



## Structures, strategizing, and contested territories: A structuration perspective on strategy development in employer branding

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### ABSTRACT

This study examines strategy development in employer branding based on structuration theory, focusing on the interplay between employer branding structures and the (inter)actions of employer branding strategists. To analyse this interplay, this paper draws upon a series of strategy meetings in an employer branding project of a multinational construction company. This study adds to the current debate on employer branding by advancing the understanding of the structural embeddedness of strategizing in employer branding. Furthermore, the study proposes that strategy development shifts employer branding engagements into contested territory due to various and contradictory structures strategists need to deal with.

### 1. Introduction

Employer brands have become an essential strategic concept in human resource (HR) management (e.g. App, Merk, & Büttgen, 2012; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2010; Martin, Gollan, & Grigg, 2011) due to the current and expected labour market shortages of qualified employees (e.g. Dögl & Holtbrügge, 2014). One stream of employer branding research examines the effects of employer brands on current employees (e.g. Edwards & Edwards, 2013) and potential applicants (e.g. Auer, Edlinger, & Mölk, 2014). Another research stream concentrates on the management of employer brands, the ‘employer branding’ (e.g. Aggerholm, Andersen, & Thomsen, 2011; Elving, Westhoff, Meeusen, & Schoonderbeek, 2013; Foster, Punjaisri, & Cheng, 2010; Leekha Chhabra & Sharma, 2014; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Related contemporary research examines the conceptualization and implementation of employer brands in organizations. This study contributes to the latter research stream, and further deepens the understanding of the management of employer brands.

Specifically, I examine strategy development in employer branding, focusing on the interplay between employer branding structures and the (inter)actions of employer branding strategists. I define the structures of employer branding as sets of functional and organizational rules and resources, strategically generated by organizations (e.g. target audience, budget) or given by the context in which the organization is embedded (e.g. labour market conditions, social welfare system). Employer branding strategists are agents responsible for the development of employer branding strategies, mainly employer brand heads, HR and brand/marketing managers, executive board members, or

external consultants. Besides individual actions on strategy, this involvement also comprises interactions in strategy meetings (e.g. discussions, negotiations) in different patterns and at various points in time. Existing empirical research on management practices in employer branding emphasizes the role of politics in employer brand management (Mölk & Auer, 2018), embeddedness of employer branding through organizational HR practices (Russell & Brannan, 2016), role and activities of employer brand managers (Edlinger, 2015), and employer branding as an HR strategy-in-action (Martin et al., 2011). Despite thorough research, we know little about strategy development in employer branding. This is because most studies—including those specialized on management practices in employer branding—assume employer branding strategies as a given. Thus, employer branding research largely neglects the impact of strategists’ (inter)actions, as well as the contextual embeddedness and organization of the strategy development in employer branding. Therefore, I suggest that the empirical studies of strategy development in employer branding can answer the following research question: how do employer branding strategies develop among strategists and what are the influences of employer branding structures on this process? Therefore, on one hand, this study looks at (inter)actions that strategists engage in to develop employer branding strategies. On the other hand, it considers the structural contexts in which strategizing in employer branding is embedded: the organizational, professional, and project environment.

Structuration theory (Giddens, 1977, 1984) serves as sensitive device to manage the analysis of strategy development in employer branding. It emphasizes the interplay between employer branding structures and strategizing in employer branding. I investigate the

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development of an employer branding strategy in a multinational construction company (MCC) by looking at strategy meetings the organization was engaged in. Contemporary thinking within strategy as practice research emphasizes the important role of strategy meetings in strategy development (e.g. Hodgkinson, Whittington, Johnson, & Schwarz, 2006; Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008) and, therefore, these social gatherings are used as an empirical window into MCC's employer branding structures and agents' strategizing in employer branding.

The study contributes to employer branding research in two ways. First, it enhances the neglected field of strategy research in employer branding by endorsing the emergent nature of strategies and strategizing in employer branding. Therefore, this study brings new viewpoints to the existing dominant functional understanding of employer branding strategies through a structuration perspective. Furthermore, it adds to the research on management practices in employer branding by analysing strategy development in a particular context and proposing that strategy development shifts employer branding engagements into contested territory due to the various and contradictory structures strategists need to deal with.

## 2. Research on employer branding

To study strategy development in employer branding, some of its properties need to be recognized from previous research. Most importantly, most studies emphasize that employer brands are strategically built to retain existing and attract potential employees (e.g. Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2010). However, few studies focus on management practices in employer branding (e.g. Edlinger, 2015; Martin et al., 2011; M $\ddot{u}$ lk & Auer, 2018; Russell & Brannan, 2016), examining the 'building up' rather than its strategic outcomes.

Basically, the development of employer branding strategies is structured by their interdisciplinary nature, 'where principles of marketing, in particular the "science of branding", are applied to HR activities' (Edwards, 2010, p. 6). Consequently, agents within the management fields of marketing and HR represent potential partners for strategy development. Moreover, few studies highlight the importance of including other intra-organizational strategists and thus illustrate and promote the multi-disciplinary aspect of employer branding. For instance, Martin et al. (2011) emphasize that line managers, union representatives, and employees at all levels are 'heavily involved in developing as well as in implementing' (p. 3629) employer brands. In this regard, Aggerholm et al. (2011) approach is less descriptive and more normative, as they promote to have 'employees as corporate partners in order to co-create' (p. 117) an accurate employer brand and achieve an increasing acceptance among different stakeholder groups. Surprisingly, relevant research largely neglects the role of extra-organizational strategists. In this respect, only two studies address this issue: Martin et al. (2011) generally note the often intense involvement of external consultants, while M $\ddot{u}$ lk and Auer (2018) report on an employer brand creation project where marketing and academic consultants played an active role. However, their specific influence on the development of an employer branding strategy is not discussed further.

The creation of employer branding strategies is thus further structured by two institutional contexts: organizations and industries. While employer branding does not depend on company size, it is mostly large-scale companies that provide the financial and human capacities for employer branding (e.g. Baum, Gsell, & Kabst, 2012). Besides company size, multinational organizations often deal with employer branding. In this respect, Martin et al. (2011) underline its wider strategic importance for multinational organizations, as employer branding has a direct impact on corporate reputation, talent management, and employee engagement agendas. Finally, employer branding is also affected by the organizations in their respective industry. Numerous studies have analysed the impact of the industrial context, as, for instance, employer branding in the power industry (Heilmann, Saarenketo, &

Liikkanen, 2013). All these studies emphasize the importance of employer branding strategies being embedded within industry-specific traits (Theurer, Tumasjan, Welp, & Lievens, 2016).

Contemporary research on management practices in employer branding provides important insights but has some limitations in terms of context. First, employer branding structures are thoroughly examined, but their impact on strategy development is not well understood. The main body of literature abstracts away from the context in which employer branding strategies are developed, that is, the very systems of organizational objective and procedures, included strategists, labour market situation(s) etc. Second, strategizing in employer branding has not been the focus of current research. Contemporary thinking mainly concentrates on practices of line, marketing, or HR managers (Martin et al., 2011; Russell & Brannan, 2016) and the 'work' of employer brand managers (Edlinger, 2015) before or after the development of employer branding strategies. M $\ddot{u}$ lk and Auer (2018) study the creation of an employer brand from a practice perspective. Therefore, the authors analysed the implementation of strategic objectives in employer branding, although the development of these strategy objectives has not been taken under consideration.

## 3. Structures, (inter)actions, and strategy development in employer branding: a structuration approach

To analyse strategy development in particular contexts, I use Giddens (1977, 1984) structuration theory, which focuses on the relationship between structure and agency. Therefore, Giddens combines the theoretical considerations of functionalism and structuralism with hermeneutics and different types of interpretative sociology. Consequently, a structuration approach shifts the focus from single actors or any form of structural totality towards 'the dynamic process whereby structures come into being' (Giddens, 1977, p. 121).

One central concept within structuration theory is the duality of structures, for which Giddens (1977) addresses the interplay between structure and social agent by emphasizing that 'structures are both constituted by human agency, and yet at the same time are the very medium of this constitution' (p. 121). In his understanding, structures exist as structural properties/conditions of (inter)actions and not as stable, dominating social phenomena. Giddens sees structures as sets of rules and resources and on which agents consciously and unconsciously refer to in (inter)actions. By doing so, they reproduce and/or change the structural properties/conditions under which they (inter)act. Consequently, the notion of agency in structuration theory emphasizes that human agency emerges through agents' confrontation with the structural properties/conditions of their social environment. Therefore, agency for Giddens is both structured and structuring. Applying this theoretical concept to strategy development in employer branding means paying attention to strategists' conformation with employer branding structures. For instance, how do agents frame the interdisciplinary concept of employer branding or where do they see the strategic benefits of employer branding engagements for organizations? As strategy development in employer branding represent exclusive events in organizations, related (inter)actions may differ in comparison to other employer branding engagements as, for instance, the creation of an employer brand (e.g. M $\ddot{u}$ lk & Auer, 2018) or the general work of employer brand managers (e.g. Edlinger, 2015).

Crucially, the duality of structures also reveals that structures, as sets of rules and resources, not only place constraints on (inter)actions but also have enabling qualities. Therefore, it stresses both the restricting and invigorating potential of rules and resources. In terms of strategy development in employer branding, this means that 'structures', as sets of rules and resources, enable strategizing while, at the same time, restricting them: they offer possibilities to distance oneself from professional routines or organizational guidelines as they also offer frameworks to organize the strategy making in employer branding. To elaborate this duality, Giddens divides structures into

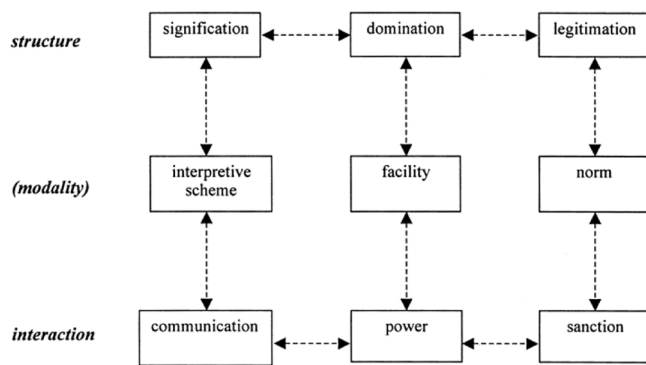


Fig. 1. Duality of structures.

Source: adapted from Giddens (1984, p. 29).

signification, domination, and legitimation, and interaction into communication, power, and sanction. The interplay of structure and (inter)action is then designated through modalities that include interpretative schemes, facilities, and norms. The model presented in Fig. 1 illustrates this duality of structures.

*Signification* comprises shared notions, concepts, and theories that make human agencies meaningful and understandable. Via interpretative schemes – ‘the mode of typification’ (Giddens, 1977, p. 133) – the dimension of signification is related to the act of communication. Consequently, agents communicate by using interpretative schemes and, as a result, ‘make sense of what actors say or do, and of the cultural objects they produce’ (Giddens, 1977, p. 133). In the strategy context, interpretative schemes can resemble common employer branding concepts (e.g. employer brand vision model), discipline-specific vocabulary and expressions (e.g. employee value proposition), or general management tools that get employed in strategy development (e.g. SWOT analysis). According to Giddens, interpretative schemes constitute cognitive aspects of social structures, ‘semantic rules’ (p. 133) that, on one hand, guide agents’ interpretation of the world. On the other hand, agents also make use of interpretative schemes consciously and tactically to actively impact the flow of events.

*Legitimation* describes shared values, standards, or assumptions, thus outlining agents’ normative views on the world. This concept is transmitted via norms to agents’ (inter)action. In other words, agents sanction foreign and legitimate their own behaviour by employing sets of norms. In the strategy context, this dimension outlines strategists’ handling of corporate guidelines and employer branding standards in conjunction with individual and collective beliefs. In a structuration approach, norms have a regulating effect on agents’ actions, representing ‘moral rules’ agents refer to by the ‘evaluation of conduct’ (Giddens, 1977, p. 133).

*Domination* refers to (in)formal power relations in social systems, such as the relationship between employer branding strategists. Domination is linked to the act of power through the modality of facility. In contrast to Giddens’ notion of semantic and moral rules, facility includes all resources ‘that may be brought to a situation of interaction; they range from command and verbal skills to the application of means of violence’ (Giddens, 1977, p. 134). Structuration theory differentiates between authoritative (non-material, power relationships) and allocative (material, economic) resources. Accordingly, agents exercise power when using available material and non-material resources. In the strategy context, the dimension of domination outlines strategists’ usage of expert knowledge or negotiation skills in meetings up to strategy budgets and human resources. Importantly, Giddens (1977) understands power as ‘transformative capacity’ (p. 134), a relational, processual resource: agents are not slaves to any existing structures; they hold the power to ‘act otherwise’ and can leave pre-fabricated terrain by saying ‘no’ (Giddens, 1984, p. 12).

#### 4. Study design and research methodology

This research is based on an in-depth case study (Yin, 1994), in which strategy meetings serve as the empirical context for analysing strategy development in employer branding. An employer branding project at an MCC is analysed. The company operates in B2B and B2C markets. Its headquarters are Central Europe, where the company was also established during the first decade of the 20th century and grew constantly. In 2013, the company had offices in 80 countries with more than 30,000 employees. Around 65% of all employees work in sales and have a background in business administration; approximately 30% work in product development or manufacturing, having either a higher technical (university degree) or no specific educational background. The remaining workforce deals with administrative tasks (e.g. accounting, human resources, logistics). MCC is family-owned, directed by an executive board, including five top managers responsible for international alignment and sustainable growth.

From August 2013 to December 2014, the MCC re-created its employer branding strategy. Therefore, the company conducted a top-down initiated project to update the global employer branding strategy established in 2008. Therefore, the project had to deal with varying facets of employer attractiveness and diverse labour markets and situations (e.g. unemployment rates, labour laws) (see EUROSTAT, 2016). The project was organized along an employer branding management model and divided into the phases (1) analysing, (2) positioning and targeting, (3) expressing and testing, and (4) roll-out. Within the different phases, MCC employed procedures and tasks that were used in other corporate projects of strategy development. Therefore, each phase included two different forms of strategy meetings, workshops, and strategy formation meetings. All workshops addressed four formal meeting tasks, short presentations of themes, followed by extensive group discussions, development of key areas of concern, and further actions. The strategy formation meetings included a structured brainstorming process to generate relevant themes and objectives for each project phase and, thus, the detailed planning of the duration, location, and content of the workshops. The formats of all project meetings were highly participatory to enhance the chances for dialogue and discussions among the involved agents. Although agents worked independently within the project (e.g. interviewing employees), the strategy meetings served as platforms to coordinate and consolidate individual efforts.

The ‘core team’ (Strategy Paper 3) in the project comprised three brand managers (BM1–3) and three HR managers (HRM1–3), professionals in their fields that have proven their qualities and competencies within several projects inside the company. Despite that, none of them had participated in MCC’s first employer branding project or in a strategy development process. The project manager (PM), with a background in corporate communication, had formal authority over the project, particularly in managing the courses and contents of the respective phases, and initiating and organizing formal meetings. Additionally, the initiators of the project, one executive board member (EBM) and the head of HR (HHR), joined the project as an ‘extended team’ (strategy paper 3). Importantly, the project manager and the extended team have participated in the first employer branding project and have experience in developing corporate strategies. Although all strategists came from different levels within the MCC hierarchy, formally, there were no higher- or lower-level position assignments (e.g. chair, moderator) in the project.

Data collection included (1) participant observation, (2) documentary material, and (3) contextual information. I observed four workshops (WS1–4) that lasted 2–5 days and four strategy formation meetings (SFM1–4) with a duration of 2–4 h. All these formal meetings were audio-taped and transcribed. Moreover, I took hand-written notes of an undefined number of informal meetings (IM), which included conversations between the involved agents during breaks (e.g. lunch or coffee). Importantly, for participant observation, I took on the role of a

researcher, and did not actively intervene in the strategy development by, for instance, participating in debates, providing support, or offering advice. I also had access to seven presentations (p1–7) with a total number of 327 slides, all used within the meetings. Furthermore, I studied contextual information on the project, namely relevant national labour market reports, the company website<sup>1</sup> (general and career page), and three strategy papers (sp1–3) produced prior to the project start.

In order to address the ontological and epistemological assumptions of structuration theory, I employed two techniques of qualitative content analysis to sufficiently process the empirical material<sup>2</sup>: a theme analysis and a context analysis (Mayring, 2014). First, I analysed how the agents (inter)act within the various meetings, in particular strategists' ways of applying available sets of rules and resources. Therefore, I conducted a deductive-inductive theme analysis for understanding strategizing in employer branding. Based on this study's literature review on employer branding, I created eight thematic units, such as 'Problems based on contradictory ideologies of employer branding' or 'Impact of organizational and industrial elements' before analysing the empirical material. Afterwards, I started analysing the observation transcripts line by line and formulated categories inductively. This process generated a system of 15 categories (e.g. 'topics that trigger conflicts', 'ways of creating agreements') and 26 sub-categories (e.g. 'thematised management errors', 'appealing to ethical and moral values'). I further analysed the documentary material using the category system. Processing the second set of data helped me enlarge and deepen the developed categories. However, having analysed these data sources, I was confronted with a large number of categories (34) and sub-categories (62). Here, I drew upon Jarzabkowski and Seidlös (2008) considerations of three critical aspects of meetings: initiation, termination, and conduct (p. 1395). Initiation is the point at which meetings get suspended from ongoing organizational processes. Additionally, initiation also comes with the establishment of particular meeting structures. Conversely, termination points at the dissolution of these particular structures and reinstating organizational structures. Conduct deals with (inter)actions within meetings and thus includes agents' ways of communicating, exercising power, or sanctioning. I focused on categories that provided information regarding meeting conduct, which helped me further structure and consolidate the existing category system, thereby gleaned information about strategists' (inter)actions. For instance, this step created categories such as 'Employing expert knowledge' or 'Executing corporate procedures and tasks'.

Second, I focused on the analysis of institutional contexts within which the strategizing in employer branding at MCC were embedded. In particular, I analysed structural properties/conditions (the sets of rules and resources) that navigate and, at the same time, get reproduced through strategists' (inter)actions. Therefore, I conducted a context analysis (Mayring, 2014) to deepen my understanding of employer branding structures. Within the initial phase, I identified additional explanatory materials based on a literature review on employer branding and, thus, I took into account labour market, organizational, and conceptual issues. Afterwards I collected empirical materials beyond the observation transcriptions and documentary materials from the meetings and generated the initial categories such as 'National labour markets and labour relations' or 'Multidisciplinary project'. Once the data collection was concluded, I summarized the material by constructing thematic statements (e.g. 'Attracting across diverse industries') and further organized these statements by means of organizational and functional topics.

As the notion of the duality of structures entails that neither

<sup>1</sup>To ensure the anonymity of MCC, the exact wording on the company website was changed in the case presentation.

<sup>2</sup>The processing of the empirical material was done in the original language (German or English) using Atlas.TI and, if necessary, translated for the presentation.

structure nor agency should be analysed in isolation (Giddens, 1977), I continuously revised and switched between the findings from theme and context analysis. This process helped me better understand the interplay between 'Employer branding structures' and 'Strategizing in employer branding', in particular the conjunction of 'organizational structures and (inter)actions' and 'functional structures and (inter)actions'.

Due to my participation during the strategy meetings and the fact that the data collection and analysis were conducted by the same person, I emphasized the critical reflections of the findings. To weaken potential (counter) biases (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2009, p. 72), I asked a research fellow with a background in employer branding and structuration theory to conduct an inter-coder check on the empirical material and the final category system to (e.g. Mayring, 2014). This final step enhanced reliability, allowing for the revision of the derived category system, discussing findings, and excluding contradictory empirical evidence.

## 5. Findings: strategy development in employer branding at MCC – structures and strategizing

### 5.1. Employer branding structures

This section illustrates the employer branding properties that maintained and constrained the strategy development at MCC, which I divided into organizational and functional structures.

Basically, developing an employer branding strategy at MCC required an understanding of *organization structures*. Generally, the involved agents must be aware that MCC is a sales-driven company in which 'more than 2/3 of our team members work daily with customers directly' (Homepage). In line with this, MCC established a business model that provides a foundation for strong turnover orientation among all employees. Consequently, all MCC employees, including back and front office services, were encouraged to work closely with customers and 'help find profitable solutions' (Homepage) for them. In particular, for anyone working in or doing a project for MCC, it is also important to know that top management puts special emphasis on corporate culture issues. With the formal description of MCC's corporate culture, the organization stresses connecting elements, e.g. 'foster a cooperative atmosphere' or 'treat others the way you want to be treated' (Career page). However, in their recruitment policy, the company also attaches great importance to employees who have an 'entrepreneurial spirit' (Homepage) and are 'not afraid to be different' (Career page). In fact, the organization exhorts people to be 'anything but traditional' (Career page) and motivates (potential) employees to avoid conventional approaches.

The *functional structures* of MCC's employer branding approach further created conditions with significant meaning for the project. In their past employer branding engagements, MCC emphasized its status as an employer of choice, particularly in the construction industry. This is based on 'excellent employee surveys' (sp3), winning various employer awards, and 'above-average ratings among relevant employer-rating web sites' (sp1). However, with the strategy update, MCC followed the top management request of to 'focus less on the construction industry in which we play' (sp2) a major role and challenge globally well-known top-employers. This was accompanied by the request to attract 'broader target groups', and not only to '[take] care of sales and engineers' (sp3). Contrary to the 2008 employer branding project, which was 'planned superficial[ly] (...) and [reached] no definite ending' (sp1), the project phases and the relevant meetings of the employer branding update were planned precisely and straightforwardly. Compliance with the time schedule was the only remaining task to ensure that MCC's plans 'do not produce any delay' (ir3) and 'go live by the beginning of 2015' (sp1).

In summary, the multifaceted employer branding structures at MCC created a complex environment for the strategy development.

Strategists were not only confronted with organizational challenges the strategizing at MCC entails, but also the consideration of functional requests played a significant role. In structuration terms, organizational and functional structures can be interpreted as the rules of the strategy development at MCC according to which resources were allocated. Only strategists that were able to correspond to these organizational and functional rules appropriately could draw on related resources, and thus influence the strategy development in employer branding at MCC.

## 5.2. Strategizing in employer branding

This section illustrates the very (inter)actions strategists engaged in when developing the new employer branding strategy at MCC. I differentiate between two sets of (inter)actions: organizational and functional.

### 5.2.1. Organizational (inter)actions

This section addresses the (inter)actions that refer to the corporate structures of MCC. I identified ‘Attacking the company orientation’, ‘Executing corporate procedures and tasks’, and ‘Addressing corporate cultural themes’.

#### Attacking organizational directions

The employer branding project at MCC was initiated to update the existing strategy in accordance to current employment standards and trends. However, the company direction of a ‘sales company with special emphasis on construction’ (p4) attached particular importance to the involved agents. Although this did not play any role during project preparation, strategists constantly attacked MCC’s sales focus during the strategy development. Attacking organizational directions needs to be understood in conjunction with strategists’ career intentions, as well as their organizational positions. For instance, during an unplanned discussion after SFM1, HRM2 stated that ‘Sales in this market is not thought of as a respectable career’ or HHR revealed ‘I’m not a vendor’. The following conversation during a coffee break (IM) also illustrated the collective negative attitude towards sales jobs:

HRM1: Sales is not perceived as a first-choice career (...) and being honest here, at MCC it is all about selling.

BM1: What do you mean exactly?

HRM1: Our sales-orientation forces us to work > > for < < our salespeople or > > as < < a salesperson.

HRM3: But, at the same time, we must admit that lots of people here at MCC, myself included, do not want to make a career in sales.

BM2: I agree!

HRM1: I also cannot imagine working in sales.

During the project, MCC’s organizational direction raised a recurrent topic within formal meetings, as strategists started to share the same opinion on the subject of sales. The exclusion of this particular corporate issue from the new employer branding strategy was officially justified by the fact that ‘The appeal and cachet of a sales role on a construction site is often low (...) so it cannot remain a focal point in the future’ (p6). From a structuration perspective, strategists mostly (inter)acted upon collective employment norms and idealisms of employer attractiveness. However, they did this on a corporate scale and with the intention to develop a new – ‘sales-free’ – employer branding strategy. It is worth noting that attacking organizational directions remained an integral part during the employer branding project at MCC.

#### Executing corporate procedures and tasks

Through the inclusion of classic corporate procedures and tasks of strategy development, MCC wanted to make sure that the new employer branding strategy also corresponds to corporate norms and standards. Therefore, MCC included forms of strategy meetings or strategic tasks, which were successfully used in past corporate strategy projects. Here, executing corporate procedures and tasks must be

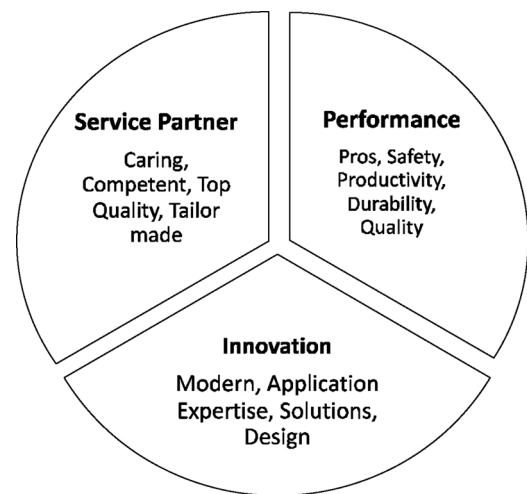


Fig. 2. The MCC Strategy Framework (sp1).

understood in conjunction with strategists’ past experience with strategy development projects. Although all strategists joined diverse corporate projects, most of the project group (HR and marketing/branding experts) had no experience in developing corporate strategies. This became most apparent when these agents executed strategy assignments the project outline had planned. For instance, during WS2, HR and marketing/branding agents were assigned to ‘define focal points for the update’ (PM). After a longer break in the conversation, the strategy expert HHR suggested to employ ‘The MCC Strategy Framework’ (Fig. 2), and in doing so, reinvigorated the strategizing.

From a structuration perspective, the HR or marketing/branding agent’s ability to execute corporate procedures and tasks and thus impact on the new employer branding strategy was facilitated and constrained by the project outline on one hand, and by their individual experience as strategists on the other. Regarding the former, the employer branding project can be seen as an opportunity for strategists from lower hierarchical levels to climb the intra-organizational career ladder and become strategy experts such as HHR or EBM. However, due to their lack of individual experience in strategizing, agents from the core team often relied on the help of experienced strategists to (inter)act and consequently drive the strategy update forward.

#### Addressing corporate cultural themes

In the context of employer branding at MCC, the strategy development was often associated with corporate culture themes. Here, addressing corporate cultural themes must be understood in conjunction with strategists’ organizational knowledge and affiliation.

On one hand, through the consideration of different aspects of the corporate culture, strategists left the impression of developing an employer branding strategy along organizational requirements and standards. However, agents did not simply ‘use’ MCC’s corporate culture to create an authentic employer branding strategy. Rather, they often referred to corporate cultural themes strategically, as a general resource to create and promote commitment for their own ideas, among others. For example, agents conducted speeches on ‘The Foundation of our success story – MCC as CULT’ (p3) or ‘The essence of MCC: Our internal, corporate DNA’ (p6), in which they proposed that the existing employer branding strategy requires a major redesign. Addressing corporate cultural themes in the development of a new employer branding strategy was facilitated by the importance of this issue for MCC in general and the involvement of some of the top managers (extended team) in particular.

On the other hand, involved agents did not only use corporate culture issues strategically to enforce their own ideas, and the employer branding project also showed the regulating effect of MCC’s ‘corporate

DNA' on their strategizing. For instance, strategists never really questioned or criticized corporate culture issues within the different meetings. Additionally, in difficult situations, in which consensus seemed unreachable and conflicts were omnipresent, strategists tended to employ everyday practice and routines. The following debate during WS1, where employee platforms were discussed, exemplifies the impact of HHR's hierarchical standing on other strategists of lower hierarchical levels.

HHR: I think, in this very moment, we confuse pride with arrogance! We should listen to those voices. (...) We all did good jobs here and, in fact, are still doing a good job.

BM2: But most of these comments on kununu or Glassdoor simply suggest that we did a bad job.

HR3: I agree! We just cannot take these things seriously. (...) These are just a bunch of people who did a bad job here (at MCC) and now want to tell us we did a bad job.

(::)

HHR: I fully agree with you all, but I think these platforms are a chance to reflect on our work and the work of our colleagues. (...) And this is our job here in the project. (...) together we can make this employer more attractive, (...) and these negative comments can help us.

HR3: Okay.

BM2: That will be difficult, but ok, let's try it.

In sum, by addressing corporate cultural themes, the involved agents mostly (inter)acted upon (in)formal organizational rules and resources and the expectations of other organizational agents. Strategists did this not only to acknowledge the 'outstanding culture' (PM) of MCC but also to enhance (core team) or maintain (extended team) their standing in the project and organization.

### 5.2.2. Functional (inter)actions

This section outlines strategists' (inter)actions that refer to the conceptual structures of employer branding at MCC, namely 'Employing expert knowledge' and 'Demanding employer branding ideals'.

#### Employing expert knowledge

When looking at the resources of the employer branding update at MCC, the project accumulated significant expert knowledge through the inclusion of diverse strategists. Here, employing expert knowledge must be understood in conjunction with strategists' professional backgrounds. On one hand, being 'the right person for this project' (BM1) comprised the confident handling of employer branding knowledge. For instance, strategists employed a four-phase employer brand management model to structure the overall course of the strategy development. Additionally, other concepts such as 'MCC's employer brand equity pyramid' (Fig. 3) were used on a case-by-case basis to organize discussions or brainstorming sessions. The employment of employer

branding knowledge gave strategists, especially agents from the core team, the opportunity to govern and alter the strategy update in accordance to their own visions and perceptions of employer branding.

On the other hand, strategists also made use of consulting studies – 'third-party knowledge' (p4) – and their own generated knowledge (e.g. observations, employee-interviews). Especially in situations in which the degree of uncertainty and the willingness of reflection seemed high, these authoritative resources offered strategists the opportunity to transform organizational roles and undermine power relations. The following discussion during WS2 exemplifies this by HRM1's attempt to convince HHR to give up MCC's contemporary employer branding approach:

HRM1: According to the recent Mercer study, the favourable conditions of work are changing.

HHR: How? Tell me!

HRM1: While baby boomers and gen Xers want job security and structure, millennials aim for employability and flexibility. (...) To sum up, on the basis of the Mercer data, the top-three career priorities for millennials are compensation, flexible work schedules, opportunity to make a difference, and not having a secure job.

HHR: So, what you're trying to say here is that we should focus rather on employability and flexibility than on job security?

HRM1: That is what the study suggests! (...) In my opinion, I think this shift is what our new positioning statement needs.

Employing expert knowledge constituted and reproduced one major authoritative resource for strategists of lower hierarchy levels. This (inter)action provided the basis for the core team to take over a strategic role within the employer branding update and undermine the decision-making power and strategic competencies of the extended team and project manager.

Although expert knowledge increased agents' possibilities to take over strategic roles within the employer branding update, it also constrained their action horizons. Besides working constructively on the employer branding strategy, strategists also used the project to provoke widespread debates based on their own understanding of employer branding. Agents with HR backgrounds criticized the neglected/disregarded HR policies, programmes, and practices within current employer branding work, for example, 'We only provide promotion and not [HR] content' (HRM2) or 'Our current employer branding needs a visual update to better support HR' (p6). By contrast, marketing agents used some strategy meetings to problematize the absent or low awareness of HR work inside and outside MCC. For instance, BM2 remarked that 'global careers and development process are missing', and BM1 stated that 'we are not able to offer attractive working time models to all of our employees'. In sum, the involved agents' expert knowledge not only made it possible for them to influence the new employer branding strategy of MCC, but also, and this is what those debates illustrated, constrained their understanding of employer branding. In other words, the functional rules and beliefs of one were the authoritative resources and criticisms of the others.

#### Demanding universal employer branding ideals

The main reason for project initiation was to overcome industry- and organization-specific limitations and thereby achieve broader employer attractiveness, or as PM put it, 'we need to strike new and unknown pathways' (SFM1). Therefore, project participants needed to extend normative rules of the existing employer branding strategy at MCC in new directions. Demanding universal employer branding ideals developed in response to these new directions the organization wanted to achieve as an employer.

On one hand, these new directions were addressed by a collective contestation of MCC's industrial context. For instance, structured brainstorming identified 'rejection factors of the construction industry' (p4), which were then organized and ranked by democratic voting. Moreover, the following empirical evidence illustrates the discussion

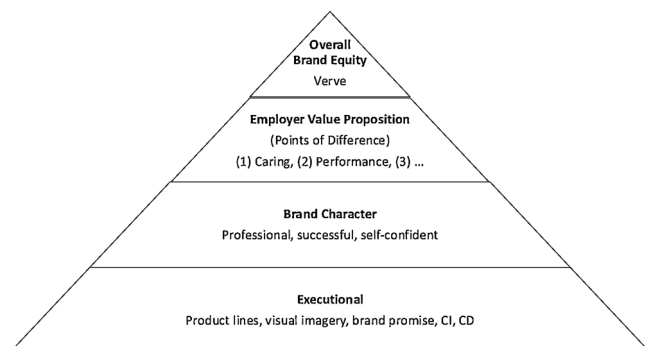


Fig. 3. MCC's employer brand equity pyramid (p7).

that led to the exclusion of industry-specific themes within the employer branding update (SFM2):

BM2: People want to work in an industry that's attractive to them (...) they do not want to work in construction, which has the perception of an old, analogue economy...

PM: (interrupts) ... that is male-dominated.

BM3: And don't forget the dirty, filthy image of construction sites!

HRM3: So, we need to show people that we are a company that is not just operating in the construction sector.

On the other hand, the consideration of national contexts of MCC's different subsidiaries also played an important role in reaching new directions. Within the project, the core team interpreted their role as a national representative for all subsidiaries of MCC and thus contested the extended team and their intention of a more 'international alignment of the brand' (EBM). For instance, PM delivered a critical opening presentation on WS2 around the theme 'How much nation needs our employer brand update?' (p3), emphasizing 'national characteristics as crucial success factors' (PM). Other strategists of the core team also stressed the importance of a more national approach (SFM3):

HRM1: Preferences from the target groups strongly depend on national labour market conditions (...).

HRM3: (interrupts) ... but also on the impact of the latest financial crisis!

HRM1: Of course! Accordingly, there is a need to address all these nation-related differences within our new employer branding.

BM2: In my opinion, the consideration of national characteristics is a central success factor here.

In sum, the core team's pro-active role as a national representative left the extended team no choice but to distance themselves from their international intentions and adopt a strong national alignment of the new employer branding strategy.

Importantly, demanding universal employer branding ideals was never in conflict with employing expert knowledge in the strategy development. Rather, both (inter)actions were interrelated, although one resembled a more normative and the other a more cognitive feature of the employer branding structures at MCC. In order to be able to demand universal employer branding ideals during strategy development, strategists depended on their ability to employ expert knowledge.

## 6. Discussion

This article examines strategy development in employer branding, using structuration theory as a sensitive device. The case of MCC illustrates that the processes and practices of strategy development exert influence on the employer branding of organizations beyond given demands. As no management field holds a dominant position within the concept of employer branding and no management board or strategist can completely determine the alignment of an employer brand, strategy development shifts employer branding engagements into contested territory. A structuration perspective suggests that this contested territory is the outcome and the medium of strategizing in employer branding. This occurs because employer branding strategists are placed in a situation where they need to negotiate between various and, in part, even contradictory employer branding structures. In the following, I discuss varying forms of this duality of structures and, thus, reconstruct political dynamics inherent to the development of employer branding strategies.

Initially, the case of MCC illustrates that the contested territory of strategy development in employer branding is the *medium and outcome of organizational (inter)actions*. The project to re-create MCC's employer branding strategy provided a sheltered organizational environment (Edlinger, 2015), in which agents were relatively free in their strategizing. There was no binding mandate they had to fulfil, but a rather personal interpretation of what is relevant for the strategy update.

Importantly, the project environment provides possibilities to distance from everyday practices and routines and enhance capacities for strategizing. In other words, it allows HR and marketing/brand managers to slip into the roles of top executives and attack organizational directions in addition to creating employer brand strategies. At MCC, for instance, attacking organizational directions was established and maintained when the strategists discovered that they all share a general aversion to the company's sales focus. In fact, being critical against organizational determinants can help create robust employer brands (e.g. Mölk & Auer, 2018) and branding strategies. However, it largely depends on the consensus of involved strategists, as in the case a shared aversion. If this consensus is missing, attacking organizational directions can also result in conflicts between the strategists and failed strategy development.

However, the case also illustrates that strategists do not necessarily use employer branding projects as opportunities to reflect organizational directions and create conflicts. In fact, some organizational structures may even guide the strategizing in employer branding and prevent conflicts. For instance, corporate frameworks for strategy development can constitute decision corridors and form employer branding strategies along organizational requirements. At MCC, for situations that were organized along corporate procedures or tasks, strategizing tended to have rather an executive than an attacking character. When strategists were confronted with corporate frameworks for strategy development, they either played by these given rules and used resources according to their formal purpose or needed guidance on how to use these rules and resources appropriately. Given this connection, it is interesting to note that strategists from lower hierarchical levels did not contest the employed frameworks and associated rules and resources at all. A reason could be that employer branding work is often done by middle managers (e.g. Martin et al., 2011; Mölk & Auer, 2018) with no or limited experience in strategizing. Consequently, these agents may face a greater challenge in appropriately executing strategy frameworks rather than dealing with the strategic purpose behind them.

Besides the regulating effects of corporate frameworks for strategy development, the case of MCC also illustrated the potential impact of corporate culture on the making of employer branding strategies. Within the project, there were no higher- or lower-level assignments of positions and no cultural criticism prohibited, but strategists still did not cross these invisible boundaries, contradict authority figures, or contest elements of the corporate culture. Importantly, the involved agents' corporate cultural knowledge was so integrated that they could hardly notice the governing effect on their strategizing. This type of knowledge refers to what strategists believe and learn about their context but are unable, or only partly able, to express discursively. This is what Giddens (1984) calls practical consciousness, taken-for-granted knowledge that enables agents to 'go on' in everyday social life. Although strategizing in this context represents exclusive events in employer branding work, the case of MCC also illustrates the impact of strategists' everyday practice and routines on their strategizing. In the course of their organizational affiliation, strategists seemed to develop 'practical consciousness' of what and how criticisms can reach agreement and what criticism will be considered irrelevant or inappropriate.

Furthermore, the case of MCC illustrates that the contested territory of strategy development in employer branding is also the *medium and outcome of functional (inter)actions*. Developing employer brand strategies is generally conveyed by a contradictory logic (Martin et al., 2011) that characterizes ambiguous rules and diffuse resources in employer branding. In the process of developing employer branding strategies, these ambiguous rules and diffuse resources may trigger processes by which the contradictory logic may transform into conflicts of (professional) interest. The case shows at least two different conflicts of (professional) interest, which can be traced back to strategists understanding of and interest in employer branding.

First, HR and marketing/branding strategists may use strategy

development to address functional problems and tensions within an organization. The case shows that strategy development in heterogeneous expert groups, as at MCC HR and marketing/branding experts, can invigorate cross-functional conflicts. The mere existence of different expert knowledge in the development of employer branding strategies builds the grounds for conflicts of (professional) interests. However, the targeted employment of expert knowledge against others could lead to an escalation and transform grounds of conflict into clashes of management professions. At MCC, strategists recurrently provoked professional-level debates that not infrequently ended in smaller and/or bigger clashes. These clashes were mostly consciously created by discrediting counterparts and their professional work. However, it would also be possible that these clashes arise unconsciously by the routine use of ‘false’ expert knowledge. Clashes of management professions hold the potential to undermine the interdisciplinary character of employer branding and develop monodisciplinary strategies, either in accordance to HR or marketing/branding rules and resources. However, at the same time, the appropriate employment of expert knowledge can also help ‘build bridges to other functions within the organization’ (Russell & Brannan, 2016, p. 115) and thus prevent or contain such clashes. At MCC, the confident handling of employer branding, and consulting and strategists’ own generated knowledge often prevented or contained clashes of management professions. However, it can also help overcome knowledge gaps of single strategists or groups (e.g. HR or marketing/branding). In fact, employing diverse expert knowledge may result in strategies that address both the interdisciplinary nature of employer branding and the challenges of modern labour markets. However, this is accompanied by strategists’ willingness to refrain from their own professional norms and beliefs and accept positions and perspectives of antagonists. Using expert knowledge appropriately within the contested territory of strategy development comes with the possibility to demarcate employer branding for an organization. In other words, playing by the conceptual rules of employer branding can increase authoritative resources (e.g. greater role of HR or marketing/branding in the organization).

The second conflict of (professional) interest appeared in the case by cross-hierarchical debates, in particular when the middle managers (of the core team) discussed with the top managers (of the extended team) whether the employer branding strategy should have a national/local or international orientation. Although tensions between the global or local alignments of employer branding are predominant challenges for multinational organizations (Martin et al., 2011; M $\ddot{u}$ lk & Auer, 2018), the case also illustrates that strategy development gives, especially middle managers, the opportunity to influence the global-local dialogue, an issue generally deliberated and adopted by the executive board. Importantly, having an impact on the global-local dialogue depends on middle managers’ ability to make use of the strategy development and existing rules and resources. The core teams’ ability to form a national alliance and lean against the extended team is one example within the case of MCC where middle managers successfully used the context of strategy development to overrule top managers. However, leaning against formal authorities who hold ‘rational and political resources to achieve their ends’ (Martin et al., 2011, p. 3629) may also come with the risk of being excluded from strategy development and, thus, losing the rules and resources an employer branding project brings (e.g. participation, voting rights). Therefore, addressing top managers’ interests in employer branding may reduce the risk of exclusion, as the formal authorities of the organization often remain the most relevant decision makers in employer branding (M $\ddot{u}$ lk & Auer, 2018). At MCC, addressing top managers’ interests comes to light by strategists’ convention to exclude industry-specific themes within the employer branding update and form a strategy that competes with the most attractive employers worldwide. Importantly, employer brands are built to address existing and potential employees’ interests. However, and this is what the case illustrates, strategies in employer branding are also or especially developed with the intention to meet the interests of the

most relevant decision makers. In other words, employer branding strategies that comply with the normative rules of the top management may draw on resources that are exclusively available to these privileged organizational agents.

## 7. Conclusion

This study addresses strategy development in employer branding, which has not hitherto been analysed in extant studies. The paper claims that strategy development shifts employer branding engagement into contested territory: organizational agents versus organizational directions, experienced versus unexperienced strategists, new versus existing employees, HR versus marketing/branding, or middle versus top managers. However, this does not necessarily mean that contested territory prevent or repress organizations from developing employer branding strategies. Rather, it shifts the attention on strategists’ (inter) actions in this contested territory. Strategy development allows agents to create employer branding strategies for organizations. However, while or because they are doing that, they exert influence on predominant formal and informal power relationships in organizations.

On one hand, the study provides implications for employer branding theory by shifting attention from structural and/or personal to the processual dimensions of the strategy development within employer branding. This understanding implies that strategizing within employer branding is a process that cannot be reduced to the employer branding structures and actions of strategists or to employer branding within an organizational and industrial context. The structuration perspective helps us better understand the interplay of employer branding structures and strategizing in employer branding and their contributions to the emergence and (re)production of employer branding strategies.

On the other hand, the study also provides practical implications for the organization of strategy development in employer branding. First, conflicts are natural within employer branding. Therefore, the establishment of siltation areas (e.g. group discussions, brainstorming events, think aloud methods) during strategy making is crucial to mediating conflicts and creating common ground. Additionally, for an escalating conflict, the invention of a code of conduct can help manage debates on controversial issues. Second, a systematic involvement of potential and/or existing employees at all hierarchical levels (e.g. Aggerholm et al., 2011) might help change the ivory-tower image of strategy development in employer branding and open it up to other stakeholders. This more inclusive approach could make the employer branding strategy more robust and decrease the rejection reactions of relevant stakeholders during implementation.

## 8. Limitations and future research

This study has several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, it only offers insights from a single case study. Therefore, future research should also focus more on employers less known in the labour market and/or small-scale companies, establishing a strategy in this context. Second, it would also be interesting to know more about the structural context (e.g. corporate culture, construction industry) in which the employer brand update was embedded. Third, the study focused on meeting conduct, neglecting involved agents’ strategizing prior to and/or after the different meetings, as well as the agents not actively involved in the formal strategic planning process (e.g. employees, department colleagues, line managers). Other studies should pay attention to the role of agents not actively involved and their strategic impact. Finally, as the empirical work mainly focused on one critical aspect of meetings, namely ‘meeting conduct’ (Jarzabkowski & Seidl, 2008), to provide a fuller picture of strategy meetings in the field of employer branding, it would be necessary to know more about ‘initiation’ and ‘termination’, the remaining two critical aspects.



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