/she believes employment might bring to him/her. The more suitable the benefits are perceived, the more positive is the employer brand image and the more attractive the company as an employer is.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Case Introduction

The case company is an organization specializing in B2B services. The company has its headquarters in Finland and has operated in the field over 20 years. The company has operations in several countries across Europe.

The company recruits constantly. The focus is mainly on the potential employees in the beginning of their careers (entry-level and next step jobs). More specifically, a typical recruit are under-graduated or graduated people with one to three years of work experience. The company recruits international talent to different locations, for example German people to Finland etc. The positions are usually in sales or sales-minded positions. In the near future the recruitment amounts seem to stay pretty stable and will adapt to market-specific changes by their performance. The recruitments are knowledge-based, not location-based - meaning that the employees have freedom to work from different countries and the market-knowhow and language skills are in the focus of recruitments.

Being a highly international firm needing talented, sales-minded people with high energy, international mind-set and language skills, the case company is competing about the best candidates with numerous companies regardless of the industry. To attract the best ones will definitely have a huge impact on the company's success.

The case company has been recognized in the annual "The most attractive employer"-rankings of the Universum Global in Finland among business students. However, controlling the level of attractiveness (maintaining such rankings) requires understanding of what makes the case company attractive and what does not. Currently, there are assumptions and beliefs of what works and is attractive and how the employee candidates perceive the company. However, no actual data is there yet to back this up. On the other hand, the company turnover rate is quite high, assumable for two reasons: a) the employee does not live up the expectations and cannot make required results and, for that reason, is let go or b) the employee manages his/her work very well but chooses not to stay. Employer branding is a strategy that can affect the employer attractiveness. Also, it is important to match the

branding with the reality in the company to keep the good ones in the company for a longer period of time.

This research is going to explore the current level of attractiveness of the case company as an employer and especially the effectors behind it. By tracking the points of employer brand image creation, the employer brand strategy can be refined to highlight the positive brand benefits and better manage the negative attributes of the company as an employer.

3.2. Research Design

This research is an assignment from the case company. Therefore, it is necessary to state that some decisions are affected by the case company. Moreover, I, as the current employee of the case company, could not take a totally objective stance as the researcher. The knowledge of the company has directed the planning of the research and helped recognizing the need for research and development of the employer brand. Thus, even though the paper is not offering generalizable new theory, it is filling an 'internal research gap' existing in the case company.

3.2.1. Research Approach

Research Philosophy

This research implements an interpretivist philosophy. Interpretivism highlights the humans as social actors whose personal experience of the world as social being affects their interpretations and meanings they give to objects and phenomena, such as actions of other people. In this type of approach the researcher tries to understand the research subjects' point of view on things, although her/his own experiences and meanings cannot be totally distinguished. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2009) suggest that interpretivist philosophy is especially suitable for business and management research and specifically for marketing and human resource management due to their circumstantial and time-critical nature. (Saunders et. al. 2009, 114)

This research represents the employer brand perspectives of the case company in the present time and reflects the brand perceptions of the target group built over time in social environment through their personal interpretations. Moreover, the interview responses of the

sample group are interpreted by the researcher and are affected by her own experiences and knowledge. However, the personal views were tried to be minimized in the interview by asking additional questions, such as “What do you mean...”, “Did I understand right...?”

This research is partly built upon the existing theory around employer branding. However, as an assigned case, the goal of this study is not exactly to build hypotheses of the theory and test it, but rather form the basis for the research. The results are reflected towards the theory (when possible) and explored whether the ‘expected’ is applicable to the case unit (the case company) or whether new findings occur. Thus, the approach of this study is deductive. (Snieder & Lerner, 2009)

For this research **qualitative methodology** was selected to enable deeper understanding of the process behind the perceptions. Sanders et al. (2009, 119) also connect the interpretivist philosophy with qualitative, in-depth investigations with small samples. As Tracy (2012) vividly suggest that "qualitative research is about immersing oneself in a scene and trying to make a sense of it". This is exactly what is tried to do here: the researcher is trying to stand in the shoes of the research object and make sense of her/his perceptions, experience, attitudes, feelings etc. towards the employer brand. And in addition to explore what is seen, it is tried to dig deeper to the 'whys' and 'hows'. Since investigating also, *how* employer brand image perceptions are formed, this paper calls for qualitative methods to give the space for additional questions, comments, and explanations. The objective of the study is also to achieve the so called “thick description” (Tracy 2012) where not only the perceptions on the employer brand are investigated but the circumstances of their formation. From that the conclusions and suggestions are drawn.

Case Study

This paper presents a case study. According to Saunders et al. 2009, 147), a case study is a good way of exploring existing theory. In the literature, the term ‘case study’ is quite broadly used. Robson’s (2002, 178) definition for case study is “a strategy for doing research which involves an empirical investigation of a particular contemporary phenomenon within its real life context using multiple sources of evidence”. According to Flick (2009, 134), the goal is, basically, to describe a case in which the subject can be, for example, certain groups of people, institution as well as an organization. In the case study, a case (compatible with the

research questions) is identified and then analyzed with the help of suitable, selected research methods. Even though, a case study is focused on a certain case, the end result is often to reflect a more general problem. (Flick 2009, 134) Saunders et al. (2009, 146) suggest that case study, as a research strategy, is especially suitable for explanatory and exploratory research and the data collection techniques often include interviews, observation, documentary analysis and questionnaires. Often the data is collected from multiple sources (data triangulation) to ensure the validity of data interpretation.

Being an assigned research for a case company, this paper is a case study concentrating on investigation of a single issue, the employer brand, of the certain organization in the certain time. Even though, the study might reflect more generalizable results on certain things, it is built solely to serve the needs of the case company. The interviews are used as the only source of data. However, being the employee of the company and in dialogue with the company representatives who have gave the research project assignment, I, as the researcher, have knowledge of the company that has been used as indirect source of information (including recruiting process and methods and employer branding procedures). As the company wants to keep internal processes and intentions as classified information, this data source has not been included in this paper or used as a base for the analysis. Rather, the information has affected the selection and design of the interview questions.

3.2.2. Data Collection

Use of secondary data

Secondary data was collected and reviewed for this research to learn the fundamentals about the research topic. The data was collected mainly from online databases – electronic academic articles were the main source of information. The secondary data was collected to guide the empirical research: forming the theoretical framework, building the interview questions, and, afterwards, reflecting the findings to the existing theory in the analysis.

Semistructured Interview

Interviewing covers a range of interactions with respondents. Interviews may be totally unstructured, partly structured, or strictly formal situations depending on the goals and settings of the studies, and the amount of control the interview wants to take over in the

interview situation. Interviews may be conducted in many ways, for example, face-to-face in person, through phone, or mail, but there is no “right” way to do it. (Bernard 2006, 210)

In the present study, the semistructured interview method is used. Semistructured interview, also called as in-depth interview, includes open-ended questions but is planned ahead with a script: a list of questions and topics to be covered. According to Bernard (2006, 212), semistructured interview is the best option of the interview techniques when the interviewer only has one chance to interview someone. (Bernard 2006; 210, 212) The interview design is explained in the section 3.2.4.

3.2.3. Sample Description

The participants for the study are representing the prospective employee candidates for the case company in the future. The participants selected for the research are under graduate or graduate university students majoring in business. The participants have either recently graduated or are graduating in a year’s time frame. Both bachelor and master level students and graduates are seen adequate for the target group.

More precisely, the interviewees are selected based on the following criteria:

- 1) She or he has not worked for the case company. This is to make sure all the interviewees have the same starting point for the interview. The interviewee may or may not have applied to the company before since recruitment process it is seen as a significant effector for employer brand.
- 2) She or he has heard about the case company before. The interviewee is expected to have some perception about the employer brand. This is to make sure the interviewee has some input to give to the research. The level of previous experience is not quantified in any way.
- 3) The interviewee is expected to be 23-30 years old which is the usual age the employees start at the company.

Originally, the interviews were agreed and scheduled with twelve respondents. This was expected to be enough to draw generalizations. However, the saturation point was already reached after eight interviews and it was not necessary to continue the interviews. Thus, the

final sample size was eight respondents and the amount of the interviews was enough to draw valid generalizations about the researched issues.

The sample was collected from Southern Finland, mostly for the convenience of data collection. All the respondents were Finnish. The respondent selection was not, however, limited on any certain university and all the participants matching the above criteria were welcomed to take part in the research. The respondents were collected from informal networks, such as from peer students and their networks.

All the interviews were live face-to-face interviews.

3.2.4. The Interview Design

In this study, the individual interviews aimed to answer certain questions about the case company. However, the interviewees were given some freedom to elaborate their answers and explain their conclusions about the issues that were brought up during the interview. The script / the questions were kept the same for every interviewee to assure the data collected across the interviews would be comparable when analyzed.

The interviews were conducted in different places – whatever was preferred by the interviewee. Either the interview was made in a public place, such as a café, or at home of the interviewee. The atmosphere was made as relaxed and informal as possible as the interviewee was wanted to express feelings and attitudes. It was expected a more formal setting and/or distant role of the interviewer could have made the respondent hold back his/her true thoughts and feelings.

All the interviews were in Finnish as it was the mother tongue of all the respondents. This was not, however, a qualification to take part in the interview. All the respondents were given the chance to choose either English or Finnish as their preferred language for the discussion.

At the beginning of the interview, certain background information was collected: the age of the respondent, the university degree, years of working experience (in business), the gender of the respondent, and the information whether the person had ever applied for a job in the case company. These were to prove the respondent is a good match with the case company and actually is a potential employee candidate for the firm. The last question about whether

the person had applied to the company made an assumption that the interviewee can comment on the dialogue done with the case company and explain whether that had infected his/her brand perceptions and attitudes towards the company in certain way. This might also raise new ideas for further research.

Table 3: Interviewee Background information

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Education	Work experience in business (years)	Have applied to the case company
1	Female	25	Master of Science in Business Administration (Marketing Management)	3	No
2	Female	26	Master of Science in Business Administration (Marketing)	2	Yes
3	Female	25	Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (Management&Strategy)	1	No
4	Female	26	Master of Science in Business Administration (Management)	1-2	No
5	Female	26	Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (Business&Politics)	3	No
6	Male	29	Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (Service Management)	4	No
7	Female	26	Master of Science in Business Administration (Innovation Management)	1,5	No
8	Female	26	Master of Science in Business Administration (Marketing Management)	4	No

The interviews were anonymous and confidential which was told to the interviewees in the beginning of the interview. The interviewees were told about the case company name as they were supposed to tell about their perceptions about this particular employer brand. No other information about the company was given prior to the interview to make sure the interviewee does not affect the existing perception held by the respondent and, thus, decrease the validity of the research.

The interview consisted of six questions. During the interview notes were written to keep on track the most important issues that might needed to be reflected on in the later phases of the interview. All the interviews were transcribed afterwards to make sure no important comments or notions were missed. Although, not every sigh, yawn or tone of voice were written down. Rather, if some non-verbal expression during the interview was interpreted to be significant, the interviewer actively asked for elaborations or further questions.

The interviews were conducted between May and July 2015. The interviews lasted from 25minutes to 35minutes. The usual length of an interview was around 30minutes.

The Interview Questions

The interview consisted of six questions (See the Finnish questions in APPENDIX I) that were formed to best support the research questions:

What is the current stand of the employer brand image of the case company and how is it formed?

- A. What are the most preferred attributes that make an employer attractive to an ideal employee candidate of the case company?*
- B. What are the employer brand perceptions towards the case company?*
- C. What are the effectors behind these employer brand perceptions?*

The interview was built to start from the general characteristics of an attractive employer by the respondent, then reflecting the perceived characteristics of the case company, and finally led to the questions investigating the source of the perceptions and their strength / stability.

Question 1: “What are the 3 most important factors that make you perceive an employer attractive?” The question one set the base for the research and answers to the first research question, “What are the most preferred attributes that make an employer attractive to an employee candidate?” This is information that could be found from the literature and previous studies but was asked here to make sure the relevancy of the information for this specific, selected target group. The “three most important” was included to the question to quickly set the mind of the respondent to the really valuable aspects for him/her. If some important factors came to the mind of the respondent in the later phase of the discussion, it was documented and added as a factor on this list. The factors were, thus, not strictly limited to the number of three.

Question 2: “What is your perception of the company X as an employer? Why?” The question two was to answer to the second research question, “What are the employer brand perceptions towards the case company?” The question two is derived from the interview question one: as the respondent had set the criteria for his/her preferred attributes of an attractive employer, he/she was asked how he/she perceived the case company. The question was set to show, how the preferred attributes and the case company perceptions were, or were not, aligned in the eyes of the target group.

Questions 3, 4, 5 and 6 concentrated on the last research question “What are the effectors behind these perceptions?” as it is more complex issue, and also the most important aspect of the study.

Question 3: This question was divided into two parts, a and b. **The 3.a.** “Where does that image come from? Can you name the sources of information that have initiated and/or affected your opinion?” was set to take the attributes mentioned in the question two to a deeper level by investigating the origin of the perceptions, so the tracking of the affecting touchpoints would be possible.

The question 3.b., “What do you consider to be the most reliable source of information for you?” was to show the importance of the source of perception. As some of the sources were seen clearly more important than the others, this question can be seen very important in terms of the relevance of the results.

Question 4 was also divided in two parts: a) “What would be the concrete steps for you to do if you were to find out whether you would want to work for the company X?” and b) Based on these factors, what could be the issues that could prevent you from applying to the company

The **4.a.** was to investigate, how the target employee candidates search for information about the case company that might have caught their interest and how they would find out whether they would really want to work for the company. This knowledge would help the case company to concentrate on the certain touchpoints if their “journey” could be followed and, thus, affected. The **4.b.** clarifies the critical points that creates the most negative perceptions about a prospective employer company. This is to help the case company in their communications management to highlight certain things and possible avoid some others.

Question 5: This question was a follow-up and a practical task to see how the steps mentioned in the question four would realize as they were done. The task was given in the following form: “I now give you some time (10minutes) to gain some information about the company X as an employer. You can use any source of information you'd feel comfortable with. You can give your comments/insights about your findings while you are doing your research.” This question did not work best as an actual task to prove whether the respondent would actually follow the steps he/she mentioned in the question four. The environment and the interviewer waiting for the respondent to act did not form the right kind of (natural) environment for such action as, for example, calling to a friend. However, this question offered valuable information on certain things in the Internet search (which was mentioned frequently in the question four) in terms what was seen important or less important and whether enough information was found whatsoever. For that reason, this question was not left out from the interview, even though the problem of the setting was noticed. Instead, the findings of the questions are analyzed from the refined point of view.

Question 6: “Did your initial perception change in any way while gaining more information? If so, was it a positive or a negative change? If not, did it strengthen? Why?” This question, again, followed the previous. It was to see how easily (if at all) the perceptions of the respondent may change when gaining more information. For example, if the perception of the respondent was solely based on hearsay, what happened if he/she gained knowledge from other sources of information? The conclusions for this question were drawn from the

comments of the respondents during the experimental phase of the interview and confirmed with this question at the end of the interview.

3.2.5. Data Analysis

As mentioned before, the data collected was transcribed by the researcher to make sure no important comments or notions were missed. Although, not every sigh, yawn or tone of voice were written down. Rather, if some non-verbal expression during the interview was interpreted to be significant, the interviewer actively asked for elaborations or further questions. This was to minimize misinterpretations by the interviewer.

For analyzing data summarizing and categorization were used. After transcription, the data was condensed question by question into compact form of information to draw the most significant findings from the collected data. Also, depending on the responses of each question, the key themes were identified from the data and further classified into categories to enable more clear results. (Saunders et al. 2009, 490)

3.2.6. Reliability and validity

Even though it is complex to assess the validity and reliability of qualitative research, some points are presented here to diminish the subjective interpretations of the examiner. (Flick 2009, 386)

The reliability of this study is ensured by keeping the research process very transparent and well-documented. For this reason, the research can be easily repeated in the same form and in the same conditions. For example, if the similar investigation is wanted to conduct in the other markets of the case company, it can be done through a similar process described in this methodology chapter and the results would be comparable with each other. However, due to the time-related constraints of the case study method, the results are not expected to be exactly the same in different time nor for different case company even though the same framework and method would be implemented. Selecting the sample group randomly, and recording and transcribing the data have also brought reliability to the research. (Flick 2009, 386)

When assessing the validity of the research, the subjectivity matter is evaluated. In this research the validity was tried to ensure by letting the company representatives and the

thesis supervisor to read the text during the process. They have all given their comments which have diminished the concerns of misinterpretations or too subjective stand on the topics and causalities, thus, brought in investigation validity. (Bernard 2006, 136; Flick 2009, 387)

4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this section the findings drawn from the interview data is summarized and categorized into meaningful findings and analyzed further towards conclusions.

4.1. Research Question A

What are the most preferred attributes that make an employer attractive to an ideal employee candidate of the case company?

Interview question 1

What are the 3 most important factors that make you perceive an employer attractive?

In this question certain factors were recognized to be frequently discussed as the attributes of an attractive employer: Company reputation as an employer, the general reputation of a company, company culture, career advancement opportunities the company offer, international opportunities, the operating field of the company, and the role the employee would be working as.

Table 4: The most significant factors affecting employer attractiveness

The most significant factors making an attractive employer
Company reputation as an employer
General company reputation
Company culture
Career advancement opportunities
International Opportunities
Industry / The operating field of the company
Job / Role

Table 5: The main factors affecting employer attractiveness (by interviewee)

Respondent	The factors making an attractive employer
Interviewee 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The operating field/industry (perquisite) - The company reputation as an employer - The innovativeness of the company - Company culture (internal)
Interviewee 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General company reputation - Company culture - Career advancement possibilities - Company size / stability
Interviewee 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Company reputation (“cool and innovative”, “young”) - Company culture (Flexibility etc.) - Career advancement possibilities - International working opportunities
Interviewee 4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Company reputation as an employer - Company culture (working culture) - Satisfying and interesting job role / description
Interviewee 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General company reputation - Company reputation as an employer - Company culture - Operating field / industry - International opportunities
Interviewee 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Career advancement possibilities - Company culture - Employee's opportunities to impact on decision-making
Interviewee 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Career advancement possibilities - General company reputation (and values) - International opportunities
Interviewee 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - General company reputation ("cool")' - Company visibility / presence - Company culture (how employees are treated) - Compensation

Company reputation and Company culture

The most important attributes in defining the company's attractiveness were the attributes relating to company reputation, whether it was about how the company's working culture would be or how the company is doing its business from the outsider's point of view.

In the above table the general company reputation and the company reputation as an employer are distinguished. However, it was not always clear whether the respondents were separating the two from each other. Moreover, company reputation as an employer (when specifically mentioned) and the perceived company culture was often seen much linked with each other. Company reputation as an employer was referred, for example, with a sentence "...it tells what is like to work there" as well as "how the company is treating its employees". It may be believed that if the company is a good place to work (based on some specific source), it does have a good reputation as an employer in general. The connection is expected to result from the assumption that people usually hear about companies' cultures from other people and the difference between opinions of some people and the generalizable opinion of public (reputation) is hard to separate from individual recipient's point of view.

In this paper, if the respondent explained an attribute by describing, how it is like to work in a company, it was classified under the 'company culture' category. If the attribute was clearly what was assumed, believed or known about the company as an employer, it was classified as 'company reputation as an employer'. Also employee references were classified in this category. If it was clearly stated the attraction (or the contrary) was about the general company reputation, e.g. "if there had been some suspicious incidents in the company", the response was classified in the 'general company reputation' category.

As a conclusion, it can be stated that company reputation, in any form, has a very significant impact on employer attraction. When looking at some specifications for what makes a company's reputation good, some adjectives, such as "cool", "young", "innovative" were mentioned. Also the presence in media was seen as a factor for a company that is hip and, thus, attractive. Also, it was seen meaningful that the personal network (friends, peer students or co-workers) of the respondent shared the positive perception of the company.

The company culture, according to the respondents, include several things, such as general atmosphere, the feeling of power in decision-making, the age of the co-workers (so they can be seen as friends as well as co-workers and the value would go beyond working hours), and how the company is treating its employees.

Career advancement opportunities

The other frequently repeated attribute was the possibility to advance in the company and gain experience for the future career. Some of the respondents stated that the possible development path was more important than the salary at the starting point of the career. However, when asked about the salary further, it was clear the compensation made a company more attractive over another if the other preferred attributes were fulfilled (suitable company culture / reputation and advancement opportunities).

International possibilities

A company being international was brought up as an attractive attribute several times. The opportunities to work abroad at some stage of the career were seen attractive but also just the international atmosphere and possibility to work in an international company (regardless of the location).

The operating industry and the job role

The industry the company operates in was mentioned a couple of times in the interviews. When further discussed, this as well with the job role, were seen as a prerequisite for looking at possible employers. For this reason, it may be that some of the respondents did not mention this, even though, it may be a significant starting point to look at the possible employer candidates. The respondents who discussed the job role mentioned that a satisfying job is linked to the working culture as it affects the atmosphere, the "feeling" that is there while working in a company.

All in all, as the starting point for this research, it can be stated that somewhat soft values are looked after when looking at this target group as employee candidates. These results are partly supported by the findings of Sivertzen et al. (2013) who found that non-material

attributes are more significant to employer attraction than material benefits, such as salary. This seems to be supported by the present study as well. However, what is very contradictory with the findings of Sivertzen et al., but in line with Berthon et al. (2005), is that the importance of work culture/atmosphere (category of 'social value' in the EmpAt scale) in this target group was seen very high whereas in the research of Sivertzen et al. a connection with employer attractiveness could not be shown.

On the EmpAt scale of Berthon et al. (2005), the development value was also very important benefit category for this target group as the respondents brought up career advancement opportunities and international opportunities as one of the most important attributes.

4.2. Research Question B

What are the employer brand perceptions towards the case company?

Interview question 2

What is your perception of the company X as an employer? Why?

The previous question revealed the preferred attributes of the target group towards an attractive employer. The goal of this question was to find out, how compatible these preferred attributes are with the case company perceptions. In this section, the perceptions are summarized first per respondent and then drawn together to a one employer brand image. The level of positiveness or negativeness of the employer brand image defines the level of employer attractiveness of the case company.

Respondent 1, Main perceptions:

Employer Reputation: Always searching for new employees, a lot of interns especially. Feels like a lot of work is done by interns with low salaries, it does not give a good impression of the employer. Also based on the job advertisement, a lot (of skills) is expected but, (based of word-of-mouth) relatively low compensation is paid. High-educated people are doing a job that does not require such education. Overall, not a fare employer → Negative perception

Company Culture: Youthful employer. The company might be a fun place to work, especially with own-aged people. But sales-type-of-work seen as tough and demanding work with high pressure with not enough compensation (word-of-mouth) → Neutral perception

Career Advancement Opportunities → Job continuity and advancement possibilities seen low → Negative perception

International Possibilities → Positive perception

Innovativeness → When compared to start-ups and technology companies, the case company does not seem very innovative but is not in the lowest category in its innovativeness level either. → Neutral perception

Respondent 2, Main perceptions:

Company Culture: Youthful place to work → Positive perception

Career Advancement Opportunities → Positive perception

Employer Reputation: A lot of announced internship positions which is perceived as work with low compensation. Negative experience from the company handling a recruitment process (cancelled position but was not informed to the applicant even though she had proceeded in the process). That made the respondent wonder if they are filled or not. She has heard a positive experience from a friend who has done an internship program but personal experience weights more. Before the recruitment process experience, the perception was positive → Negative perception

The Operating Industry / Job Role → Not interesting to the respondent → Negative perception

Respondent 3, Main perceptions:

Company Culture: From the respondent's perspective the company seems to be a fun place to work at. Young people as peers with similar interests (positive notion) (based on the

opinions of previous employees). Does not have a clear impression of working style etc. → Positive perception

Career Advancement Opportunities: The respondent holds an impression the company wants to keep the best in-house (word-of-mouth) → Neutral perception

International Possibilities: The respondent is not sure if there is possibility to work abroad but she has heard the company is very international → Neutral perception

Respondent 4, Main findings:

Company Culture: The respondent's perceptions about the company culture: good working environment/atmosphere, fun to work at, youthful and young people. → Positive perception

Employer Reputation: The respondent thinks that dominance of young people working for the company may mean that the salary levels are quite low, and the job roles/descriptions as well. The respondent considers, though, that it may be related to the fact that the company is quite young and has not developed its employee development programs a lot. The respondent holds an impression that the advancement path is very standardized and does not fit all, and that the potential in people might be missed with this kind of a procedure. They recruit to very similar roles all the time. → Neutral perception

Respondent 5, Main perceptions:

Company Reputation: Good reputation (based on 'public' and a friend has worked there) → Positive perception

Company Culture: The respondent thinks the company culture holds a good atmosphere and it is nice to work there, thus, interesting (based on word-of-mouth from current employees / Facebook) Own-aged people working is seen an attractive attribute. → Positive perception

Respondent 6, Main perceptions

Company Culture: Good team spirit and work culture which can be seen from the outside. The respondent has visited the company's birthday party as a guest and seen the company people in an informal situation and it has affected the perception a lot. The respondent relates this to the company culture and atmosphere. → Very positive perception

Career Advancement Opportunities: The respondent believes the good employees get to proceed on their career in the company. The career path is seen very structured, though, but seen still as a good thing. Taking part in decision-making and ideation is seen a bit restricted, though, and dependable on performance. → Neutral perception

Respondent 7, Main perceptions:

Operating Industry / Job Role: The respondent has profiled the company as a telemarketing company in her mind which does not seem attractive. Sales in general is not seen as interesting field by the respondent. If there was a job opening that would be outside sales, she could see the company differently. → Negative perception

International Opportunities → Positive perception

Company Reputation: The impression of how things are implemented (based on webpage and word-of-mouth) is not clear or good. The company reputation does not attract the respondent. → Negative perception

Employer Reputation: The respondent holds an impression that the company is not a long-term workplace; rather a pit stop to something better. Although, a lot of networking possibilities. Also, the company recruits all the time and that raises a question, why people do not stay. → Negative perception

Respondent 8, Main perceptions:

Company Culture: The respondent perceives the company as 'youthful', 'dynamic', 'cool'. She believes there are young people working and a good atmosphere. A lot of activities and people have fun. (Based on company web pages and word-of-mouth) → Positive perception

Employer Reputation: The respondent believes the company pays low salaries for trainees (and that people usually if not always start as trainees) (based on word-of-mouth) - this is not seen attractive. She believes, though, that the company is well managed and knows the company has been awarded in the 'Best place to work'-ratings, which gives a positive impression. However, the comments from previous employees play a more significant role. → Negative perception

Career Advancement Opportunities: The respondent believes employees usually start from the bottom and advance in-house but cannot start from a higher position - It is not attractive for someone who already has experience to start from a trainee position. → Negative perception

Overall findings for the research question B

Table 6: The most attractive employer attributes reflected on the case company

Attracting attribute	Positive perception	Neutral perception	Negative perception	Total of respondents reflecting the case company to the attribute
Reputation	1	1	4	6/8
Company culture	6	1	0	7/8
Career opportunities	1	2	2	5/8
International possibilities	2	1	0	3/8
Job role	0	0	2	2/8

The research question B holds the goal to find out how the case company is seen as an employer, i.e. it describes its employer brand image. The results were reflected with the same attributes that were found out in the research question A, in which the most attractive employer attributes were defined.

Based on this interview question, the respondents reflected the company/employer reputation, company culture, career advancement opportunities, international possibilities,

and the (expected) job roles. They were not given the classifications in the interview – rather their responses were classified under these categories.

As mentioned in the interview question 1, the company reputation and the employer reputation were not clearly separated. This phenomenon was repeated in this question also. For this reason, the responses were counted under general “Reputation” category.

Six out of eight respondents evaluated the reputation attribute. Mainly, the respondents discussed the company from an employer perspective. Only one perceived the reputation in a clearly positive light. Same amount went to the neutral evaluation. Many of the respondents saw both positive and negative sides in this attribute but, based on the source of the perception, they ended up in a rather negative conclusion. Thus, four respondents perceive the reputation as negative. This was not very strong negative result, though, and seemed easily affected (as the respondents hold both positive and negative perceptions about the company) However, the overall reputation of the case company is not especially attractive to the target group.

Seven out of eight respondents reflected their perceptions about the case company’s company culture. The company culture here is about what is like to work in the company and about the overall atmosphere inside the company. Six out of eight gave positive or very positive comments about the issue. One respondent gave a neutral response. Overall, the company culture is seen as a very attractive attribute in this company.

The opportunities for advancing in a career in this company were evaluated by five respondents. This divided opinions. Most of the respondents thought there are possibilities to advance in the case company but they are very restricted and follow a certain procedure or path. Often, for example, starting from an internship level was not an option because of former experience (this kind of position is seen downgrading) and low wage and it was seen as the only option in this particular company. For this reason, the opportunities were seen in a negative light. Overall, the career advancement opportunities in this company are not seen as an attractive attribute, even though, it is not seen totally negative way either.

Only three of the respondents discussed about the international opportunities in this question. This is because they saw the company as an international company which they preferred. It

was not, however, clear whether the company offered a possibility to re-locate abroad or is the company just a company with international people and operations. Overall, the result is rather positive in terms of international possibilities.

As mentioned before, the job role was often expected to be a prerequisite for job application and it was not defined as an attraction point. However, some interviewees brought up this issue as they held an impression of the case company that the job roles are only in sales and their own attitude towards sales job was very negative. In this question, this issue was brought up by two respondents and it was negative perception for both of them.

Innovativeness was brought up by only one respondent and she could not decide whether the company was really innovative or not. The end result for this attribute is that the innovativeness is not a strong attribute of the company in terms of employer attraction. However, it can be that innovativeness in general is seen as part of a company reputation rather than as an individual benefit or attribute of an employer. This is why this attribute was not taken into account as its own.

When looking at the overall score, the positive, i.e. clearly attractive scores were 10/23. During the interview discussions, the overall attitude towards the case company was not especially negative but neither was it very positively excited. To conclude, it seems the company may be perceived as an option to work for but not a company that drags in applicants by its reputation.

4.3. Research Question C

What are the effectors behind these employer brand perceptions?

The last research question was given most attention in the interview as it was expected to be the most complex. All the questions 3, 4, 5, and 6 concentrated on this. First the sources and their reliability of the employer brand image was explored. After that the process to find information about a possible employer was investigated.

Interview question 3

3.a: Where does that image come from? Can you name the sources of information that have initiated and/or affected your opinion?

3.b: What do you consider to be the most reliable source of information for you?

The third question investigated the overall sources for the current perceptions about the case company and its employer attractiveness. This was to understand the touchpoints the target group may have with the company. Also, it was figured out which of the sources were seen reliable by the respondents.

The sources mentioned were very similar between the interviewees. The main sources were:

1. Previous or current employees of the company who the respondent have had contact with either face-to-face or through social media
2. Friends or peers from university or work who have not first-hand experience from the company as an employer
3. Job advertisements from either social media or online recruitment sites

When asked the most reliable source of information, it was very clear that the current or previous employees of the company hold the most power in delivering reliable information. The contact with the previous/current employee does not have to be face-to-face; many of the respondents mentioned that they have seen status updates on social media sites which has been in a big role in building the image of the company as an employer. Even the personal experience with the company was experienced less valid information than a statement from a previous/current employee. Also, a friend's statement with no personal experience as an employee, were seen highly reliable - even though the original source of information was not clear. These findings are much in line with Fisbein & Ajzen's (1975) model of belief formation which was discussed in the section 2.1.2. As stated in their theory, a belief can be as strong whether it is based on a person's own observation or whether it is based on a secondary source, such as another person's statements depending on different factors, such as trust.

Table 7: The most important sources of information and their reliability

Interviewee	Sources of Information	The most reliable source
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Job advertisements at online recruiting sites - Company webpages - Friends/peer students (with no first-hand experience) - Previous/current employees 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The current or previous employees of the company
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal recruitment experience - Previous/current employees - Company excursion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The current or previous employees of the company
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Previous/current employees - Friends/peers (with no first-hand experience) - Job advertisements (social media) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The current or previous employees of the company - Friends and peers (with no first-hand experience)
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Previous/current employees - Job advertisements at online recruiting sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The current or previous employees of the company
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Previous/current employees (their social media updates) - Friends/peers (with no first-hand experience) - Job advertisements (social media) - Company webpages 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The current or previous employees of the company (when you want to know about the company culture) - Webpages (when you want to know about the company)
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Personal experience at the company's own event - Previous/current employees - Social media (especially friends' updates) - Friends/peers who have been a client of the company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The current or previous employees of the company
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Friends/peers (with no first-hand experience) - Previous/current employees - Job advertisements at online recruiting sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Friends/peers (with no first-hand experience) - Previous/current employees
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Previous/current employees - Friends/peers (with no first-hand experience) - Social media (especially friend's updates) - Job advertisements at online recruiting sites 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Previous/current employees - Friends/peers (with no first-hand experience)

Thus, when further explored, it was found that:

- The current/previous employer experience weights more than an own personal experience from recruitment process. The closer the friend (trusted or liked), the more weight the statement holds.
- It weighs more if the person (friend with no first-hand experience of the employer) is a close, more specifically trusted, friend with a similar mindset. This close of a friend's opinion is seen reliable even though the initial source of information may not be known.
- The company's own communication is not seen very effective, nor reliable. Very few of the respondents brought up any remembered situation of the company's own communication. Either it has not been done very much or it has not been noticed. As few had ever visited the company websites themselves - no other active approach towards the company was mentioned.

In addition to the main findings from this question, a couple of respondents mentioned they have visited the company webpage - however, this was not very common. Other mentioned contact points by some of the respondents were recruitment process with the company, a birthday party event of the company (avec), and a company excursion from the university. One respondent remembers that the company has represented at a recruitment fair (Arena Fair) but did not have any memory/impression of the company. Another respondent brought up that has not seen the company at recruiting fairs at all.

All in all, it is very clear that the current and previous employees have a great impact on how the case company as an employer is perceived. Word-of-Mouth seems to be the most trusted source of information - even if it is based on first-hand experience or not.

Interview questions 4 and 5

4.a. What would be the concrete steps for you to do if you were to find out whether you would want to work for the company X?

4.b. Based on these factors, what could be the issues that could prevent you from applying to the company?

5: This question was a follow-up and a practical task to see how the steps mentioned in the question four would realize as they were done. The task was given in the following form: "I now give you some time (10minutes) to gain some information about the company X as an employer. You can use any source of information you'd feel comfortable with. You can give your comments/insights about your findings while you are doing your research."

Interview questions 4 and 5 were to follow the path the target group would take if they were to search information about the target company while doing research on interesting employers. The question was set specifically to concentrate on the case company, not, for example, on searching information about interesting employers in general, because it was wanted to generate insights about the target company while the research as well. Question 4.a. first set the methods the target group would use while doing research. Question 4.b. was added to the question list during the first interview since while the person was discussing what she was looking for and how he/she evaluated that source, it became very natural to ask what she did not like or what factors might affect his/her desire to apply to the company.

The fifth question was a continuum for the fourth one: it went deeper on how the applicant searched information and how he/she evaluated what was found. It activated the respondents to really think what they would actually do, instead of just expecting themselves to follow a certain path.

The main touchpoints of the information paths

All the interviewees had their own expected or experienced path of searching information but clear similarities were found. The most common source of information was the company webpages and the former employees of the case company. In the table 8 the main touchpoints of the personal information paths of the interviewees are built as described by the interviewees. The paths are drawn from their free discussion, so they may not be in exact order. However, they do show the priorities of the respondents as the first ones came very easily and 'sure' from the top of their mind, which here is interpreted as something deeply learned.

Table 8: Main touchpoints of the personal information paths

Interviewee 4.a. Main touchpoints of the Information Paths	
1	Company webpages → Open positions (and their valuation) → LinkedIn
2	Company excursion from the university → (Positive first impression) → Company webpages → Social media
3	Online recruitment pages → Company webpages → open positions → evaluation → if recruitment process, then calls to former employees (friends)
4	Company webpages → Former employees (friends) → Google: Social media/Press → LinkedIn (if the highest employees are found from the webpages)
5	Company webpages → Open positions
6	Call to a friend → Company webpages → Google → discussion forums
7	Friends/Previous employees → Google → Company webpages and discussion forums
8	Friends/Previous employees → Discussion forums

The experimental phase – Information search analysis

In the experimental phase, the interviewees were allowed to use any method for information search they wanted. However, because the research setting was not totally private (as the interviewer was there monitoring the process), and the options were limited into one location. Thus, even though mentioned in the question 4, none of the interviewees wanted to actually

call/contact a friend during the experiment as the situation was only imaginary. Eventually, the main source for information search was a computer or a smart phone and the Internet.

Primary Sources

Company Webpages (the most important source):

In the experimental phase, it became clear that company webpages are the primary source of information while starting a search about a possible employer. What is looked for from the company webpage was both company information and open positions, depending on the interviewee and his/her former information on the company. After all, a lot of notions were made about the webpages.

What was found very common was that it was very hard to find information about the company itself (what they do, how they operate) from the webpages. The company information was considered very important when evaluating whether to apply or not. The respondents felt the webpage is only targeted for the company customers and it was complicated and frustrating to find the valuable information from job applicant's point of view. It was clear they do not want to spend the time to find the basic information. Empty slogans were not enough and company vision and mission were looked after. Moreover, the existence of both www.xxx.com and www.xxx.fi was found confusing.

Most of the respondents interpreted the company culture based on the career page. Based on the pictures and info about the organization structure, the company was seen as fun and youthful which, based on the previous findings about the attractive attributes, is a positive thing. However, the cues about a serious career were not presented. This was seen both attractive and not, as the people are looking for career, not just an "exchange experience with partying and drinking". This was not something that would prevent from applying but is not highly attractive for the goal-oriented people as valuable experience for further career is seen important.

Another finding about the webpages was that the career page and other parts of the company webpages are unbalanced. The respondents stated that on the other side there is only

business and on the other side only partying leaving the gap quite big, which does not give a coherent image of the company.

A long list of internship positions on the job openings list brought up some questions. Some of the respondents had noticed there are open intern positions all the time and it seems they are not filled at all. A lot of other roles are open as well which makes the respondents wonder whether the company is really growing a lot or is there a really such a high turnover which is not a good sign for an applicant. This left the respondents with confusion.

Job advertisements seem to be an important source of information for applicants. They also represent the company culture as well as are expected to define the purpose of the future employee in the position. In addition to the job requirements, the applicants are expecting to see what kind of person is the best fit to the position, as well as, what the company can offer to the employee. Instead of just the information, the style of the written advertisement is interpreted carefully – and makes a difference whether the employer is perceived attractive.

Lastly, it was found that the people that know the company better do not go through the webpages so intensively for information. They look for the feeling of the company or do not go to the webpage at all in the application phase.

Employee References

Besides the webpages, most of the respondents referred to the previous employees as the main source of information which is aligned with the former findings about the most reliable sources of information. An interesting finding was that as the webpages are not very clear, coherent or attractive, the employee references weight even more by their power.

When asked, many of the respondents stated they would contact a friend (former or current employee) to gain more information about the company as an employer. However, in the experimental phase, it became clear it needs to be a close enough friend to call or take personal contact. Instead, the needed information is often based on interpretation of their activity on social media. Sometimes also the perceptions are asked from current employee's friend if the friend is closer to the information seeker. As mentioned before, the information gained from a friend is trusted even though the information source would not be very well

known. The information looked for is usually about work culture or about job descriptions, not about general company information.

Secondary Sources

Google. Google search was often used as the first phase in the information search. Either people searched with the case company name and ended up to the company webpages (www.xxx.com or www.xxx.fi) and might have afterwards looked for experiences from discussion forums as the company search brought them up.

Social Media

LinkedIn. From LinkedIn the target group searches for working in the case company and whether there are friends who to call to. Also they might do a general overlook of the people and their positions in the company. No respondents stated they would visit specifically the case company's LinkedIn site – rather search for people connected to it.

Discussion forums. The information gained from the discussion forums is usually connected with the company reputation as an employer. However, it seems the respondents are very critical in terms anonymous discussion and what it presents. Thus, even though, there are negative comments online about the case company, it is not likely to prevent the target group from applying to a company but it might raise questions and concerns or strengthen existing negative perceptions if there are some.

Company social media sites. The respondents might visit the company Facebook, Twitter or YouTube account but they are critical as they believe companies make everything look pretty. As the company webpages are used for company information search and the employees are given the voice as the culture representatives, the corporate social media sites are not seen as important source of information when evaluating a company as an employer.

Recruitment process. The recruitment process was mentioned as an important indicator of a company as an employer. The impression of the interviewer was considered as the face of the company and was expected to represent the company values and working habits as the

employer in terms of how you would be treated as an employee. A good recruitment process would include also good management, information flow, announced schedule, and ongoing communication throughout the process. The company is expected to want the applicant, not just on the contrary.

Career fairs or company excursions. Some of the respondent mentioned career fairs and company excursions as a great source of information as it gives a chance to have a straight contact with the company representatives. This is seen as a reliable source, especially to interpret the company culture.

Issues decreasing employer attractiveness

The question 4.b. specified the issues that made an employer seem unattractive. The table 9 shows the main attributes and issues mentioned by the interviewees. Certain generalizations were drawn and the most significant findings are described below.

Negative References

When asked about the issues that might prevent the target group from applying to a company, the references were, again, a significant effector. If someone, the closer the more powerful, shared negative experiences about the employer, it was seen as an inhibitor. Based on the interview, if a good friend says negative things about the employer, it is assumable that the person does not even apply to the company. Instead, if the person is not close or presents a third party opinion, she/he may apply and make her/his own evaluation about the recruitment process and even about the job by trying, unless there are better options available.

Low salary

It was a little surprising that when asked in the first question the attributes that make a company an attractive employer, salary was mentioned very rarely. However, when the question was turned around to what would inhibit the interviewee from applying to certain company and position, the salary came up frequently. Thus, even though, money is not seen as a clearly attractive attribute, it does define whether to apply to a position. The level of what

is enough was not explored in this study but the difference between the two notions might be explained with what is seen 'enough' to maintain decent living standards.

Table 9: Issues lowering employer attractiveness

Interviewee 4.b. Issues lowering employer attractiveness	
1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low salary - Job ad (job description is not attractive, or the expectations are unrealistic for the role) - Friends' (previous or current employees) negative statements about work atmosphere
2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Badly managed recruitment process - Negative comments on social media - Bad work atmosphere (reference, word-of-mouth)
3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low salary - Unfit job culture (if, for example, comes through from the job ad or from a reference)
4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very negative references from former employees - Badly managed recruitment process
5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Job position / role - Bad work atmosphere (reference) - Low salary
6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negative references from former employees (friends), e.g. employees treated unfair (many cases) - No interesting positions
7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negative references from former employees (friends) - Recruitment process
8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Bad work atmosphere (references from previous employees / friends) - Low salary

Recruitment process

Unprofessional, rude, or otherwise poorly managed recruitment process may play a critical role in employee attraction. Either it increases the interest towards the company or does the opposite. As mentioned before, a recruitment process is expected to represent the company

values and working habits as the employer in terms of how you would be treated as an employee.

Job advertisement

Job advertisements were mentioned a few times by the interviewees, and were mainly brought up in cases where the company is unknown to the possible applicant. If the job ad is poorly written and does not highlight the attractive attributes, it is likely to inhibit the applicant to take action towards the company.

Job role

Job role, when seen as not interesting or motivating, is an important factor when deciding whether to apply or not. This, however, is not highly related with the employer brand. However, if the company is seen attractive enough, the target group is more likely to lower its requirements on the desired job role. In the case of the case company, it was often brought up that the highly sales-minded company culture does not seem attractive to the target group. Highly pressured atmosphere is generally seen unattractive by the target group and most of the respondents held this kind of perception about the target company.

Interview question 6

Did your initial perception change in any way while gaining more information? If so, was it a positive or a negative change? If not, did it strengthen? Why?

In the last question, the impact of information gain on the case company's employer attractiveness was explored. Instead of being interested in about the case company's brand perceptions per se, the strength of the initial perceptions and its vulnerability was investigated.

The responses in this question were divided clearly in three categories. When a person held a strong negative or positive perception of some attribute, it was easily strengthened but not changed. However, when a person did not have a previous expectation (information) on an issue or an attraction attribute, the gap was rather easy to fill in by information gain. Also, if

the perception was on a weaker basis; for example, from a less reliable resource for the respondent; the perception was easier to affect.

None of the respondents changed their perception about the case company employer image as a whole. However, some attributes were strengthened and some attributes were weakened during the information search. The most vulnerable attribute during this research was the employer reputation which is strongly related to the social media discussions. However, it was clear that the previously mentioned criticism towards this source existed, even though, it did arouse some questions and hesitancy. The reactions were, however, relatively mild. The attributes that strengthened by many respondents were internationalism, and youthful and fun work environment (however this was not only seen as a positive attribute as found in the previous questions).

It must be noted that none of the respondents contacted their friends (or other previous employees of the case company in their network), which was because of the research setting without privacy. The natural situation could have changed the behavior. Since the power of previous employees was mentioned so many times as the most powerful effector, it is expected to have more impact on the employer brand perceptions than the sources used in this experiment by the target group.

In the following chapter 5 the results and their meaning for the case company are discussed further.

5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The main purpose of this study was to investigate the current employer brand image of the case company among their ideal group of potential employees and find out what is it based on. The target group for this study consisted of 23-30-year old graduating or recently graduated business students living in Finland.

To answer to the first research question, it was explored what are the preferred employer attributes this target group seeks from an employer. In the second research question these attributes were compared to the perceptions of the case company. It was found that company reputation in general and as an employer are seen important when evaluating a company's attractiveness level as an employer. It has been suggested in the literature (e.g. Foster et al. 2010) that all the branding activities (corporate, internal and employer branding) should be aligned. However, according to this study, the different aspects of reputation are not only interconnected, they are mixed in the recipients' minds. It may seem that the respondents build only one brand image for a company which describes both the company as a business operator and as an employer. The different descriptions of the brand are drawn from the memory when needed. This is something that should be considered already in the case company's overall corporate brand strategy. The following questions could be the starting point: Who are we? How do we want to be seen? What is the message we want to deliver? The answers to these give the base for the question 'Who are we as an employer?' etc.

Currently the reputation of the case company was not very good. One reason for this may be that for the target group it was very unclear what the company was about; what they are doing, for who, and what is the benefit of it. It may be hard to imagine one to work in a company if you cannot imagine what you would be doing there. This may also be one reason for the fact that many of the respondents perceived the company not attractive because of its reputation as a very sales-oriented company. And not only sales but phone sales. This may not be a very attractive picture in one's mind, especially if you do not know who and how you would be working. (Note: The company is not in the telemarketing industry and most of its positions are not in direct sales). It has to be understood that branding is about painting pictures from small cues; highlighting the right ones is the key. Thus, it is not suggested to push the sales too much to front in the branding within this target group.

It was also clear that the potential employees of the case company value highly a positive work culture. It is very important for this target group that the daily work is pleasant and gives both psychological but especially social rewards. The perceptions of the case company's work culture were mainly positive. A lot of word-of-mouth-based beliefs of the company's atmosphere were shared in the interviews. However, it was found that the target group seeks to take the social benefits of employment outside the workplace – to create friendships non-related to work. In this context the age of the co-workers plays a role. This is definitely the main strength of the case company. It is suggested that these notions would be taken into consideration in the communications, but rather than pushing it through with aggressive marketing straight to the potential employees, it is recommended to encourage it through internal branding. Thus, enhancing these social relationships within existing employees by organizing varying opportunities to mingle, the word-of-mouth will likely to take care of rest among this age group. This is based on the finding that trust in the source is very important and based on this study, company's marketing is not seen reliable. Instead, friends and their friends (even though the source would not be known) have a tremendous impact on how the company is seen.

As stated before in the chapter 2.1.3., in internal branding it needs to be taken into account that satisfied workers are more easily affected by internal branding and the starting point should always be a satisfying working environment to the employees both economically and psychologically. Satisfied employees are more likely to deliver a positive brand message of their employer. (Punjaisri & Wilson 2011, 1531)

International opportunities are also a strength of the case company. It was mentioned as an important attribute for many people in this target group. This is something the case company should show actively in their communication. They are already perceived in a positive light in this category but creative ways of telling about this could bring even more brand value for the company.

Another important attribute for the target group was career advancement opportunities. For the case company, the perceptions towards this attribute were much unified. The career path inside the case company was seen very 'closed' as it was believed there is only one option: to start as an intern and maybe to proceed by certain steps. This was seen on the other hand positive (at least there are possibilities to proceed), but on the other hand negative: If you

already have a lot of experience, you cannot work for this company unless you want to take steps back. This might be something to think of in the case company. Being visible with other possible job openings and making them more available for also people outside the company, the employer brand image might be positively affected and make it more interesting among the target group in general.

Overall, to gain valuable experience for the future career was seen very important. The social and career advancement-related attributes/benefits were seen more important than economic rewards. However, even though the economic values were not rated as the priorities when choosing the attractiveness priorities, it was seen as a hindering attribute for employer attractiveness. These findings together are positive on one hand – the employees would be willing to work with less economic returns as long as they have a positive work atmosphere and gain experience for the future. This, however, does not suggest long-term commitment towards the employer. If the low salary is somewhat hindering factor for employer attractiveness and career advancement is more or less a short-term decision in one company, concentrating on these attributes will probably not prospect low turnover rate. Instead, there should be a balance of attributes that both attracts and retains the best people and their gained knowledge in the company a longer period of time.

The main source for employer brand building was clearly the company employees - previous and current. An important notion in this was that it does not have a significant difference if the perceptions behind the brand image came from a known source or from someone you did not know. The perception was stronger the closer the person was, but the same perception was held if the trusted person discussed the issue with no own direct experience. Thus, the effect of word-of-mouth is extremely strong. For this reason, the aforementioned internal branding is highly recommended to boost positive brand image.

As the word-of-mouth is perceived as the most important and as the most reliable source, it is important to think further, how the company can hinder negative word-of-mouth. For example, in the cases of lay-offs there might be, the exit process should be carefully planned. Whereas the positive brand image will bring in better and more motivated talent in with less effort, a well-planned exit path would also be a critical point to control the negative talk. It is worrying that some of the respondents considered the company as an employer that is 'not fair'. This was due to the beliefs of low salaries in high-demanding, result-based work. Also, the usage

of a large amount of interns as workforce was behind these kind of employer perceptions. This is not attractive for a potential employee even if the salary was not a main criterion for employer attractiveness. Fairness is something that was often discussed together with work culture and work atmosphere which, again, is highly important for the target group. This should be addressed in the employer brand strategy and its implementation. For example, as an opposite to 'internship usage', the case company could brand its internships as an internship program that offers specific possibilities for work life entry and experience in specific business areas (finance, marketing, HR etc.). Moreover, these positions could be divided into internships (students with no former experience) and trainee positions (students with some experience), and create separate compensation models. This could higher the employer image as a fair employer who offers great work experience with specific learning points. As mentioned, good experience (for future career) is seen more important than the salary.

As word-of-mouth cannot be controlled (just given a positive push), there were found certain touchpoints the case company can have control over. The content of job advertisement was mentioned as a significant source of employer evaluation. The employee candidates evaluate the job advertisements based on the basics such as job requirements and job descriptions but also based on the writing style. The used language indicates the reader, for example, the company culture in terms of how formal or informal it is. Thus, it is suggested that the job advertisements are created with careful considerations on what are the points to be communicated between the lines and what are not. Naturally, this all should be in line with the corporate brand strategy. The job advertisement is a good opportunity to communicate the found appreciated values mentioned in this study.

Other touchpoints with the potential employees brought up in this research were company visits and recruitment fairs/events, and recruitment process. These are touchpoints that might reach the potential employee even though he/she would not be actively looking for information on this specific company. This is, thus, initiated by the company itself and is about making the company visible. One respondent had an experience with the case company's company visit and was very impressed. It was clear that her existing brand image she had held was improved during the company visit because she got to experience the atmosphere herself (which was perceived as very positive). Combining this notion with the finding that employer brand perceptions are rather easily affected when the image held of the company is

not very strong and based on rather small amount of information and/or not based on a highly reliable source such as a friend, company visits could be one strategic touchpoint for the case company to easily deliver positive direct brand experiences. It is expected that this kind of very positive brand experiences are further shared through word-of-mouth in the long run.

Recruitment events are also an opportunity to build positive brand awareness. However, this touchpoint relies more on personal encounters with the company representatives than on a wholesome company experience during company visits. Recruitment process is also a critical point as it may have a very negative impact on employer brand perceptions when badly implemented. Well-structured plan for recruitment process with clear communication to the applicants is recommended for the case company. All in all, the tactics in delivering good employer brand signals to create favorable employer brand perceptions are different in the different methods but should be based on the same brand messages.

When the interest has been awaked, the potential employees are going to seek information about the potential employer. As it was found in this study, the most common information source is the company webpage. The main information the potential employees look for is about what the company is doing. This is to answer questions like: 'am I interested in this, does this motivate me?', 'does this suit to my values?', 'can I picture myself in this kind of environment?' The website is also evaluated by its looks. This may be especially important with this target group age as they value youthful, innovative, and cool companies which also bring a feeling of prestige to them.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, the main deliverables of this study are summarized under Main findings, Managerial implications, Suggestions for future research, and Limitations of the study.

6.1. Main findings

The purpose of this study was to answer the research question: **“What is the current stand of the employer brand image of the case company and how is it formed?”**

The main findings are presented shortly in the order of the sub-research questions.

What are the most preferred attributes that make an employer attractive to an ideal employee candidate of the case company?

The most attractive employer benefits/attributes for the prospective employees are: company reputation, company reputation as an employer, company culture, career advancement opportunities, and international opportunities. Also the job role and the industry the company operates in play a role in the attractiveness.

What are the employer brand perceptions towards the case company?

The current employer brand image of the case company is not positive enough to attract employees by its reputation. However, it is not significantly negative either – a lot of positive/attractive attributes could be recognized during the research. The clear strengths of the case company in terms of employer image are its company culture and atmosphere and its international opportunities. The most negative attribute was its reputation which was about perceptions of unfairness of the case company as an employer and somewhat about limited career advancement opportunities.

What are the effectors behind these employer brand perceptions?

Clearly the most important source for employer brand perceptions, and thus for employer brand image of the company, is the word-of-mouth. The current and previous employees are the most used source for forming the opinion about an employer. They are not only the most used source but they are also the most trusted source regardless whether the perceiver is in

direct or indirect contact with the original source (person). Personal direct experience with a brand/company is also a very powerful source of information but very few people who have not worked in the company have had such contact with the company.

6.2. Managerial implications

From the findings of this paper, the following implications were suggested:

1) Definition of internal brand image

Investigation on internal brand image is recommended to understand 1) how the employees perceive the case company as an employer, 2) what are the critical points for satisfaction and dissatisfaction, 3) what kind of message is delivered outside the work environment based on the internal employer brand image. This would help to plan the internal branding programs to impact the external employer brand image and, thus, employer attractiveness.

2) Internal branding

Internal branding program planning and execution is recommended to increase employer satisfaction and, through this, external employer attractiveness. It is also suggested to measure the success of the internal branding program

3) External employer branding program

It is suggested that the case company makes a clear plan and schedule for external employer branding. This could include the already suggested internship program re-branding, building brand messages around the valued benefits defined by the target group, re-designing the content of job advertisements, planning impressive, ongoing company visits/excursions for universities, and taking part on the career fairs with well-planned message. It is also suggested that the webpage of the company would be balanced and aligned between the customer-oriented website and the career page. They should be representing the same corporate brand, its values and hold clear, unique but genuine brand promises. Last, it is suggested to follow the social media conversations frequently to be aware of the message delivered outside the company.

6.3. Suggestions for future research

After it is found out how the company is perceived as an employer and the main resources for the perceptions defined, the company should make sure, the perceived attractive factors and the actual internal reality are aligned. This could be researched through in-depth investigation with the current employees. Aligning the two would affect the employee engagement and turnover.

In general, the impact of compensation could not be determined during this research. It was found from the literature and partly from this study that monetary compensation is not a significant benefit in employer attractiveness. However, it was found that it does affect negatively as a preventing factor (when too low). For this reason, it is suggested that this issue should be investigated further. For example, if there is a specific point (salary level) under/over which the salary does affect the attractiveness.

6.4. Limitations of the study

This paper is a case study reflecting the employer brand image of a specific company in a certain time, also concentrating on a quite narrow target group. For this reason, all the findings of this study are not generalizable for the processes of employer brand image formation in all cases. Moreover, the case study is only concentrating on the Finnish market of the case company. Thus, the results of the employer brand perceptions cannot be generalized to the other markets the company operates in.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX I: The Interview Questions – English and Finnish

1. What are the 3 most important factors that make you perceive an employer attractive?

1. Mitkä ovat kolme tärkeintä tekijää, jotka vaikuttavat mielikuvaasi työnantajan houkuttavuudesta?

2. What is your perception of the company X as an employer? Why?

2. Mikä on käsityksesi X-yrityksestä työnantajana? Miksi?

3.a. Where does that image come from? Can you name the sources of information that have initiated and/or affected your opinion?

3.a. Mihin mielikuvasi pohjautuu? Osaatko nimetä tietolähteitä, jotka ovat synnyttäneet/vaikuttaneet mielikuvan muodostumiseen?

3.b. What do you consider to be the most reliable source of information for you?

3.b. Minkä koet olevan itsellesi luotettavin mainitsemistasi lähteistä?

4.a. What would be the concrete steps for you to do if you were to find out whether you would want to work for the company X?

4.a. Jos sinun pitäisi päättää haluaisitko hakeutua töihin yritykselle X, miten käytännössä selvittäisit yrityksen houkuttavuutta itsellesi työnantajana?

4.b. Based on these factors, what could be the issues that could prevent you from applying to the company?

4.b. Näihin tekijöihin perustuen, mitkä tekijät voisivat estää sinua hakemasta tähän yritykseen?

5. I now give you some time (10minutes) to gain some information about the company X as an employer. You can use any source of information you'd feel comfortable with. You can give your comments/insights about your findings while you are doing your research.

5. Annan sinulle nyt hetken aikaa (10minuuttia) etsiä käytännössä X yrityksestä tietoa työnantajana. Saat käyttää vapaasti mitä tahansa tietolähteitä, jotka tuntuvat sinulle luonnollisilta. Voit kertoa löydöksistäsi samanaikaisesti (tutkiessasi asiaa).

6. Did your initial perception change in any way while gaining more information? If so, was it a positive or a negative change? If not, did it strengthen? Why?

6. Muuttuiko alkuperäinen mielikuvasi mitenkään saadessasi lisää tietoa? Jos kyllä, oliko muutos positiivinen vai negatiivinen? Jos ei, vahvistuiko tietty mielikuva? Miksi?