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THE ENTICING EMPLOYER – EXAMINING THE DIMENSIONS OF EMPLOYER BRAND EQUITY AND EMPLOYER BRAND GAPS IN THE FINNISH IT SECTOR

Master's Thesis

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ABSTRACT

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As economies increasingly rely on services to generate value, the demand for skilled labor has increased rapidly. The competition for employees is especially steep in the Finnish IT sector, which – despite increasing demand – sees fewer new graduates enter the workforce each year. To help attract and retain human capital, many companies have turned to employer branding as a source of differentiation and added value.

Building on signalling theory, information asymmetry and theories on branding and employer branding, this study explores the dimensions of employer brand equity as experienced by employees in the Finnish IT sector. Through qualitative analysis, we examine seven semi-structured interviews collected from one case company and assess the relationship between the expected employer brand and the experienced employer brand. The data collection was carried out from November 2019 through January 2020.

The findings indicate that employees within the Finnish IT sector prefer 'softer' values, such as communality and self-fulfillment over 'harder', economically minded or career-oriented values when evaluating between employers. Furthermore, based on the findings we suggest that where employers fail to meet the expectations of their employees, employee dissatisfaction can be mitigated through mutual trust and open communication.

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Muutos kohti palveluyhteiskuntaa on johtanut ankaraan kilpailuun osaavasta työvoimasta. Kilpailu on erityisen voimakasta suomalaisella IT-alalla, jolle kasvavasta kysynnästä huolimatta valmistuu vuosi vuodelta vähemmän uusia osaajia. Monet yritykset hakevatkin alati kiristyvään kilpailuun vipuvoimaa työnantajabrändäyksestä, jonka avulla pyritään houkuttelemaan uusia työntekijöitä sekä pitämään kiinni nykyisistä.

Tässä tutkielmassa tarkastellaan suomalaisten IT-alalla työskentelevien työntekijöiden kokemaa työnantajabrändipääomaa signalointiteorian, epäsymmetrisen informaation sekä erinäisten brändäys- ja työnantajabrändäysviitekehysten kautta. Tutkielmassa analysoidaan marras–tammikuussa 2019–2020 yhdestä case-yrityksestä kerättyjä yksilöhaastatteluja laadullisen analyysin menetelmin ja arvioidaan suhdetta odotetun ja koetun työnantajabrändin välillä.

Tutkielman löydökset viittaavat siihen, että työntekijät suomalaisella IT-alalla arvostavat työnantajabrändissä pehmeitä arvoja, kuten yhteisöllisyyttä ja itsensä toteuttamista enemmän kuin kovia ura- tai talouskeskeisiä arvoja. Tutkielmassa esitetään myös, että työntekijän odotusten ja koetun todellisuuden ollessa epäsuhdassa, voidaan työntekijän tyytymättömyyttä lieventää avoimen kommunikaation ja keskinäisen luottamuksen avulla.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

What a ride! Today marks both the completion of a master’s degree and a thesis reborn. This thesis was initially conceptualized with an altogether different idea for an altogether different case company. But life happens, and as such, with a change in employment the work was left on the backburner only to be revived in the fall of 2019 with a new concept, a new case company, a new drive and a new plan of attack. And here we are – finally.

I would like to extend my sincerest thanks to the case company for the enthusiasm with which they jumped on the project as well as all their help in scheduling and setting up the interviews. I would also like thank both of the two supervisors I’ve worked with throughout this process, professor Sanna-Katriina Asikainen and associate professor Anssi Tarkiainen, for their support and guidance. Lastly, I’d like to thank my friends, my family and particularly my father for constantly asking me whether I was “done with my thesis already or not”.

In Helsinki, May 30th, 2020
Roope Huotari

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1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this thesis is to examine the concept of employer branding in the context of a specific case company within the Finnish IT sector. The paper begins by briefly discussing the background of the study as well as the external factors which have led to the managerial problem at the heart of this research.

After examining the background, the managerial problem concerning the manifestation, consequences and nature of the case company's employer brand will be presented in detail. This problem, then, will be examined and scrutinized through a review of existing literature on the topic.

The aim of the literature review is to uncover research which could provide frames of reference, key concepts, theories and frameworks useful in examining the phenomenon in this context. A secondary goal is to expose possible research gaps in the employer branding literature, which this thesis could in turn help fill.

1.1 Background

The research problem addressed by this thesis is first and foremost managerial in nature and concerns the use of employer branding in attracting and retaining new talent. The challenge is most evident in the day-to-day activities of the company's marketing and HR functions. In order to give the reader a comprehensive image of the situation, a brief overview of the background of the study will be presented before introducing the research problem in detail.

According to reports by Statistics Finland (Tilastokeskus), the Finnish IT sector now employs roughly 20.000 individuals more than it did ten years ago (Teknologiateollisuus 2018). This amounts to nearly a 40% increase in the number of workers.

Not only is the demand for recruits on the rise, reports show that the supply of new graduates is actually declining, further intensifying the already-stark competition for talent. According to the business think-tank EVA, the overall number of new “IT-graduates” in Finland has declined in the 21st century and is projected to keep decreasing. The report defines “IT-graduates” as those graduating with one of the following degrees: Master of Science, Information Technology; Master of Arts, Computer Science or Bachelor of Engineering, Information Technology. The report goes on to state that despite high demand, the number of new students accepted to these degree programs has trod water for the past decade and even receded slightly. Citing investigations by The Finnish Information Processing Association and The Finnish Software and E-business Association, the EVA report concludes that if the status quo remains, the talent shortage in the industry could reach anywhere from thirty to sixty-thousand individuals by 2030. (Ahopelto, 2018)

The extreme competition has already manifested itself in a number of different ways. Even though wage trends have stagnated in recent years, the median pay for ICT professionals in Finland is still the highest among all private sector industries (Serén 2016, Tilastokeskus 2018). In addition to offering higher wages, many employers are investing into the wellbeing of their employees. Flexible hours, referral bonuses, office parties, sports clubs etc. are becoming increasingly common tools in attracting and retaining new talent (CGI.fi 2018, Suojanen 2018, Vatanen 2018).

1.1.1 Managerial problem

In recent years, the case company has grown exponentially. Between 2016-2018, the company has expanded to new markets and nearly doubled its yearly revenue. At the same time, the amount of personnel has grown by roughly 80%. The considerable year-on-year growth has come with some growing pains: new recruits are increasingly difficult to come by and the company’s human resources functions have been stretched thin. This circumstance has been amplified by the seemingly ever-increasing competition for recruits within the Finnish IT services and consulting industry. The combined weight of these two challenges has encouraged the case company to turn to employer branding as a possible remedy. Although techniques and methods associated with employer branding are widespread within the case company, the company has not examined the underlying causalities of the phenomenon. Questions such as “What attracts recruits to the organization?” and “How do we ensure we retain the best people?” remain largely unanswered.

In order to position themselves as an attractive employer, the company needs to determine what characteristics recruits look for and how well these characteristics play out within their organization. The goal of this research is to shed light on both questions: to find what employees look for in an ideal employer and to examine how well the case company measures up on these criteria. In doing so, the research seeks to identify potential gaps between the ideal and the realistic, and to hopefully raise awareness on any issues the case company ought to address.

1.2 Literature review

According to Webster & Watson (2002, xiii, xix), the purpose of a literature review is to create *“a firm foundation for advancing knowledge”*, to *“facilitate theory development”* and to *“identify critical knowledge gaps and thus motivate researchers to close this breach”*. The authors state that a robust literature review is concept-centric, drawing from multiple research methodologies, sets of journals and geographic regions (Webster & Watson 2002, xv-xvi).

This literature review begins with a brief introduction on the history and the literature of branding: how the concept was first introduced, how it has evolved throughout the years and how the phenomenon is approached now. After the phenomenon of branding is introduced as a general abstraction, the focus of the review shifts to the more novel concept of employer branding – seeking to provide the reader with a general overview of this contemporary approach and to identify potential gaps in the existing literature.

At its narrowest, in the context of consumer-based marketing, a brand can be defined as a name, logo, symbol, design or trademark of a product or an organization (Schultz, D. E., Barnes, B. E., Schultz, H. F., & Azzaro, M. 2009, 10). Thought to have originated as a way of marking objects or livestock, branding has since evolved to an interdisciplinary and multi-faceted creation (Bastos & Levy 2012, 349-363). Over the years, the definitions have broadened with more modern approaches extending the phenomenon to entire organizations. A popular definition provided by Urde (2013, 750), for example, argues that the corporate brand comprises of eight dimensions: the company's *value proposition*, its *relationships* and *position* within the market, the *personality* and *expression* of its communications, its *mission and vision*, its *culture* and its *competences*.

Although its roots run deep in consumer-based marketing, tn the context of recruiting branding is still a relatively new phenomenon. According to multiple sources (e.g. Lubecka 2013, 8; Pawar 2018, 162; Vatsa 2016, 9) the term *employer branding* was first coined by Simon Barrow (1990) in his talk to a UK management audience. The first academic paper on the phenomenon was published in 1996 and sought to test *"the application of brand management techniques to human resource management"* through qualitative research on top executives of 27 UK companies (Ambler & Barrow 1996, 185). The authors found that through the principles of *relationship marketing*, organizations' HR and marketing activities could indeed share a common framework where thoughtful brand management facilitates internal relationships and HR practices illuminate customer marketing activities (Ambler & Barrow 1996, 201). Thus, through their findings Ambler & Barrow suggest that companies adopt a holistic approach to marketing and HR, where one side benefits the other.

The definition of an employer brand provided by Ambler & Barrow (1996, 187) has been widely accepted and used in later literature (e.g. Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 502; Berthon, Ewing & Hah 2005, 153-154; Ewing, de Bussy & Berthon 2002, 11).

Further research has focused on understanding the different dimensions, functions and consequences of employer branding. Wilder, Gudergan & Lings (2010) examined the strategic implications of employer branding for staff recruitment whereas Davies (2008) focused on the influence of employer branding on managers. Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) sought to conceptualize the topic and create a framework for further research while Berthon, Ewing & Hah (2005) delved into the dimensions of attractiveness in employer branding. The effects of the phenomenon have also been examined throughout various geographical areas and industries (e.g. Pawar 2018 for the Indian IT industry, Lievens 2007 for the Belgian army).

Though the popularity of employer branding has surged both in organizations and in academic literature, researchers have largely ignored the phenomenon of *brand gap* in this novel context. The brand gap, as defined by Neumeier (2005, 15), describes the gap between what the brand wants to be, show and communicate and what the consumer experiences. While this phenomenon has been explored extensively in consumer-based marketing (e.g. Gonzalez, Val, Justel & Iriarte 2016; Clatworthy 2012), little attention has been placed on employer branding. Thus, by seeking to understand what employees look for in an ideal employer and how their current employer stacks up on these criteria, this research hopes to add to the existing literature on employer branding by identifying potential brand gaps between the ideal and the lived experience.

1.3 Research aims and questions

After conducting the literature review, the aims and research questions of this thesis are now defined.

By focusing on a specific case company, the research aims to illuminate the status of employer branding in the Finnish IT industry. By identifying dimensions of employer brand equity as expressed by the employees of the case company, this study aims to build a basis on which further researcher can be conducted and the phenomenon explored in a broader context. This research also aims to provide an overview of the current status of employer branding as it is conducted by companies in the Finnish IT industry. Furthermore, through this research, we hope to add to the existing literature on employer branding by examining the gap between what employees look for in an ideal employer and how these criteria apply to their current environment. Through including both new junior recruits and established senior employees in the data collection process, we hope to also add to the existing literature by illuminating the effects of seniority on the desired qualities of a preferred employer.

The research questions proposed in this study are:

Q1: What are the dimensions of employer brand equity as experienced by the employees?
Q2: How do employees evaluate their current employer based on these dimensions of employer brand equity?
Q3: How do employees assess the gap between the ideal employer brand and the experienced one?

By providing answers to these three research questions, this study hopes to answer the following main research question:

MRQ: What is the relationship between the expected employer brand and the experienced employer brand in the Finnish IT sector?

1.4 Theoretical framework

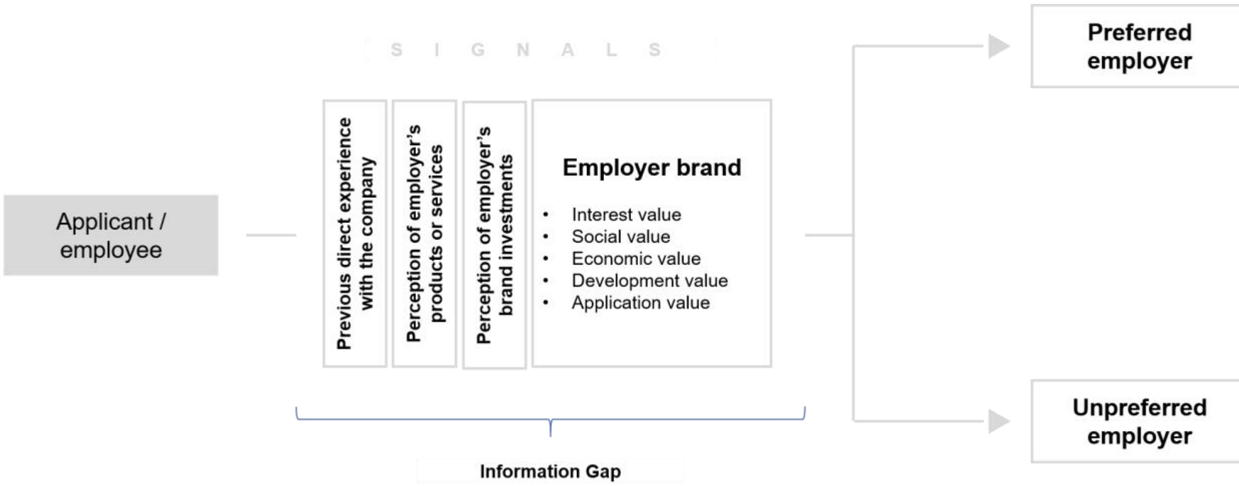

Figure 1. Theoretical framework building on Olson & Jacoby (1972), Erdem & Swait (1998), Wilden et al. (2010), Berthon et al. (2005) and Erhart & Ziegert (2005)

The theoretical framework of this study, illustrated in figure 1, has its roots in signalling theory and information economics, as the phenomena are described and presented by Olson & Jacoby (1972) and Erdem & Swait (1998). Building on these two theories, Wilden, Gudergan & Lings (2010) argue that in the absence of personal experience, employees and applicants evaluate employers based on their employer brand, which the authors see as a summary of all of the available informational cues – or signals – regarding the company as an employer. Berthon, Ewing & Hah (2005, 162) argue that the employer brand can generate value on five dimensions: interest, social, economic, development and application. Combining signalling theory with other theoretical approaches, Erhart & Ziegert (2005) suggest that when evaluating organizations as potential employers, individuals consider not only the organization but also their self-image and assess the fit between the two.

Thus, to summarize the theoretical framework in figure 2, the value of the employer brand lies in the information it contains. If the brand message is deemed trustworthy, employees and potential recruits rely on it to bridge the gap between the known and the unknown – they use the employer brand form an image of the organization as an employer and assess how well their personal needs and desires fit that image. As a result, employees and potential recruits categorize the organization as either a preferred employer or an unpreferred one.

1.5 Key concepts and their definitions

Employer branding	A strategic marketing and human resource management process which aims to shape the employer image and in turn increases the attractiveness of the organization to potential employees. Employer branding also impacts an organization's culture and its identity, which contribute to employer brand loyalty and thus lead to increased employee productivity. (Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 502-505)
Employer brand	A widely accepted definition is provided by Ambler & Barrow (1996, 187), who present the concept as *"the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company"*.
Brand identity	Brand identity refers to the way in which a company seeks to identify and differentiate itself. Brand identity can be divided into different components and is oftentimes communicated through a branding strategy. (Nandan 2005, 265-266)
Brand equity	Brand equity determines how favorably or unfavorably individuals react to similar attributes

within competing brands. In consumer marketing, *"a brand is said to have positive customer-based brand equity when consumers react more favorably to an element of the marketing mix for the brand than they do to the same marketing mix element when it is attributed to a fictitiously named or unnamed version of the product or service."* Brand equity is dictated by *brand awareness* and *brand image*. (Keller 1993, 1)

Brand awareness The combined effects of brand recognition and brand recall – brand awareness dictates how easily individuals recall their prior exposure to a brand when given either the brand or the product category as a cue (Keller 1993, 3).

Brand image In employer branding literature, *brand image* is often used interchangeably with *employer brand* (see e.g. Lievens, Van Hoye & Anseel 2007). In the context of consumer branding, brand image can be defined as a sum of the mental associations target groups hold of a given brand. These associations can be divided into functional and symbolic attributes. (Burmann, Schaefer & Maloney 2008, 158) Where *brand identity* can be seen as the intended outcome of branding activities, the *brand image* reflects the actual outcome in the minds of target groups (Nandan 2005, 268).

Employer attractiveness The envisioned benefits a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization. Employer attractiveness is intrinsically linked to the more general concept of brand equity, i.e. the more attractive an employer, the higher its employer brand equity. (Berthon, Ewing & Hah 2005, 156) In accordance with the conclusions presented by Berthon et al. (2005, 155) and Lievens & Slaughter (2016, 411), employer attractiveness – for the purposes of this research – is defined as brand equity within the employer branding context.

1.6 Research methodology

In conducting this study, we hope to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of employer branding in the context of a specific case company within a specific industry and a specific geographical location. Instead of providing conclusive results, the study aims to illuminate the phenomenon in this novel context and to discover potential problems and guidelines for further research to address. Because of this exploratory nature, the empirical part of the study will be conducted using a qualitative research approach.

Qualitative analysis, as described by Alasuutari (2011, 38) seeks to understand the logical structure found within a singular phenomenon. According to the author, the aim of a qualitative study is to holistically combine the research material into one logically sound explanation. For this research, data has been collected through seven individual interviews conducted using a semi-structured interview format. The interviews are transcribed, and the transcriptions analyzed through qualitative content analysis. The content analysis process as described by Carney (1990) and Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2002, 111) seeks to interpret text data through summarizing and packaging the data, repackaging and aggregating it and finally developing and testing propositions to construct an explanatory framework.

1.7 Structure of the study

In the following chapters, this study examines the academic literature behind the theoretical framework presented in section 1.4. First, in chapter two, general concepts of branding such as brand equity, brand image and brand awareness are introduced and examined. With this general overview, the aim is to identify the most important concepts and frameworks of branding theory as they relate to employer branding and thus to this study. Afterwards, in chapter three, these components are assessed hand in hand with the existing employer branding literature. Chapter three also discussed the history of the employer branding phenomenon and examines its different applications throughout the years. After the theoretical overview on branding and employer branding, the findings of the literature review are summarized in chapter four.

The empirical section of the study begins with examining the research design and methodology in chapter five. Here, the selected approaches for data collection and analysis – qualitative research, semi-structured interviews, content analysis – are introduced and justified. In chapter five, the case company and the interviewees are discussed in detail and the validity of the findings is assessed. Afterwards, in chapter six, the research findings are introduced and discussed. Here, each emerging theme is examined in its own sub-chapter through three perspectives: in an ideal context, in the interviewees' current context and in the context of the industry at large. Once the findings of the research are presented, they are then discussed in relation to existing theoretical frameworks. Finally, conclusions and suggestions for further research are presented.

2 BRAND EQUITY, BRAND IMAGE AND BRAND AWARENESS

In a traditional marketing context, brand equity is defined as the added value of the brand name (Farquhar 1989, 24; Keller 1993, 1; Yoo, Donthu & Lee 2000, 195). For example, the product of a brand with high brand equity can generally be sold for a larger price premium than its unbranded competitor. Thus, managing brand equity is not only important from a marketing standpoint, but can also affect the firm's financial performance (e.g. Kim, H. B., Gon Kim, W. & An, J. A. 2003).

Keller (1993, 2) defines consumer-based brand equity through two dimensions: what customers a) know of the brand and b) how well they remember the brand. The former, also referred to as **brand image**, is comprised of the mental connections customers associate with a certain brand. The latter, commonly known as **brand awareness**, relates to brand recall and recognition – how well consumers remember the brand (Keller 1993, 2).

2.1 Brand image

Keller (1993, 5) goes on to state that these associations can be further divided into six subcategories: product-related or non-product-related attributes; functional, experiential or symbolic benefits; and overall brand attitudes. In the context of employer branding, the product-related dimensions provide little added value and will thus not be discussed further.

Keller (1993, 4-6) defines the latter four in the following manner:

Functional benefits	Motivated by desires such as problem removal or avoidance, functional benefits refer to the intrinsic advantages of products and services, i.e. their main use and their main value.

Experiential benefits	Satisfying experiential needs, experiential benefits relate to what it feels like to use certain products or services.
Symbolic benefits	The more extrinsic benefits of using certain products or services, symbolic benefits correspond to underlying needs for e.g. social approval or personal expression.
Brand attitudes	A sum of the benefits and attributes associated with a given brand – brand attitudes reflect individuals' overall evaluations of a brand on all three previously-mentioned dimensions.

2.1.1 Brand attitudes

Keller (1993, 6) notes that while brand attitudes are often simplified as a function of (to a certain extent) observable qualities associated with the brand, they also serve a value-expressive function. According to Katz's (1960, 170) well-established work into the psychology of attitudes, individuals derive satisfaction from expressing attitudes which correspond with their personal values or self-image. Thus, when creating multivariate measures for brand attitude, a general component for brand attitude separate from the attributes and benefits of the brand is often included.

This gap between observable brand qualities and brand attitudes can be explained through the Elaboration Likelihood Model. According to Petty & Cacioppo (1986; 126, 134 & 166), attitudes are not only altered through persuasive arguments but also by environmental cues, particularly when the individual's prior knowledge and motivation to process new information are low.

Petty & Cacioppo (1986, 127) define attitudes as “general evaluations people hold in regard to themselves, other people, objects and issues” and state that they stem from either behavioral, cognitive or affective origins. Thus, perceptions on quality can also be seen as an attitude.

Olson & Jacoby’s (1972) findings support Petty & Cacioppo’s (1986) Elaboration Likelihood Model and highlight the importance of environmental cues in the formation of brand attitudes.

2.1.2 Brand image in the employer branding context

Backhaus & Tikoo (2004, 505) find that while not applicable word for word, many of the dimensions proposed by Keller (1993) are also found in the employer branding context. For example, functional benefits relate to the objective and explicit qualities of a potential employer such as salary and benefits. Symbolic benefits, on the other hand, relate to perceptions of prestige and social approval associated with a given company. Keller’s (1993) dimensions also correspond well with Ambler & Barrow’s (1996, 187) initial definition of an employer brand as a package of functional, psychological and economic benefits.

However, product marketing frameworks such as the one proposed by Keller (1993) fail to include all of the factors involved in complex employment decisions. These factors include – among other needs – the humanitarian desire to apply and teach one’s skills, express creativity and to progress on your career. Thus, to meaningfully examine brand image in employer branding, we need to consider an alternative framework built for this specific context: employer attractiveness.

2.1.3 Employer attractiveness

In their exploratory research, Berthon et al. (2005, 156) conceptualize and define the dimensions of employer attractiveness. The authors define the term as *"the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organisation"* (Berthon et al. 2005, 151). This definition is widely used in later research (e.g. Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen 2013, 474; Wilden et al. 2010, 12).

Berthon et al. (2005, 155) note that the concept of employer attractiveness can be considered an antecedent of the more general concept of employer brand equity. Thus, employer attractiveness can be seen as a translation of brand image in the employer branding context. This proposition is supported by Lievens & Slaughter (2016, 411) who refer to Berthon et al's dimensions of employer attractiveness as the "employer image scale".

Building on Ambler & Barrow's (1996, 187) three-fold definition, the researchers found employer attractiveness to consist of a total of five distinct dimensions. They conclude their findings to be a refinement and extension of the three dimensions proposed by Ambler & Barrow: functional, psychological and economic (Berthon et al. 2005, 162). The resulting model comprises of five categories: social value, development value, application value, interest value and economic value. According to the researchers, the psychological benefits expressed by Ambler & Barrow are captured in the interest and social value dimensions whereas the functional benefits are divided between the development and application value categories. Both models include a separate measure for economic value.

The authors define the five resulting factors as follows (Berthon et al. 2005, 159-162):

Interest value	*"The extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides an exciting work environment, novel work practices and that makes use of its employee's creativity to produce high-quality, innovative products and services."*
Social value	*"The extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides a working environment that is fun, happy, provides good collegial relationships and a team atmosphere."*
Economic value	*"The extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides above-average salary, compensation package, job security and promotional opportunities."*
Development value	**"***The extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides recognition, self-worth and confidence, coupled with a career-enhancing experience and a springboard to future employment."*
Application value	*"The extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides an opportunity for the employee to apply what they have learned and to teach others, in an environment that is both customer orientated and humanitarian."*

These five dimensions proposed by Berthon et al. as well as the twenty-five individual attributes they are comprised of, have been used as a baseline for numerous employer branding studies (e.g. Arachchige & Robertson 2011; Roy 2008; Schlager, Bodderas, Maas & Luc Cachelin 2011).

2.2 Brand awareness

Whereas brand image relates to *what* consumers associate with a certain brand, the concept of brand awareness encompasses whether consumers recall the brand in the first place (Keller 1993, 2).

One of the fundamental building blocks of modern marketing and advertising, brand awareness has been comprehensively examined in a myriad of different theoretical contexts and business applications. Hoyer & Brown (1990) discuss the relation between brand awareness and choice in repeat-purchase product decisions, Oh (2000) examines the phenomenon’s effect on customer value and behavioral intentions and Percy & Rossiter (1992) discuss the role of brand awareness in advertising strategies. Some researchers have also examined ways to structure, measure and quantify the phenomenon (e.g. Laurent, Kapferer & Roussel 1995; Aaker 1996).

According to Laurent et al. (1995, 170), there are three classical measures of brand awareness: spontaneous, top-of-mind and aided. The authors define spontaneous awareness for a given brand as the percentage of respondents who name the brand after being asked to list companies in a specific product category. Top-of-mind, on the other hand, is calculated as the percentage of interviewees naming a given brand first. Lastly, Laurent et al. define aided awareness as the percentage of respondents indicating knowledge of the given brand after being provided a list of brand names. The structure presented by Laurent et al. has seen wide use in later literature. For example, Lu, Chang & Chang (2014, 258-261), use the Laurent et al.’s (1995) findings in measuring brand awareness in influencer marketing.

2.2.1 Brand awareness in employer branding

As previously discussed, brand equity plays a crucial part in employer branding strategies. Thus, brand awareness as a key building block of brand equity, is also as relevant in the employer branding context as it is with consumer goods.

This conclusion is supported by the seminal work of Ambler & Barrow (1996, 191), who see awareness as part of the legitimate measurement of employer brand equity even when it comes to current employees. The authors note that while recognition of the employer brand is assured with current employees, the concept is two-dimensional, covering not only the breadth of the population who recognize the brand but also the depth – the ease at which recognition is achieved. Ambler & Barrow's conclusions clearly echo the three-fold structure of brand awareness proposed by Laurent et al. (1995, 170), with breadth of recognition alluding to spontaneous and aided methods of measuring brand awareness and top-of-mind covering the dimension of depth or ease of recognition.

2.3 Brand equity

According to Kapferer (2008, 9), modern marketing literature views brands as intangible assets which can be managed to produce benefit for the business. Hence, the author continues, brands are now considered part of a company's capital – a part that can be managed and exploited. This shift in thinking has given rise to the concept of brand equity – a measurable description of brand strength and favourability.

Kapferer (2008, 10) defines brands and brand equity through two dimensions: intangibility and conditionality. Even though the value of a brand is created solely through mental connections, Kapferer argues that no brand can generate value without the products or services attached to it. Thus, he concludes, all brands are evaluated through their connected products and services and hence all brand management should start with developing products and services that represent the brand.

While Keller (1993, 8) defines brand equity through its effect on consumer response, other measures such as the brand equity ten proposed by Aaker (1996, 103) emphasize behavioral outcomes such as loyalty. In his book, Kapferer (2008, 13-14) prefers the official Marketing Science Institute definition of brand equity as *“the set of associations and behaviour on the part of a brand’s customers, channel members and parent corporation that permits the brand to earn greater volume or greater margins than it could without the brand name”*. This definition coined by Leuthesser (1988, 31), is one of the seminal definitions of brand equity and has been widely used in later literature (incl. Kapferer 2008; Chaudhuri & Holbrook 2001).

Despite being one of its oldest definitions, Leuthesser’s interpretation of brand equity encapsulates the different dimensions of branding quite holistically – in addition to the traditional customer-based view, Leuthesser covers the brand’s effect on other stakeholders of the company as well. The definition also captures both mental and behavioural outcomes of brand equity and comments on the desired results of the branding process, too.

2.3.1 Brand equity as a signalling phenomenon

In their research into consumer psychology, Erdem & Swait (1998) provide an interesting take on the role of brand equity and brands as market signals. The authors argue that in markets with imperfect and asymmetrical distribution of information, firms use brands as a vehicle for product information and positioning. Erdem & Swait (1998, 131) claim that when faced with uncertainty around product attributes, consumers turn to the company brand, which they examine as a market signal to help assess the validity of the company’s claims product claims. The stronger the brand equity, the more trustworthy the company’s claims. The authors conclude that this reduced uncertainty lowers information costs and the risk perceived by consumers.

A similar view of brands and brand equity has also been expressed by Olson & Jacoby (1972). Looking into consumers’ perceptions on value and quality, the authors note that product quality is often assessed through intrinsic and extrinsic cues. Intrinsic cues relate to integral product attributes, whereas extrinsic cues refer to features not part of the physical product, such as reputation or brand name. While the authors found that individuals perceive intrinsic cues as more credible indicators of product quality, they also note that in the absence of intrinsic information, quality-assessments are often made based on extrinsic cues.

Building on Farquhar’s (1989) traditional definition of brand equity as *“the added value a brand gives a product”*, Erdem & Swait (1998, 132-133) clarify the value function through the theories of information economics and signalling theory. The authors argue that the value of brand equity is generated through the utilitarian value of the brand signal, which consumers use to reduce perceived risk and lessen information acquisition costs.

2.3.2 Brand equity in employer branding

Ambler & Barrow (1996, 188) see the concept of brand equity as directly applicable in the context of employer branding. The authors note that the employer brand can simply be considered as another brand marketed to a distinct segment (i.e. the employees). As with traditional, product-related branding processes, the success of employer branding, too, can thus be measured and valued through brand equity.

This view is supported by Backhaus & Tikoo (2004, 504), who define employer brand equity as the desired outcome of employer branding. The authors conclude that, as with any brand equity, the employer brand equity causes potential or existing employees to react differently to similar recruitment, selection and retention efforts by different firms.
The work of Erdem & Swait (1998) on the role of brands as market signals provides solid basis for examining the phenomenon of brand equity in the context of employer branding. As the authors state, firms understand the quality of their product better than their

customers. The resulting information asymmetry creates a need for market mechanisms by which firms can inform consumers about the quality of their product. (Erdem & Swait 1998, 134)

Although created for the context of product-marketing, Erdem & Swait's insights apply equally well – if not better – in the world of employer branding. As noted by Olson & Jacoby (1972), in the absence of intrinsic cues, consumers tend to rely on extrinsic factors such as image and brand name in assessing the quality of a product. Since occupations do not possess the physical attributes Olson & Jacoby refer to as intrinsic cues, in the context of employer branding, intrinsic cues could be defined as firsthand experience working with or for the company. Seeing as applicants rarely have access to this firsthand information regarding their career decisions, the value of extrinsic cues such as company reputation and salary as basis for decision-making is increased.

Whether we prefer the term cue or market signal, branding literature seems united on the fact that the role of a brand is to convey information in the marketplace. Thus, to create a more holistic overview of the value-creating and expressing functions of employer branding, a more detailed review of the literature behind information asymmetry and signalling theory is required.

3 EMPLOYER BRANDING

According to multiple sources (e.g. Lubecka 2013, 8; Pawar 2018, 162; Vatsa 2016, 9) the term *employer branding* was first coined by Simon Barrow (1990) in his talk to a UK management audience. The first academic paper on the phenomenon was published in 1996 and sought to test *"the application of brand management techniques to human resource management"* through qualitative research on top executives of 27 UK companies (Ambler & Barrow 1996, 185). The authors found that through the principles of *relationship marketing*, organizations' HR and marketing activities could indeed share a common framework where thoughtful brand management facilitates internal relationships and HR practices illuminate customer marketing activities (Ambler & Barrow 1996, 201). Thus, through their findings Ambler & Barrow suggest that companies adopt a holistic approach to marketing and HR, where one side benefits the other. This relationship is illustrated in figure 2.

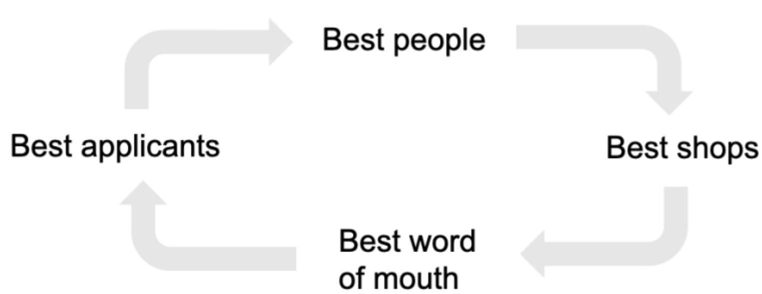

Figure 2. "Link between quality of employees and quality of product / service" from Ambler & Barrow (1996, 186)

The definition of an employer brand provided by Ambler & Barrow (1996, 187) has been widely accepted and used in later literature (e.g. Backhaus & Tikoo 2004, 502; Berthon, Ewing & Hah 2005, 153-154; Ewing, de Bussy & Berthon 2002, 11).

Further research has focused on understanding the different dimensions, functions and consequences of employer branding. Wilder, Gudergan & Lings (2010) examined the strategic implications of employer branding for staff recruitment whereas Davies (2008) focused on the influence of employer branding on managers. Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) sought to conceptualize the topic and create a framework for further research while Berthon, Ewing & Hah (2005) delved into the dimensions of attractiveness in employer branding. The effects of the phenomenon have also been examined throughout various geographical areas and industries (e.g. Pawar 2018 for the Indian IT industry, Lievens 2007 for the Belgian army).

3.1 Employer branding as a signaling phenomenon

In their research, Wilder, Guldergan & Lings (2010, 5-6) examine the role of employer branding in attracting human capital and argue that a company's brand, both as an employer and as a service provider, are paramount factors in influencing job-seekers' decisions.

The authors approach the phenomenon through the concepts of *information asymmetry* and *signalling theory*. Information asymmetry, according to Stiglitz (2002, 469), can be summed up as *"different people knowing different things"* and essentially denotes the inequality in access to relevant information between two or more parties. Wilder et al. (2010, 8) stress the importance of the concept in the labour market, since potential employees rarely have access to perfect information about a prospective employer.

In such environments where one party knows more than the other, Wilder et al. (2010, 8) state that the less-informed party will seek to overcome this information gap. However, finding relevant information requires time and effort, and e.g. in the context of recruitment, can oftentimes prove to be impossible. In purchase situations where information is hard to find, consumers rely on signals, such as brand or price in making their decision (Dawar & Parker 1994, 83). Wilder et al. (2010, 8-9) argue that the same function occurs in the labor market, whereby potential employees evaluate employers based on their outward characteristics, and that employers can hope to influence this image by their employer branding activities.

Signalling theory is fundamentally concerned with reducing information asymmetries, and thus provides a useful tool for describing individuals’ behaviour in situations where information is not evenly distributed (Connelly, Certo, Ireland & Reutzel 2010, 39-40). Since the theory is so intrinsically linked to information asymmetry, and thus recruitment and employer branding, an overview of signalling theory literature is provided in the following chapter.

3.1.1 Signalling theory

According to Connelly et al. (2002, 40) the roots of signalling theory and research into information asymmetry stem back to Spence’s seminal work in 1973. In his paper Spence (1973, 356) outlined a framework describing the effects of information asymmetry and signalling in the job market and the recruitment process. Thus, signalling theory has from its inception been associated with recruitment, and drawing connections to more modern recruitment activities such as employer branding only stands to reason.

Based on an extensive review of existing literature, Connelly et al. (2002, 52) propose there to be fifteen factors affecting signalling between two parties which can be altered to reduce information asymmetry. These factors are illustrated in figure 2.

Signalling theory has also been examined through the lens of organizational attractiveness. Studying the effects of recruitment activities on college campuses, Turban (2001, 306) found that *“applicants interpret recruitment activities as signals for unknown organizational attributes”*. In other words, when faced with incomplete information, applicants can take recruiters’ outward characteristics and behaviours as signals of what it might be like to work for the firm.

Table 2. "Key Signaling Theory Constructs" (Connelly et al. 2010, 52)

Construct (alternate names)	**Definition**
Signaler	
Honesty (genuineness, veracity)	Extent to which the signaler actually has the unobservable quality being signalled
Reliability (credibility)	The combination of a signal's honesty and fit
Signal	
Signal cost	Transaction costs associated with implementing a signal
Observability (intensity, strength, clarity, visibility)	Signal strength, not accounting for distortions and deception
Fit (value, quality)	Extent to which the signal is correlated with unobservable quality
Frequency (timing)	Number of times the same signal is transmitted
Consistency	Agreement between signals from one source
Receiver	
Receiver attention	Extent to which receivers vigilantly scan the signalling environment
Receiver interpretation (calibration)	Amount of distortion introduced by the receiver, and/or weights applied to signals by the receiver
Feedback/environment	
Countersignals (feedback)	Responsive signalling from the receiver designed to improve signal interpretation
Distortions	Noise that can be introduced by the signalling environment, external referents or other signalers

Taking this a step further, Ehrhart & Ziegert (2005) explored organizational attraction through a comprehensive theoretical approach where they integrated signalling theory with other theories of organizational attraction. Combining earlier theories and frameworks the authors propose three overarching "metatheories" that explain organizational attraction: environment processing theories – those explaining how individuals see their environment, interactionist processing theories – those that focus on the fit between the individual and the environment and self-processing theories – those that illustrate how individuals see themselves (Ehrhart & Ziegert 2005, 903).

3.1.2 Values as determinants of self-image

Building on Ehrhart & Ziegert's conclusions, we can deduce that an adequate assessment of organizational attraction and employer branding requires an understanding of how individuals perceive themselves. A frequently used method for examining self-image is through a value framework.

One of the seminal works in the field of value research is presented by Schwartz (1994, 22) whose theory of ten basic human values has been the foundation of multiple cross-national research projects and barometers, including the long-running European Social Survey (European Social Survey, 2019). Schwartz's value theory has also been applied in the Finnish context – most recently by Rinta-Kiikka, Yrjölä & Alho (2018) for economic research center PTT. Referring to Rokeach (1973) and Schwartz (1992), Rinta-Kiikka et al. (2018) argue that, in addition to signalling desirable end-states, values guide an individual's opinions, goals and attitudes. Their work builds on previous research by Helkama (2015) through utilizing interview questions included in the European Value Study, of which Finland has been part since 1990.

According to Schwartz (1994, 21), values represent responses to three universal requirements: our needs as biological organisms, the requisites of social interactions and requirements for the smooth functioning and survival of groups. The author goes on to state that these values are acquired through socialization and conforming to dominant group values as well as through individually unique learning experiences. Building on earlier value classifications (e.g. Rokeach's (1973, 44) framework of 36 values) through this reasoning, Schwartz (1994, 21-22) argues that there are ten distinct value types that guide our decisions, give us direction and provide standards for judging and justifying actions. These ten value types are: power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity and security. Furthermore, Schwartz (1994, 24) argues that these ten value types can be further categorized through their overarching motivations. The author notes that since motivational differences are continuous rather than discrete, the resulting motivational factors can be plotted in a circular structure, where values from adjacent types may intermix. This structure is presented in figure 3.

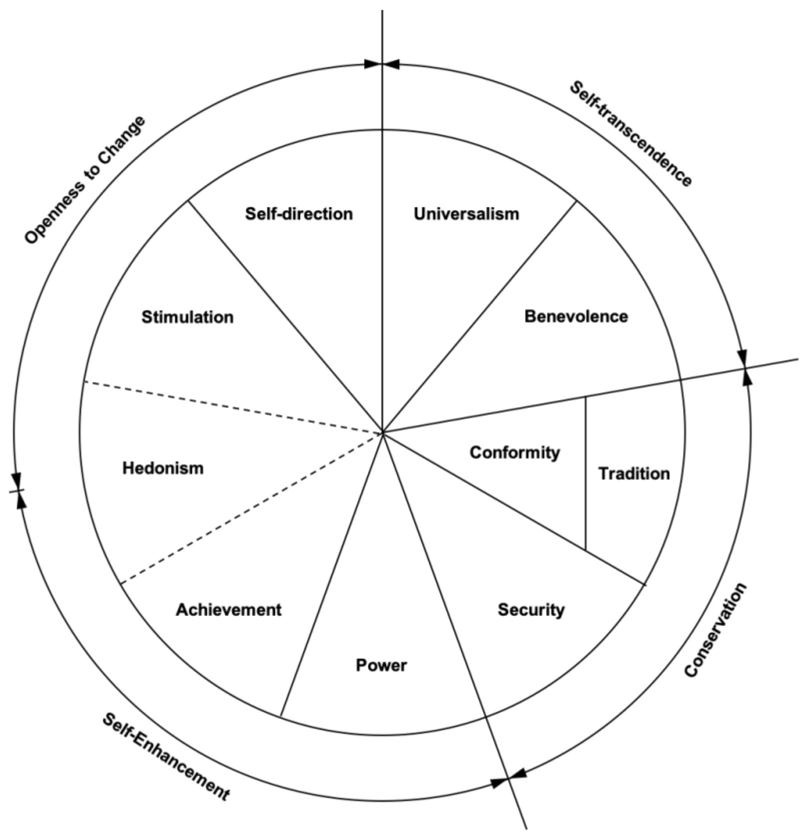

Figure 3. Schwartz's (1994, 24) theoretical model of relations among value types

3.2 Components of employer branding

Multiple studies have sought to identify and classify distinct components within the employer brand. One such classification is presented by Pawar (2018) in the context of the Indian IT industry.

Referring to theoretical approaches by Davies (2008), Ewing et al. (2002), Gaddam (2008) & Sokro (2012), Pawar (2018, 166) identifies five distinct groups and a total of 29 categories responsible for creating an organization’s employer brand. The five groups (2018, 166) he identifies are *work-life balance*, *culture and environment*, *company and value*, *salary and benefits* and *job and people*. While at a first glimpse Pawar’s (2018) work looks very similar to this research, the cultural differences between the Indian and Finnish labor market result in many of the individual components not translating directly to the Finnish context.

To create a classification better suited for the Finnish labor market, the decision was made to supplement Pawar’s (2018) findings with another approach presented by Arachchige & Robertson (2011). Through their examination of employer branding in the context of Australian and Sri Lankan business students, the authors find a total of 25 components, which are then further divided into seven categories through factor analysis (Arachchige & Robertson 2011, 33-42). The components identified by Arachchige & Robertson (2011) and Pawar (2018) and used as the basis for the categorization in this research are illustrated in appendices I and II.

Through combining and contrasting the different components presented by Arachchige & Robertson (2011, 33-34) and Pawar (2018, 168) as well as the initial categorizations proposed by the authors, this study proposes the following eight employer branding factors:

1. Innovative environment valuing creativity
2. Happy, honest and fair environment
3. Good relationships with colleagues and superiors
4. Above average compensation, benefits and promotion opportunities
5. Well-known company with quality products and services
6. Challenging work with a chance to develop
7. Socially responsible work with a chance to apply what I've learned and teach others
8. Good work-life balance

Comparing this list of factors with the five dimensions of employer attractiveness proposed by Berthon et al. (2005, 162), distinct connections between the operational factors and their theoretical counterparts can be made. Factor 1 reflects the interest value of an employer, while factors 2 and 3 reflect aspects of social value. Factor 4 encompasses the characteristics represented by Berthon et al.'s definition of economic value and factors 5 and 6 refer to measures of development value. Finally, factor 7 shows a clear connection to aspects of application value.

It should be noted that the final factor representing work-life balance identified by Pawar (2018) is absent from the work of Arachchige & Robertson (2011) and does not fall under any of the theoretical dimensions of employer attractiveness proposed by Berthon et al. (2005). The same notion is made by Dabirian, Kietzmann & Diba (2017, 4), who, through their analysis of 38,000 online employer reviews, confirm the five value propositions presented by Berthon et al. and uncover two additional factors: management value and work/life balance. The findings of Dabirian et al. combined with the considerable attention work-life balance has recently seen – both in the Finnish labor market as well as the national media – favor including the eighth factor in this study. The other factor uncovered by Dabirian et al. (2017, 4), management value, is captured in components 2 & 3 of the categorization used in this interview and is thus not included as a separate factor.

4 SUMMARISING THE LITERATURE REVIEW

Employer branding is a key element of modern recruitment and has several managerial and theoretical implications. The employer brand is seen as a signal of unobservable qualities regarding the employer, and due to information asymmetries in the labor market, it is an important tool in alleviating job seekers' uncertainty and promoting organizational attraction. This chapter seeks to summarize the theoretical foundation of the study and identify gaps within the existing employer branding literature.

According to Olson & Jacoby (1972), consumers assess product quality mainly on physical attributes or what the authors refer to as intrinsic cues. In the absence of these cues, however, quality assessments rely increasingly on extrinsic cues such as warranties and reviews. Based on the frameworks of signalling theory and information economics, Erdem & Swait (1998) argue that the intrinsic value of a brand is in the information it contains. In an environment with imperfect and asymmetrical information, consumers search for ways to reduce their uncertainty and alleviate the risks related with purchase decisions. When faced with non-existent or unreliable information, consumers base their quality assessments on trustworthy brand signals.

Wilder et al. (2010) campaign for the validity of this logic in the employer branding context. Again, basing their conclusions on information economics and signalling theory, the authors suggest that in the absence of personal experience, employees and applicants evaluate potential employers on extrinsic cues. The authors see the employer brand as the sum of these cues, the value of which is generated when it is deemed trustworthy enough to cross the information gap.

While the previous theories explain *why* employer branding works, the work of Ehrhart & Ziegert (2005) provides an excellent framework for *how* it works. Combining signalling theory with other theoretical approaches, Ehrhart & Ziegert (2005) examine the function of organizational attraction and argue that individual assessments on organizations are built on three dimensions: how individuals perceive their environment, how they perceive themselves and how they assess the fit between the first two. This study argues that the first part of Ehrhart & Ziegert's (2005) dimensions – how individuals perceive their environment – can be assessed through existing frameworks on employer branding components and value propositions. According to Berthon et al. (2005), an employer brand generates value for employees and applicants on five dimensions: social, developmental, application, interest and economic. Combining Berthon et al.'s (2005) framework with classifications presented by Pawar (2018), Arachchige & Robertson (2011) and Dabirian et al. (2017), this study presents a total of eight distinct employer branding factors listed in appendix III. Furthermore, the argument is made that employees and applicants evaluate these factors through their personal value structures. Examining individual values through Schwartz's (1994) seminal work on human value categorization, this study seeks to address the latter two parts of Ehrhart & Ziegert's (2005) three-fold conclusion: how individuals perceive themselves and how they assess the fit between themselves and the organization.

Although the phenomenon has been approached from multiple angles, little emphasis has been placed on whether the desired traits of an employer change as the employee gains seniority. Furthermore, researchers have largely ignored the phenomenon of brand gap in the employer branding context. On conceptualizing and researching employer branding Backhaus & Tikoo (2004, 513) indeed noted the need for further research on perceived gaps stating that researchers should examine the consequences of perceived breaches or violations of the employer brand message.

By asking interviewees to first evaluate their ideal employer and to then examine their current environment through these criteria, this study hopes to gain a deeper understanding of the effects of perceived brand gap in the employer branding context. In addition, through the inclusion of both new recruits and established employees, this research can also build on existing literature by examining the variability of the employer brand throughout the employee's career.

5 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

In the following chapters, the structure of the empirical section of this research is defined. Reasons for choosing specific data collection and analysis methods are provided and examined in contrast with alternative methods. The empirical section of the research is qualitative in nature and built on a series of semi-structured interviews.

Alasuutari (2011, 38) defines qualitative analysis as a holistic examination of the research material. According to the author, the process seeks to understand and illuminate the logical structure found within a singular phenomenon. Whereas with quantitative methods, deviations between observations are accepted and can be accounted for, the qualitative approach integrates all deviations as part of the final conclusion. When working with qualitative methods, the onus is on the researcher to be able to holistically combine all observational variations into one, logically sound explanation.

When compared to their quantitative counterparts, the conclusions drawn through qualitative research face greater risk of manipulation through researcher bias. When working with qualitative methods, Eskola & Suoranta (2000, 19-20) emphasise the importance of a data-driven approach: the subject matter is to be examined without preconceived notions and advancements and connections are to be made through logical conclusions alone.

Instead of providing counts or measures, qualitative research focuses on causal relations seeking answers to why something happens rather than examining how often or how frequently it occurs. Due to its inductive nature, the method is particularly useful in explaining complex phenomena and generating new hypotheses rather than confirming pre-existing ones. As the phenomena it seeks to explain, one could argue that qualitative research itself is ambiguous and evades definitive description. As Tuomi & Sarajärvi (206, 16) conclude, the definition of qualitative research varies from researcher to researcher – from phenomenon to phenomenon. In practice, qualitative research can be thought of as a hypothesis-generating form of research aiming to comprehensively understand a given phenomenon through thorough and profound observation.

5.1 Data collection

Since this study touches on topics which are both highly personal and highly complex such as individuals' perceptions of self, their values and their place within social structures, data collection was chosen to be conducted through individual interviews.

According to Eskola & Suoranta (2000, 85), the interview is the most common method of collecting qualitative data in Finland. The authors describe the interview process as a guided conversation seeking to clarify the interviewee's opinions, thoughts and motives. Hirsjärvi & Hurme (1980, 41) describe the interview as a pre-planned, trust-based process initiated and guided by the interviewer. Referring to Richardson, Dohrenwend & Klein (1965) as well as Smith (1975), Barriball & While (1994, 329) argue that the individual interview is particularly useful in examining an individual's values and attitudes.

Interviews come in several different formats. According to Eskola & Suoranta (2000, 86), the most common way of categorizing interviews is through their structure: how fixed are the questions and how strict is the interviewer in structuring the interview. Based on these criteria the authors define four types of interviews: *structured interviews* with a fixed set of answers and no variation in question order or format, *semi-structured interviews* with a fixed set of open-ended questions, *theme interviews* with a fixed set of topics to be covered free form and *open interviews* with a single theme to be discussed conversationally.

The primary purpose of this study is to generate new hypotheses regarding the composition of the employer brand in the minds of Finnish IT sector employees. The secondary purpose is to test and validate existing studies which have sought to divide the employer brand into different measurable factors (Arachchige & Robertson 2011, Pawar

2018) and to see whether the same factors hold in the Finnish marketplace. Thirdly, the study also seeks to answer a managerial problem regarding the positioning of different prevalent actors within the Finnish IT sector.

5.1.1 Interview structure

To reach this multi-faceted goal, each interview consists of three parts: first, a semi-structured interview focused on the characteristics of a preferred employer, how the interviewees evaluate their current employers and what they think of the industry at large.

The first part of the interview consists of three open-ended questions:

- In your opinion, what makes an ideal work environment?
- How well do these factors apply to your current work environment?
- Based on conversations you've had with your colleagues and acquaintances; how well do you think these factors apply to the industry at large?

These open-ended questions provide the starting point for the interview. According to Hsieh & Shannon (2005, 1281), when collecting data through interviews, it is advised to follow open-ended questions with targeted questions on predetermined categories. Thus, depending on the scope of the initial answer, each open-ended question is followed with additional delineating questions on employer brand components identified through earlier literature (Arachchige & Robertson 2011; Pawar 2018). Through these follow-up questions interviewees are asked to contemplate the research phenomenon through different points of view: what it means for their job description, what it means in terms of the work environment or their relationships with colleagues and supervisors, what it means in terms of the company, its products and services or its organization and management. Additional, impromptu follow-up questions are asked as needed until the topic is sufficiently covered.

In their research into organizational attraction, combining signaling theory with other theoretical approaches, Ehrhart & Ziegert (2005, 903) propose organizational attraction is the function of the fit between an individual's image of themselves and the image they have of their environment (i.e. the organization). To adequately assess organizational attraction and employer branding, one needs to also analyze how an individual perceives themselves. After the open-ended part of the interview, a brief overlook into each interviewees' personal values is conducted through a structured interview format. The framework used in the value evaluation process is developed by Schwartz (1994, 22) and is part of a longitudinal study on the values of Finnish people, the most recent of which was conducted by Rinta-Kiikka et al. (2018) for economic research center PTT. Due to a small sample size, this research does not allow for the creation of definitive, comparable value profiles for respondents. Instead, interviewees are asked to evaluate each of the ten motivational values identified by Schwartz (1994, 22) on a scale from 1-7, after which the results are plotted on a radar chart and analyzed visually.

The structure of the second part of the interview including the ten motivational values identified by Schwartz (1994, 22) is illustrated in appendix III. For interviews conducted in Finnish, the translations provided by Helkama (2015) and utilized by Rinta-Kiikka, Yrjölä & Alho (2018, 12) are used.

After examining individuals' values through the framework provided by Schwartz (1994, 22), the interview process continues in a structured format to assess interviewees' opinions on the components of a preferred employer identified in earlier literature (Arachchige & Robertson 2011; Pawar 2018) and illustrated in appendix III. Since this research does not strive for quantitatively comparable findings, interviewees are not asked to rank each individual factor numerically. By asking interviewees to definitively rank each factor by order of importance we would run the risk of influencing the data analysis process into drawing conclusions that are – thanks to the limited scope of the research – not supported by the data. Thus, instead of asking interviewees to rank each individual factor, in the second structured part of the interview, pre-selected categories are presented to the interviewees' after which they are called on to pick the three they consider most important. This method mimics aided awareness, one of the three classical measures of measuring brand awareness identified by e.g. Laurent et al. (1995, 170).

The categories presented to the interviewees are constructed through combining measures identified by pre-existing research into the characteristics and determinants of an employer brand. The categorization used in this study is built on three papers: Arachchige & Robertson's (2011) research into the determinants of employer branding among Australian and Sri Lankan business students, Pawar's (2018) research into the factors of employer branding in Indian IT companies and Dabirian et al.'s (2017) research into employer value propositions identified through a robust analysis of online reviews.

After the interviewee has successfully identified three of the most important factors they look for in an employer, a final structured questionnaire is presented to the interviewee asking them to evaluate different companies in the industry based on earlier discussions. This final, structured section of the interview process seeks to answer a managerial problem concerned with the positioning of different companies in the Finnish IT sector. Should the interviewee not be familiar with some of the presented companies, the choice is given to skip one or more of the companies presented. The companies were identified in collaboration with the case company and were based on their prevalence in the competitive field for employees. The structure of this final part of the interview process is illustrated in appendix IV.

5.2 Data analysis

The first part of the interview process, the semi-structured interviews, will be examined through the framework of content analysis. According to Weber (1990, 10), content analysis is a research method designed to help draw valid conclusions from text. Referring to Berelson (1952), Hsieh & Shannon (2005, 1278) note that while content analysis was initially developed to serve both qualitative and quantitative needs, the method was traditionally used for quantitative analysis: coding text data into categories and describing the resulting material through statistics. Later, according to the authors, the research method has seen increased popularity in qualitative research, with researchers pivoting away from counting words to examining and classifying text intensively – finding hidden similarities or reoccurring themes within qualitative data. For the purposes of this study, the following definition of qualitative content analysis provided by Hsieh & Shannon (2005, 1278) is used: *“qualitative content analysis is defined as a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns”*.

Unlike other qualitative research methods, such as grounded theory which seeks to generate a substantive theory explaining the research phenomenon, qualitative content analysis yields a set of categories describing the phenomenon in a specific context (Cho & Lee 2014, 16; Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1281; Suddaby 2006, 636). According to Hsieh & Shannon (2005, 1281), specific methods of content analysis are particularly useful in validating and extending existing theories and frameworks to novel contexts. Since previous literature on the nature of employer branding, its effects and components exists, the scope of this research provides no need for generating a new theoretical framework. Thus, approaching the phenomenon through qualitative content analysis with the aim of validating and extending existing theories in the specific context of the Finnish IT sector proves a more rational approach.

Hsieh & Shannon (2005, 1277) categorize qualitative content analysis methods to three distinct classes: conventional, directed or summative content analysis. The three approaches differ based on their coding schemes, origins of codes and threats to trustworthiness. Of these three approaches, the authors favor directed content analysis when faced with existing, but incomplete, theories and frameworks (Hsieh & Shannon 2005, 1281).

Referring to the approach as *deductive* content analysis, Potter & Levine-Donnerstein (1999, 264) advice researchers to start the process of directed content analysis by identifying key concepts and variables using existing theoretical frameworks. Next, operational definitions for each resulting category are provided using the theory. To reduce the often-criticized division between qualitative and quantitative methods, Mayring (2004, 269) suggests integrating quantitative stages into the qualitative content analysis process. The author notes that combining qualitative and quantitative approaches works best in descriptive research with clearly delimitated research questions as opposed to initial, exploratory research.

When it comes to the analysis itself, Miles & Huberman (1984, 91-92) refer to Carney's (1990) three-step model of analytical abstraction according to which data is first summarized and packaged, then repackaged, aggregated and clustered until finally an explanatory framework is developed, constructed and tested. The authors describe the process as a series of analyses where the researcher condenses *"more and more data into a more and more coherent understanding of what, how and why"* (Miles & Huberman 1984, 91). According to Eskola & Suoranta (2000, 137), the process aims to summarize and clarify the data without losing any of the inherent information. The step-by-step process as described by Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2002, 111) with classification of stages and additional modifications made referring to Carney's (1990) ladder of analytical abstraction is visualized in figure 4.

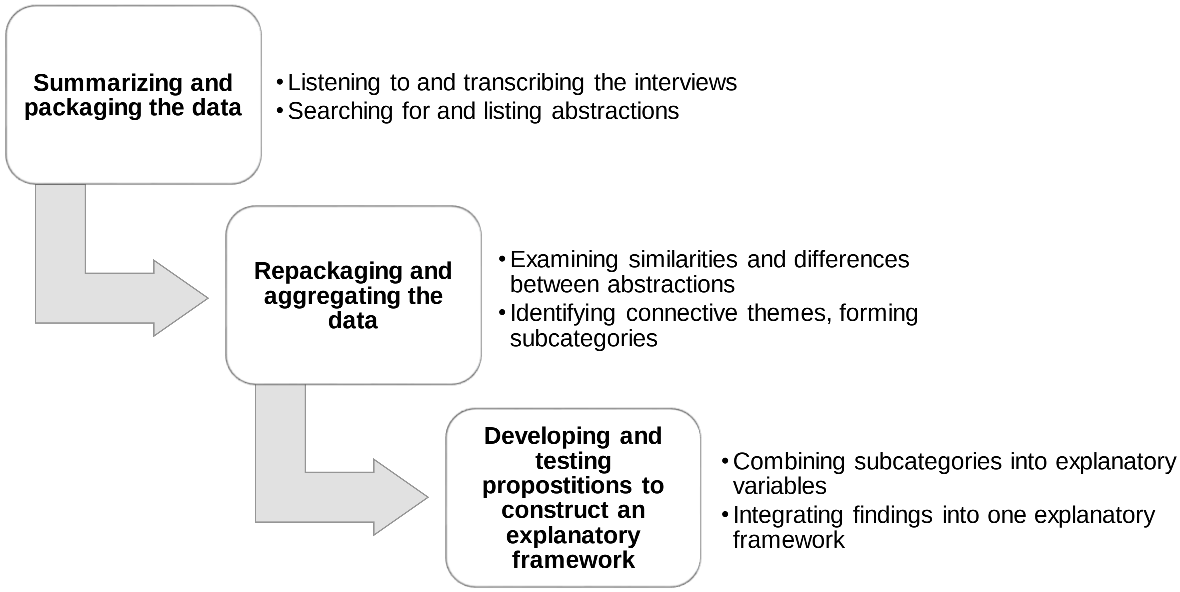

Figure 4. The content analysis process described through combining models and definitions by Carney (1990) and Tuomi & Sarajärvi (2002, 111)

Throughout the research process, Miles & Huberman (1984, 91-93) suggest plotting the resulting information through what the authors refer to as a data display – a visual format presenting the data systematically either through a matrix or a network model. The authors argue that a systematic visual presentation of data facilitates drawing valid conclusions.

Referring to Berelson (1952), Weber (1990, 10) states that – among other applications – content analysis is particularly useful for identifying the characteristics of the communicator, determining their psychological state, describing responses to communications and reflecting cultural patterns of groups and institutions. Thus, when examining the values, attitudes and opinions of individuals with the aim of analyzing how well those values, attitudes and opinions fit with facets of corporate image, the methods of content analysis provide valuable tools for drawing valid conclusions.

Mayring (2000, 3) argues that the main idea of qualitative content analysis is to harness the advantages of quantitative analysis for use in qualitative text interpretation. When conducting qualitative content analysis, the author stresses the importance of delimitation. The flexible nature of the research method lends itself to many potential angles: conclusions can be drawn on the sender or the recipient of the message, the message can be analyzed based on its content or effect and inferences can be made regarding the communication situation itself – just to name a few. Thus, distinct lines regarding the scope and limitation of the data analysis are to be drawn.

5.3 Description of case company and interviewees

The case company from which interviewees were selected is a large Finnish enterprise specializing in cybersecurity consulting. The company has grown expediently in the last few years and – at the time of this research – employs nearly 400 personnel. The company's fast growth is largely supported by its keen position towards mergers and acquisitions.

The interviewees selected for this study were determined in collaboration with a dedicated human resources representative from the case company. The interviewees were selected to represent the personnel of the company well in terms of age and expertise. Due to scheduling restraints, the sampling does not represent the workforce of the case company well in terms of gender: apart from one, all of the interviewed personnel were male.

One of the intentions of this study is to uncover indications of whether or not the characteristics of a preferred employer vary based on the employee's seniority. To support this agenda, the interviewees chosen for this study had to meet further criteria on seniority. In the final sampling, the employees fall into two seniority groups: those with less than two years of relevant industry experience and those with over five years of relevant industry experience. For the sake of concision, these groups will henceforth be referred to as *juniors* and seniors. Here, industry experience is defined broadly to include a wide range of activities within the IT industry, including business functions such as consulting and management on top of more technical functions such as software development and coding. Thus, we see some variance in the educational backgrounds of the interviewees: most of the more senior employees included in the sampling hold business management degrees with a focus on cybersecurity or information systems whereas the more junior interviewees have all graduated or are currently completing their studies in more technical fields, such as software development or information and communications technology.

To facilitate data collection and to help create an open and honest interview experience, in mutual agreeance with the case company, the decision was made to analyze each interview anonymously. Thus, any information that could identify an individual interviewee is not published in this study. Descriptions of the interviewees as well as their respective seniority groups are detailed in table 2.

Table 3. Descriptions of interviewees with seniority classifications

	Seniority	*Description*
Interviewee 1	Junior	A 32-year-old male cybersecurity trainee with under two years of previous work experience working with public sector IT. Not yet graduated. Employed at case company for six weeks at the time of the interview.
Interviewee 2	Junior	A 27-year-old male cybersecurity trainee with no previous work experience in the field. Not yet graduated. Employed at case company for six weeks at the time of the interview.
Interviewee 3	Junior	A 27-year-old female junior consultant with an MSc in internet technologies. While writing her thesis, she worked in a competing Finnish cybersecurity firm. Employed at case company for two and a half months at the time of the interview.
Interviewee 4	Junior	A 29-year-old male cybersecurity trainee with a year of previous work experience in the field. Employed at case company for three months at the time of the interview.
Interviewee 5	Senior	A 53-year-old male software developer with over 15 years of previous work experience in the field. Employed at case company for four years at the time of the interview.
Interviewee 6	Senior	A 45-year-old male senior consultant and coach with over 15 years of previous work experience in the field. Employed at case company for five years at the time of the interview.
Interviewee 7	Senior	A 35-year-old male consultant with 7-8 years of previous work experience in the field. Employed at case company for one and a half years at the time of the interview.

5.4 Validity of the findings

According to Golafshani (2003, 599) validity is traditionally defined, in a quantitative research setting, as a determinant of whether the research truly measures what it is intended to measure. In other words, validity determines whether the research instruments used can answer the question posed. Golafshani (2003, 602) adds that some scholars argue against the applicability of the term in qualitative research while simultaneously acknowledging the need for some kind of qualifying check. Referring to Davies & Dodd (2002), Lincoln & Guba (1985), Seale (1999) and Stenbacka (2001), she goes on to state that many qualitative researchers have opted to use alternative, yet synonymous terms such as quality, rigor and trustworthiness in place of validity.

Regardless of whether we prefer one term over another, the goal behind examining the validity or trustworthiness of any research, whether qualitative or quantitative, is to arrive in more credible and defensible results (Johnson 1997, 283). Another viewpoint traditionally attached to the concept of validity is the generalizability of the results. Again, describing a quantitative research setting, Golafshani (2003, 603) argues that the ability to generalize findings to larger populations and novel situations is one of the most common tests of validity. Although quantitative and qualitative methods differ greatly on the degree to which researchers can arrive in generalizable results, Patton (2001, 544-545) does raise generalizability – or the external validity of the results – as one of the key research criteria all qualitative inquiry should aim for. In striving for generalizable results, Patton (2001, 247) advocates for the use of triangulation: using various data sources and methods, several different researchers or evaluators and multiple perspectives to examine the data and to tackle the research problem. According to Patton (2001, 248), using multiple methods of data collection provides the researcher with an opportunity to cross-check the validity of answers over various forms of data. Alternative data can help correct for researcher bias and loaded questions and may allow the researcher to examine the data more objectively.

In this study, the dimensions of triangulation as suggested by Patton (2001, 247) are adhered to as follows. The validity of the findings is improved by combining both qualitative and quantitative forms of data collection, allowing for a more objective and holistic analysis. Furthermore, to include multiple perspectives in the data analysis process, the research problem is analyzed through various theories and hypotheses as well as examined against results from earlier, similar studies involving comparable research problems.

Where the validity of this study falls short is in the generalizability of the findings. Due to the homogenous nature of the interviewees and the relatively small sample size, the findings of this study are not directly applicable to a larger context. Moreover, due to the individualistic nature of the research, the data collection and analysis have been carried out by a single researcher and evaluator. As such, individual biases or blind spots have a larger chance of swaying the data collection and analysis. Thus, the findings of this study are descriptive rather than conclusive – the research process seeks to apply existing theories and frameworks to a specific cultural and temporal context rather than building towards a generalizable theory or frame of reference.

6 RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this segment, the findings of the seven individual interviews are examined and analysed through the theoretical frameworks presented earlier in this study. The segment is structured so that each theme emerging from the interviews is analysed in its own sub-chapter. Each sub-chapter is divided into three sections: the first focusing on the interviewees' thoughts on an ideal work environment, the second on their assessment of their current work environment and the third on the Finnish IT industry as a whole.

First, each theme is described on a general level after which any differences in thematical answers provided by the two different interviewee classes – the juniors and the seniors – are examined. As the results of the value surveys filled out by interviewees and illustrated in appendix IV proved inconclusive, findings from these surveys will not be discussed further. Furthermore, as the company survey (appendix V) pertains to a strictly managerial problem and sufficient background analysis between these companies and their employer brands was not conducted, their results, too, will be excluded from discussion.

6.1 People, community and culture

One theme discussed in all the interviews is the importance of people, organizational culture and a sense of community in creating a positive work environment. The results indicate some variance between the two interviewee groups with the senior interviewees showing more concern for functional, work-related characteristics such as collaboration and open information sharing practices. The junior interviewees, on the other hand, seem more attracted to softer values, such as personal relationships with colleagues and a sense of community and belonging.

6.1.1 Ideal environment

When asked to describe the people and the community of their ideal work environment, the interviewees reflected on topics including diversity and tolerance, collaboration, personal relationships and a sense of community and belonging.

The topics of diversity and tolerance were covered both in terms of their functional benefits for the workplace as well as their emotional significance to the individual interviewees. On the functional benefits of diversity, interviewee 6 commented: “It’s good to have many kinds of people. It makes for well-functioning teams where people are not just clones of one another. When everyone is not hired with the same exact criteria, you have different approaches to things”. In both interviewee groups, the issue of diversity was also raised for its personal importance to the interviewees themselves – particularly relating to individual differences in experiencing social situations. On this, interviewee 7 commented: “I’m not comfortable talking all the time and really need my own space. So, it’s good to have talkative people around – I can stay quiet more and just listen”.

Both interviewee groups also underlined the importance of collaboration, with the junior interviewees understandably emphasizing their personal need for support and the more senior interviewees stressing the importance of collaborative work and open sharing of information for them to work more productively. On sharing information, interviewee 5 commented: “[In an ideal work environment] no one should withhold information and assume a position of *I’m the only one who knows this, come and ask me*. Working in an environment like that is very unpleasant.”

The two interviewee groups diverge most on the topics of personal relationships and a sense of community. In their answers, all of the junior interviewees underlined the importance of connecting with your colleagues on a personal level and sharing a sense of community, whereas only one of the senior interviewees raised these topics as themes of importance in an ideal workplace. Many of the junior interviewees, however, do not wish to connect on a personal level with all of their colleagues but instead stress the importance of relating to and forming deeper bonds with a few close work friends.

On the topics of personal relationships and sense of community, the discrepancies between the two groups might at least in part be explained by the timing of the data collection. At the time of the interviews, none of the junior interviewees had been employed at the case company for longer than three months. Two were only hired six weeks ago. At such early stages of employment, these junior interviewees adapting to their new social environment might experience an urgent need to form new bonds and relationships within this new context. The senior interviewees, on the other hand, have all been employed at the case company for years – providing ample time for them to build and foster long-lasting, stable relationships with their co-workers. Thus, since the senior interviewees are already well-integrated to their work environment, they might be less prone to vocalizing their need for personal relationships and a sense of community.

The heightened need for personal relationships vocalized by the junior interviewees could in part be explained by the *cultural shock* effect.

According to Winkelman (1994, 121), contact with and immersion in a new culture can cause the individual to experience a multifaceted stress response called cultural shock. Winkelman (1994, 124) argues that assimilating and acculturating to the new environment – adjusting one's personal and social relations and seeking to form new bonds – is key in overcoming the effects and stresses of this phenomenon. Winkelman (1994, 122) states that individuals generally enter the crises phase within a few weeks of entering the new environment. If we are to directly translate Winkelman's notions to the context of changing work environments, the junior recruits taking part in this study were all interviewed at the optimal point in time for them to be experiencing the effects of cultural shock.

Although he examines the phenomenon in the context of cultural geography – analyzing individuals' reactions to changes in their ethnic, lingual and national environment – examining the junior interviewees' responses through Winkelman's findings provides an interesting perspective and could help explain some of the stressors these respondents are currently dealing with.

6.1.2 Current environment

When asked to assess their current work environment through the themes of people and community, the two interviewee groups showed similar discrepancies as they did in their answers regarding the qualities of a hypothetical, ideal workplace.

Again, the seniors focused more on diversity and collaboration – emphasizing once more their functional benefits for collaborative work. Interviewee 5 expressed his concern for how different personality traits effect the sharing of information, saying: “Some people are more secretive by nature and prefer to keep information to themselves”. All in all, however, the senior interviewees expressed their content towards their current work environment in terms of its people and the community.

The junior interviewees, too, expressed their – quite unreserved – satisfaction about their current work environment. The junior interviewees all seemed pleased with the personal relationships they’ve built with their colleagues and described the community as “familial” and “likeminded”. On the company’s recruitment practices, one interviewee commented “Throughout the recruitment process, I got the sense that they’re looking for a ‘good guy’, too. They weren’t only interested in your technical qualifications and know-how, but your personality as well – whether you fit in or not”. On collaboration, the junior interviewees praised their colleagues for their support and helpfulness. However, one interviewee noted that mistakes and errors are not always handled openly: at times, some of the more senior employees correct their juniors’ work ex post facto, without notifying the person who made the mistake. The interviewee has raised this concern with the people in question and reckons that the way senior employees handle mistakes by juniors boils down to personality differences.

6.1.3 Assessment of industry as a whole

When asked to consider the working conditions of the Finnish IT industry as a whole, the senior interviewees did not comment on the importance of people and community.

One of the junior interviewees drew comparisons between the sub-industries of gaming and cybersecurity. Drawing on their own experience and that of their personal network's, the interviewee stated that the Finnish gaming industry tends to put individuals on a pedestal, a tendency which the interviewee views in a negative light. The interviewee argued that the Finnish cybersecurity field used to suffer from the same issue but has since matured and democratized – recognizing that success relies on collaboration rather than one individual's contribution. Based on this assessment, the interviewee views the cybersecurity field more favorably than the gaming industry.

6.2 Organization and leadership

Another theme covered in all interviews was the role of organization and leadership in creating a positive work environment. Again, we see some variance in the answers provided by the two interviewee groups, with the more senior interviewees emphasizing their need for autonomy and the junior interviewees citing the importance of managerial qualities such as openness and approachability.

6.2.1 Ideal environment

When asked to describe their ideal work environment in terms of organization and leadership, the interviewees' answers fell under three categories: employee autonomy, organizational hierarchy and managerial qualities. The categories showed clear division between the two interviewee groups, with the more senior interviewees emphasizing autonomy in their answers and the junior interviewees focusing more on organizational hierarchy.

On employee autonomy, both interviewee groups cited concerns for their own personal need for autonomy as well as the benefits it provides for the employer and the organization as a whole. On their personal need for autonomy, the interviewees' made comments such as "it would be very irritating if someone were constantly breathing down my neck" and "I don't want to be thrown in the deep end without having a say". The need for autonomy was heavily emphasized in the senior interviewees' answers as a prerequisite for their function within the organization. The senior interviewees have spent years accumulating knowledge and skills within their area of expertise and thus consider themselves to be the best determinants of how to do their job. Interviewee 5 commented on the importance of autonomy for his role as an expert followingly: "You don't tell the expert how to do things, you tell them what to do. Otherwise, you risk limiting the expert and they're no longer an expert".

Where the two interviewee groups showed most variance was on organizational hierarchy. Nearly all of the junior interviewees commented on their preferences for how hierarchical their employing organization should be, whereas the seniors barely mentioned hierarchy in their descriptions of an ideal work environment. According to the junior interviewees, the ideal employer is one where management is close to the employee, easy to reach and works in the same physical space as the employees. As a whole, the junior interviewees tended to prefer a low-hierarchy organization, but there was some variance within their answers, too. Interviewee made remarks on the importance of a good hierarchical balance and commented that he values the importance of having a clearly defined supervisor, who provides good guidance and "protects" their subordinates from higher organizational levels. The interviewee in question made remarks in other parts of the interview as well, for preferring a more hierarchical organizational model. This could go towards demonstrating that even though younger generations on the whole seem to trend towards a preference for flat organizations over hierarchical ones, there is still considerable variance within their preferences. Thus, it is important that we refrain from viewing millennial and gen z employees entering the workforce as one monolithic group with the same preferences for an employer.

Both interviewee groups also commented on the importance of managerial qualities such as leading by example, respecting your employees and valuing their wellbeing.

6.2.2 Current environment

The division between the two groups with the seniors emphasizing autonomy and the juniors underlining the role of hierarchy, continued when the two groups were asked to describe their current work environment. On autonomy, some of the senior interviewees noted that while they generally have the mandate to determine how they carry out their own work, they feel a lack of influence on other organizational functions which set the framework within which they can operate. One interviewee noted the discrepancy between sales and execution, citing concerns that the experts who carry out the work are not always involved in the discussions where the criteria are set. The interviewee stated: “I wish experts here had more say on what is promised to the client and the terms of the agreement”.

On hierarchy, both interviewee groups complimented the management of the organization for its approachability and open communication. The CEO of the case company, in particular, received praise from the junior interviewees, nearly all of whom commented on the CEO’s direct and laid-back demeanor. The symbolic effect of the CEO hanging around at the office and eating lunch with employees regardless of rank was not lost among the interviewees and seemed to generate a great deal of cohesion within the junior interviewees. On the symbolic and exemplary role of the CEO, one of the senior interviewees commented: “The atmosphere of the company begins with the CEO. In my opinion, [the CEO of the company] has a good approach to things. --- I don’t think our expansion abroad, for example, would have worked out if it were not for his personality. He’s managed to convince all these companies that it’s a good thing we’ve bought them.”

6.2.3 Assessment of industry as a whole

When asked to assess the industry as a whole in terms of organization and leadership, the senior interviewees focused more on the hierarchy of the organizations whereas the junior interviewees cited managerial qualities.

According to the senior interviewees, the industry has – in recent years – managed to shift away from more hierarchical models by cutting middle management positions. The benefit of this, as seen by the senior interviewees, is increased flow of information. As stated earlier by one of the senior interviewees, increased communication between the client and the expert carrying out the task commissioned by the client is seen favorably. By cutting middle management positions, the industry had, according to one of the senior interviewees, managed to facilitate direct communication and sharing of information between the client and the experts. On hierarchy, another senior interviewee cited their variations caused by the size and the origin of the organization, arguing that large North American organizations tend to be the most hierarchical.

Again, on hierarchy, one of the junior interviewees cited concerns for the consolidation of power in some sub-sections of the Finnish IT industry. According to the interviewee, the gaming industry, in particular, tends to consolidate power to a few select managers and officers, which, according to the interviewee can lead to abuses of power, affecting the culture of the organization negatively. The interviewee argues that this consolidation of power is caused by the relative novelty of the industry and continues that the cybersecurity industry, too, used to suffer from the same flaw, but has since managed to even out the distribution of power within organizations.

6.3 Collaboration and ways of working

Another topic emerging from the interviews concerns collaboration and ways of working together. This topic was more prevalent in discussions with the junior interviewees but also featured to a lesser extent in the answers of the senior employees. Concerning collaboration, the interviewees' answers fall under three main categories: attitude towards change, shared practices, and interpersonal trust. Of these three themes, only the latter two emerged in the senior interviewees' answers. In the interviewees' answers concerning collaboration and ways of working together, the case company was featured heavily, with less of an emphasis on answers regarding the interviewees' hypothetical ideal work environment or the industry at large.

6.3.1 Ideal environment

The ideal work environment in terms of collaboration, as described by the interviewees is one where processes are clearly defined and agreed upon, where mistakes are tolerated and where employees are met with trust to apply their expertise as they best see fit. Whereas trust featured heavily in the answers of both interviewee groups, the two groups diverged somewhat on what the concept means for their daily work. The junior interviewees cited their concern for making mistakes and emphasized their content with flexible work hours and remote work practices – themes which both require the employer to trust the employee. The senior interviewees, however, underlined the importance of trust as a facilitator for them to do their best work and for everyone within the workplace to be met with fairness and equality. Thus, the answers of the two interviewee groups seem to reflect, again, the underlying power structures of the workplace: the junior interviewees seemingly feel the need to earn their trust and express their gratitude for manifestations of that trust, whereas the senior interviewees view trust as a fundamental assumption – a basic resource needed for them to function in the workplace.

In addition to trust, the junior interviewees also express their need for structure – a phenomenon which could be partially explained by their inexperience within the industry and the case company. Again, at the time of the interview, none of the junior interviewees had been employed at the case company for more than three months and were most likely not completely familiarized with their new occupation. Shared practices, processes and frameworks were all held in high regard in the junior interviewees' answers. On the function of organizational size and its processes, interviewee 4 noted: "I'd prefer to work in, at least, a medium-sized company with clearly defined processes. I wouldn't want to get involved in a start-up."

On ways of working, the senior interviewees noted their appreciation for innovative, novel work practices and up-to-date processes and equipment.

6.3.2 Current environment

On collaboration and ways of working, most of the interviewees' answers homed in on their current work environment. The junior interviewees, in particular, praised their current work environment for the trust it places on employees, manifesting in autonomy and flexibility.

Another aspect on which the junior interviewees expressed their content was the attitude towards change and constant development. The interviewees feel that they can raise awareness on issues and take initiative on developing the shared practices of the workplace without fear of facing backlash. The junior interviewees also expressed their satisfaction for getting to try new things and develop professionally, and noted that their employer seems to really invest in the development of its employees.

The topic of professional development was also covered in more personal terms, relating to the joy of discovery and learning new things. On this, interviewee 1 commented: "This place is like a theme park. You can roam around, visit the different rides and find what you like.” The interviewee also noted that the range of different tasks and the freedom of movement inside the organization were some of the main things that drew the interviewee to the company in the first place.

6.3.3 Industry as a whole

In terms of collaboration and ways of working, the interviewees view the industry as modern and up to date, reacting positively to changing practices novel ways of working.

The senior interviewees were more vocal in assessing the industry as a whole, comparing and contrasting differences between their previous employers and relating them to the experiences of their professional networks. All in all, the senior interviewees seemed to conclude that organizations vary greatly based on their size and the way they do business. In conclusion, the senior interviewees view working in consulting companies as more hectic and demanding, and client-side companies as more balanced and relaxed. Some of the senior interviewees did indeed state that were they to consider changing jobs, they would prefer to switch to a client-side organization next. Smaller companies were also seen as more hectic, with more of the work spilling over office hours.

On the other hand, one of the junior interviewees, drawing on experience working in a large telecoms company, argued that processes in larger organizations tend to be more rigid, making the work move more slowly and be less dynamic, which the interviewee viewed unfavorably. This could serve as an indication that as employees progress in seniority, qualities previously seen as unfavorable become less important as the priority of good work-life balance increases.

6.4 Meaningful work

When discussing the nature of the interviewees' work and the importance of meaningful work tasks in creating a favorable environment, the interviewees' answers fell under two categories. Firstly, the interviewees described the different ways in which meaningful work generates personal value for them. From the answers, three distinct value propositions emerge: meaningful work generates societal value, developmental value and interest value. That is to say, meaningful work is interesting and stimulating for the employee, it allows him/her to develop his/her skills and its outcomes generate value for the society at large. Secondly, the interviewees discussed the pre-requisites of meaningful work, emphasizing that meaningful tasks do not exist in a vacuum, but require the workplace to reach a consensus on underlying rules and conventions such as organizational structures and the autonomy of the workers. As they work in a consulting company, the interviewees also mentioned the significance of interesting and agreeable client organizations in creating the basis for meaningful work.

6.4.1 Ideal environment

When asked to describe their work in an ideal environment, two aspects rise over the others: for the interviewees, above all, meaningful work is interesting and challenging – it provides mental stimuli and allows the interviewees to develop their skills. Thus, when it comes to meaningful work, the two seemingly most important value propositions relate to interest value and developmental value. On maintaining interest value, the interviewees underlined the importance of variety, stating that with enough monotony and repetition, even previously challenging tasks become tiresome.

Variety features heavily in the junior interviewees' answers on developmental value, too. For the junior interviewees, one of the most important aspects of meaningful work is getting to try out various tasks and functions in order to develop professionally. In attracting junior recruits, a wide range of different tasks and functions within a specific theme could indeed provide a key selling point. Evidence for this hypothesis is expressed in a statement by interviewee three: “I knew I wanted to work in cybersecurity, but I did not know what I specifically wanted to do *within* cybersecurity. That’s why I applied to a large firm like this that provides the option to switch tasks”.

Although evoking developmental value could provide for a key selling point in attracting junior employees to a given company or organization, one should not make the assumption that the importance of developmental value dilutes over the span of an employee’s career. All of the senior interviewees, too, emphasized their preference for demanding tasks through which they can challenge themselves and develop professionally. However, whereas the junior interviewees showed more distinction in their answers regarding developmental value and interest value, with the senior interviewees these two categories show considerable overlap. For the senior interviewees, constant professional development seems to be a key aspect of them maintaining interest for their work. Thus, with the senior interviewees, developmental value can – to some extent – be viewed as a function of interest value. A comment provided by interviewee six illustrates this point well: “I enjoy getting to solve interesting challenges and problems. You get this sense of accomplishment and the feeling of getting something done”.

To extrapolate the point further, one could argue that as junior employees are less familiar with their tasks, they achieve the same sense of problem-solving and accomplishment in their daily work. Thus, as they are already in an environment which challenges them daily, the junior employees interviewed for this study might not crave difficult tasks to maintain their interest. Instead, one could argue that the junior interviewees view professional development more as a requirement for advancing on their careers, rather than as a prerequisite for maintaining interest for their work.

On societal value, interviewees in both groups expressed their desire to create a positive societal impact with their work. However, it should be noted that the topic of societal value was not addressed in all of the interviews and did not seem to be a high-priority topic for any of the interviewees. When asked to comment on the importance of societal value in choosing which clients to work for, the answers of the interviewees provide inconclusive evidence. Some of the interviewees stated that they would not work with clients whom they view as unethical, whereas others stated that they would work with any clients.

When asked to describe their ideal clients, some of the interviewees stated their preference for working with both small and large organizations, while others expressed their desire to work with companies in industries which they have a personal interest towards. However, many of the interviewees did not see the client pool as important in creating an ideal work environment.

6.4.2 Current environment

When asked to describe their ideal work environment in terms of meaningful work, the answers of the two interviewee groups show little variance. However, when evaluating their current employer through this perspective, the answers of the two groups diverge. The junior employees continue to evaluate their current work environment mainly in terms of developmental and interest value whereas the senior employees pay more attention to the enablers of meaningful work: the underlying rules and structures of the workplace.

In terms of developmental value, the junior interviewees value the wide range of opportunities provided by their current employer. As a large consultancy firm, the case company has a plethora of different functions and career paths, a range which itself is seen as a major source of attraction by the junior interviewees. The actual process of career development is seen as self-directing, with the junior interviewees experiencing little to no guidance or counselling from management at this stage of their employment. Since the junior interviewees seem to trust the company in treating employees as equals, this self-directive development is not necessarily viewed as a negative. As interviewee 4 puts it: “We’ll see what projects I get involved with, and then, based on that, we can evaluate which ones work the best for me”.

When it comes to interest value, the junior interviewees, again, seem to trust the process. Many of them describe their current job function as “good enough for the time being”, but express a desire to develop and to move to more challenging tasks with time. According to the junior interviewees, management takes into account the interests and wishes of employees, with even new recruits having some autonomy over their work tasks. As the junior interviewees gain seniority, they believe they can influence this even more.

While some of the senior employees touched on topics relating to interest and developmental value, most interviewees in this group homed in on organizational structures and societal value. Some routine tasks were seen as laborious and time consuming, and when working with certain functions, such as software development, some of the senior interviewees seemed to think that the organizational structures in place weren’t allowing them to do their best work. In the end, even the most purposeful work loses meaning if your environment does not allow you to conduct it.

The concept of meaningful work was also discussed in relation to the societal impact of the case company. One of the senior interviewees expressed his pleasure towards working for a firm that he sees as instrumental in keeping society running. According to the interviewee, knowing that his work leaves a positive imprint on society increases his motivation and makes his days more meaningful. A positive impact on society was also discussed in relation to the company’s client pool. The interviewee stated that because the company mainly works with large industrial firms, which he sees as instrumental for society, he feels that his work is even more meaningful than if the company’s client pool were to consist of smaller firms.

6.4.3 Industry at large

When asked to describe the industry at large, both interviewee groups mainly discussed the topic of meaningful work in terms of interest value and organizational structures. Many of the junior interviewees expressed their desire to work with cybersecurity exclusively, indicating that among IT fields cybersecurity might be seen as a more attractive career path than other subsets of the industry.

In terms of organizational structures, both interviewee groups highlighted the at times arduous nature of a consulting company with its many clients and multiple ongoing projects. Both interviewee groups seem to believe that the work of a consultant is more laborious and hectic compared to similar tasks on the client side.

7 DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

In the final chapter of this study, the findings of the empirical section are summarized and discussed as they relate to existing branding and employer branding literature. In comparing and contrasting the findings with those presented by earlier research, the aim of this final chapter is to contribute to the existing theoretical frameworks presented earlier in the study and to provide potential problems and questions for further research to answer.

This chapter also examines the practical implications of the findings for marketing and HR managers within the case company and the Finnish IT industry at large. Furthermore, the limitations of the study are introduced and reviewed.

7.1 Summary of findings

The aim of this study was to examine the status of employer branding within the Finnish IT industry by analyzing the dimensions of employer brand equity as described by the employees of a specific case company. By asking interviewees to compare their current employer with an ideal, hypothetical one, we seek to illuminate the phenomenon of brand gap within the employer branding context. Furthermore, through the inclusion of two distinct interviewee groups, we hope to also understand if and how employee seniority affects these dimensions of brand equity.

In this section, we examine the three research questions presented at the beginning of this study: “What are the dimensions of employer brand equity as experienced by the employees?”, “How do employer branding efforts by companies within the Finnish IT sector match these dimensions?” and “How do employees assess the gap between the ideal employer brand and the experienced one?”.

Q1: What are the dimensions of employer brand equity as experienced by the employees?

The literature on employer brand equity relies heavily on frameworks built around consumer-based brand equity – such as the one proposed by Keller (1993, 2-6).

Combining these consumer-based theories with Ambler & Barrow's (1996) seminal work on employer branding, Berthon et al. (2005, 159-162) define employer brand equity as a sum of five values: interest value, social value, economic value, development value and application value. Their work on employer brand equity is widely accepted and has been used as the baseline for multiple studies (e.g. Arachchige & Robertson 2011; Roy 2008; Schlager, Bodderas, Maas & Luc Cachelin 2011).

This study combines two operationalizations proposed by Arachchige & Robertson (2011, 33-34) and Pawar (2018, 168) – both built on Berthon et al's (2005) dimensions of employer brand equity – and argues that employers can generate brand equity through eight dimensions:

1. Innovative environment valuing creativity
2. Happy, honest and fair environment
3. Good relationships with colleagues and superiors
4. Above average compensation, benefits and promotion opportunities
5. Well-known company with quality products and services
6. Challenging work with a chance to develop
7. Socially responsible work with a chance to apply what I've learned and teach others
8. Good work-life balance

In the empirical section of the study, in chapter six, we find that most – if not all – of the aforementioned factors feature in the answers of the interviewees. However, it is evident that some factors carry more weight than others. Factors two, three and six emerged in all of the seven semi-structured interviews carried out for this study, whereas factors four and five featured in one interview each. A comparison of the answers of the two interview groups – the juniors and the seniors – indicates some seniority-based variance in the results. The junior interviewees seemed most concerned with factors three and six: maintaining good relationships with colleagues and supervisors and working with challenging tasks and developing professionally. Some factors, such as factor seven, were only featured in the answers of the senior employees while others, such as factor two, were featured in all interviews regardless of seniority.

The results of the empirical study seem to indicate that the operational variables defined by Arachchige & Robertson (2011, 33-34) and Pawar (2018, 168) apply in the context of the Finnish IT industry. However, further research needs to be made on the relative weight of each factor in this novel context since, in the results of this study, factors two, three and six appear heavily overrepresented.

When compared with the five overarching factors of employer attractiveness – or employer brand equity – proposed by Berthon et al. (2005, 159-162), the results of this study indicate that of the five value propositions…

… **social** and **interest value** are highly regarded by both interviewee groups,
… **development value** seems more important to the junior interviewees,
… **application value** seems more important to the senior interviewees and
… **economic value** is largely absent in the answers of both interviewee groups.

In summary: the dimensions of employer brand equity as experienced by the employees interviewed in this study are built on social value and interest value. In addition to these two dimensions, the junior interviewees emphasize development value in their answers and the senior interviewees emphasize application value in their answers.

Based on these findings, this study argues that the operational factors of employer brand equity based on the work of Arachchige & Robertson (2011, 33-34) and Pawar (2018,

168) apply to the context of the Finnish IT sector. Furthermore, we propose that the significance of each factor is not distributed evenly. Instead, we suggest that, in general, employees within the Finnish IT sector rank the relative importance of each factor as follows:

1. Happy, honest and fair environment
2. Good relationships with colleagues and superiors
3. Challenging work with a chance to develop
4. Socially responsible work with a chance to apply what I've learned and teach others
5. Good work-life balance
6. Innovative environment valuing creativity
7. Above average compensation, benefits and promotion opportunities
8. Well-known company with quality products and services

Though further research is needed, this order of importance highlights the possible preferences of the Finnish IT workforce and provides HR and marketing managers with a preliminary guideline on which factors to emphasize in their employer branding efforts.

Q2: How do employees evaluate their current employer based on these dimensions of employer brand equity?

Based on the work of Wilder et al. (2010, 5-6), this study examines employer branding as a signalling phenomenon, arguing that the value of the employer brand lies in the information it contains and communicates. Wilder et al. (2010) base their findings on the theories of information asymmetry and signalling theory, which – according to Connelly et al. (2010, 39-40) – concern individuals' behaviour in situations where information is distributed unevenly. Wilder et al. (2010, 8-9) propose that the employer brand functions as a vessel for information in the labour market and argue that – if deemed trustworthy – employees and potential recruits use it to overcome the inherent information asymmetry in the market. Combining information asymmetry with other theoretical frameworks, Ehrhat & Ziegert (2005, 903) argue that the function of organizational attraction is composed of three elements: how individuals see themselves, how they see their environment and how they evaluate the fit between the two.

The empirical part of this study follows the guidelines set by the three metatheories proposed by Ehrhart & Ziegert (2005). In the empirical section, organizational attraction is assessed through first examining individuals' preferences, then assessing their perceptions of their current environment and finally evaluating the fit between the two. In this study, participants were first asked to describe their ideal work environment after which they were requested to evaluate their current employer based on these criteria.

The empirical section of this study indicates that, for the case company, the overall function of organizational attraction seems fairly strong. In the previous chapter, a list of employer brand equity factors based on the work of Arachchige & Robertson (2011, 33-34) and Pawar (2018, 168) was presented. Based on the empirical data collected, this list was then rearranged to an order of importance prioritizing factors related to social value and interest value. On these value dimensions, the participants of the study rated the case company highly, with the junior interviewees – in particular – praising the case company for its collegial spirit and jovial atmosphere. Both interviewee groups also lauded the company for its low sense of hierarchy and its fair and balanced treatment of employees.

Based on the interview data, of the eight employer brand equity factors, the case company falls short on factors three and six. The case company's shortcomings on factor three, "Challenging work with a chance to develop", emerge in the answers of the junior interviewees whereas the absence of factor six, "Innovative environment valuing creativity" is most felt by the senior interviewee group. Further research is needed to determine the validity of this hypothesis and to illuminate the standing of other employer brand equity factors as they relate to the ones deemed most important by the findings of this study.

Q3: How do employees assess the gap between the ideal employer brand and the experienced one?

Though the concept of brand gap is widely discussed in consumer-based marketing literature (e.g. Gonzalez et al. 2016, Clatworthy 2012), previous studies have largely ignored the phenomenon in employer branding. The brand gap is defined as the gap between what the brand wants to be and what the consumer – or in the context of this study, the employee – experiences (Neumeier 2005, 15).

Since this study does not discuss the desired, strategic goals of the case company's employer branding efforts, declarative statements on the existence of an 'employer brand gap' cannot be made. Nevertheless, the empirical data does allow for some deductions, which could prove to be of interest for managers and further researchers.

As previously mentioned, interest value and development value are key components of a robust employer brand: to attract new recruits and to keep existing employees satisfied, the employer must provide its employees with stimulating tasks and a chance to develop. The empirical data collected for this study demonstrate that when evaluating a potential employer, the junior interviewees, in particular, hold these value propositions in high regard. However, citing repetitive tasks and routine assignments, the answers of many junior interviewees indicate that on these two dimensions, their current work environment does not fully match their expectations. Despite this discrepancy, the junior interviewees show little signs of distress. The case company, as their employer, has implied that as they gain experience and develop their skills, they will be met with more challenging tasks and more interesting assignments.

Based on these findings, this study proposes that mutual trust and open communication are essential components in alleviating the effects of potential brand gaps in the employer branding context.

We propose that since the employer-employee contract is in general a fairly long-term arrangement, employees tolerate temporary gaps between expected employer brand attributes and experienced attributes fairly well – particularly in the first few weeks of employment. During this stage, this phenomenon could be aggravated by two cognitive biases: *optimism bias*, or the propensity of humans to overestimate the likelihood of positive events and *confirmation bias*, our tendency to interpret evidence in a way that confirms or supports our existing beliefs and expectations (Sharot 2011, 941; Nickerson 1998, 175).

Thus, based on the results of this study, we propose that upon entering a new work environment, recruits tend to either ignore gaps in the employer brand or consider them as temporary. As time progresses, we believe these gaps become increasingly difficult to ignore, resulting in cognitive dissonance and forcing the employee to change his/her behavior. To test this hypothesis, further research into the phenomenon of brand gaps in the employer branding context is needed.

MRQ: What is the relationship between the expected employer brand and the experienced employer brand in the Finnish IT sector?

Based on the findings summarized through the three sub-research questions, we can now conclude that while employers seemingly manage to cater to the expectations of their employees well, gaps between the expected employer brand and the experienced employer brand do exist. The findings indicate that although these gaps vary from person to person and are reacted upon differently, employee seniority could be a significant factor in determining which specific dimensions of employer brand equity are more susceptible to gaps than others as employees progress on their careers. Furthermore, the findings imply that while – in general – gaps between the expected employer brand and the experienced employer brand cause dissatisfaction in the exposed employees, trust between the employee and their employer could be a mitigating factor in alleviating this dissatisfaction.

Due to many limitations in the research setting, the findings of this study are not conclusive or generalizable. However, the conclusions presented provide interesting avenues for other researchers to examine. Suggestions for further research are presented in chapter 7.4.

7.2 Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that the preferences held by employees within the Finnish IT sector regarding traits associated with preferred employers vary somewhat when compared with international research and data on employer branding.

In general, employees within the Finnish IT industry appear to prefer ‘softer’ values, such as communality and self-fulfillment over ‘harder’, economically minded or career-oriented values when evaluating between employers. Although little research has been conducted into the specifics of the Finnish workforce vis-à-vis employer branding, Finnish employers seem to have grasped the peculiarities of their employees quite well. Based on the interviews conducted for this study, the brand image cultivated by the employing case company matches this expectation of ‘softer’ values adequately.

The findings indicate that – in general – so long as they actively listen to their employees, employers within the Finnish IT sector have a good shot at matching the criteria expected of them. Although further research needs to be conducted, the results advocate for an increased emphasis on softer values throughout employer branding activities. Furthermore, this study suggests that where employers fail to meet the expectations of their employees, employee dissatisfaction can be mitigated through trust and open communication.

7.3 Theoretical contributions and managerial implications

The theoretical aim of this study was to add to the literature on employer branding through testing and validating existing theories and frameworks in a novel context and to examine if these frameworks apply in this new environment.

The empirical section of this study relies heavily on the findings of Berthon et al. (2005), according to which an employer brand generates value for employees and applicants on five dimensions: social, developmental, application, interest and economic. Combining this categorization with classifications presented by Pawar (2018), Arachchige & Robertson (2011) and Dabirian et al. (2017), this study presents a total of eight distinct employer branding factors listed in appendix III. Through seven semi-structured interviews, the significance of these factors and their underlying value propositions in employees' evaluations of employer attractiveness was assessed.

The theoretical implications of this assessment are mixed. Of the five value dimensions presented by Berthon et al. (2005), the data supported four: social value, developmental value, application value and interest value. Somewhat surprisingly, the fifth value dimension: economic value, was largely unfeatured in the data. This could suggest that either a) the model presented by Berthon et al. (2005) does not wholly fit the context of the Finnish IT industry, b) the dimension is of relatively small significance or c) the small sample size and the modest research setting allowed for it to go unnoticed. Either way, this result calls for increased scrutiny on Berthon et al.'s (2005) model and presents interesting avenues for further research.

Furthermore, by exploring the concept of employer branding as a signalling phenomenon, this study aimed to demonstrate the effects of the three metatheories presented by Ehrhart & Ziegert (2005, 903), who argue that the function of organizational attraction is composed of how individuals see themselves, how they see their environment and how they evaluate the fit between the two. The findings of this study indicate that the hypotheses set forward by Ehrhart & Ziegert apply in this novel context, too: on average, the interviewees who expressed a more coherent fit between their personal desires and the image they hold of their employer, exhibited greater content and increased satisfaction with their work environment.

For managers working with employer branding efforts, this study presents a few points of interest. Firstly, based on the interview data, we argue that employees in the Finnish IT industry rank the relative importance of the employer branding factors presented in appendix III followingly:

1. Happy, honest and fair environment
2. Good relationships with colleagues and superiors
3. Challenging work with a chance to develop
4. Socially responsible work with a chance to apply what I've learned and teach others
5. Good work-life balance
6. Innovative environment valuing creativity
7. Above average compensation, benefits and promotion opportunities
8. Well-known company with quality products and services

This ranking presents a range of possibilities for managers in human resources and marketing in Finnish IT companies to better focus their employer branding activities. The ranking indicates that employees in the Finnish IT industry exhibit a preference for softer values such as communality and self-fulfilment over harder, career-oriented or economical values. This preliminary data suggests that managers working with employer branding might benefit from highlighting these soft values in their employer branding activities.

Furthermore, the results indicate that junior employees in the Finnish IT industry might be more attracted to organizations presenting themselves as nurturing environments with room to grow, prosper and develop. More senior employees, on the other hand, seem to be drawn to organizations fostering self-expression, creativity and freedom. This, again, provides some guidelines for managers working with employer branding activities to better target their desired recruits.

7.4 Limitations and suggestions for further research

By focusing on a specific case company, the aim of this study was to illuminate the status of employer branding in the Finnish IT industry and to build ground for further research. Thus, the findings of this study do not directly translate to organizations outside of the case company, but they may provide a starting point upon which more generalizable data can be collected.

The empirical part of the study builds on data collected from seven individual interviews. The interviewees were selected in co-operation with the case company and fall into two categories based on seniority: four of the interviewees were classified as junior employees while three were considered senior employees. During the data analysis process, the answers of these two groups were compared for any possible discrepancies. The division of an already small sample size into two distinct groups as well as the subsequent analysis of these groups as separate entities diminishes the validity of the findings. By using a more robust selection of interviewees, the findings of this study would have carried considerably more weight. Furthermore, by selecting the interviewees at random we could have avoided any possible biases in the interviewee selection process. Moreover, analysis of the interview data was carried out by a single individual, increasing the likelihood of researcher bias throughout the data analysis process, too. By having the empirical data analysed by multiple people, we could have, again, improved the validity of the findings.

Despite issues with research validity, this study managed to meet its main objective of illuminating the phenomenon of employer branding in the context of the Finnish IT industry and to generate compelling avenues for further research to explore. Based on this study, subsequent employer branding literature could examine such questions as:

- What is the relative significance of employer brand equity factors – do some factors carry more weight than others?
- How do employees assess the relative significance of each of the four employer brand value propositions presented by Berthon et al. (2005)?
- How do employees within the Finnish IT sector assess the role of economic value when evaluating between employers?
- What is the role of employer-employee trust in mitigating the effects of brand gap in the employer branding context?
- Does cultural shock factor into the way an employee assesses their work environment in the beginning stages of employment?
- Do cognitive biases – such as optimism bias or confirmation bias – affect employees' response towards gaps between the expected employer brand and the experienced employer brand?

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APPENDICES

Appendix I. Components of Employer Attractiveness as Identified by Arachchige & Robertson (2011, 33-34)

Recognition/appreciation from management
A fun working environment
Provides opportunity for better jobs in the future
Feeling good about yourself as a result of working for the organisation
Feeling more self-confident as a result of working for the organisation
Gaining experience that will help your career
Having a good relationship with your supervisors
Having a good relationship with your colleagues
Supportive and encouraging colleagues
Working in an exciting environment
Innovative employer – new work practices and ideas
The organisation values and makes use of your creativity
The organisation produces high quality products and services
The organisation produces innovative products and services
Good promotion opportunities within the organisation
Socially responsible organisation
Opportunity to apply what was learned at university
Opportunity to teach others what you have learned at university
Acceptance and belonging
The organisation is customer-oriented
Job security within the organisation
Can gain experience in a range of departments
Happy work environment
An above average basic salary
An attractive overall compensation package
A very profitable organisation
A large company
Company is well-known through advertising and media exposure
The type of product and/or service produced by the organisation
The quality of the management
The organisation is known for its honesty and fairness
Giving you greater respect from family and friends

Appendix II. Employer Brand Factors as Identified by Pawar (2018, 167)

Location
Company Size
Company Fit
Reputation
Business Travel
Technology Level
Product/Service
Profile
Role Clarity
Flexi time
Company Environment
Empowerment
Challenging Work
Responsibility
Development
Appeal
Salary
Health Benefits
Teams Quality
Incentives
Managers Quality
Work Hours
Opportunities
Bonus
Facilities
Mobility
Vacation
Childcare
Retirement Benefits

Appendix III. The Eight Distinct Employer Brand Factors Presented in This Study Based on Berthon et al. (2005) Pawar (2018), Arachchige & Robertson (2011) and Dabirian et al. (2017)

Innovative environment valuing creativity
Happy, honest and fair environment
Good relationships with colleagues and superiors
Above average compensation, benefits and promotion opportunities
Well-known company with quality products and services
Challenging work with a chance to develop
Socially responsible work with a chance to apply what I’ve learned and teach others
Good work-life balance

Appendix IV. Questionnaire to Support the Structured Interview Process on Interviewees' Individual Values Based on Motivational Values and Explanations by Schwartz (1994, 22)

Value	**Explanation**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
Power	Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources							
Achievement	Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards							
Hedonism	Pleasure and sensuous gratification for oneself							
Stimulation	Excitement, novelty and challenge in life							
Self-direction	Independent thought and action – choosing, creating, exploring							
Universalism	Understanding, appreciation, tolerance and protection for the welfare of *all* people and for nature							
Benevolence	Preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent personal contact							
Tradition	Respect, commitment and acceptance of the customs and ideas that traditional culture or religion provide							
Conformity	Restraint of actions, inclinations and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate social expectations or norms							
Security	Safety, harmony and stability of society, of relationships and of self							

Appendix V. Questionnaire Used in the Structured Interview Process Asking Interviewees to Evaluate Companies Based on Their Earlier Answers

On a scale from 1-7, how would you rate each of the following companies based on the questions discussed earlier?

Company	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**
CGI							
Nixu							
F-Secure							
Reaktor							
KPMG							
Solita							
Vincit							
Elisa							
Nordcloud							