THE IMPACT OF NEGATIVE MEDIA COVERAGE, BRAND-HATE, OR CONSUMER BOYCOTT ON THE EMPLOYER BRAND
(In the Example of Amazon)

Master’s Thesis
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This thesis aims to examine the potential impact of brand hate and negative media coverage on a specific element of brand structure—the employer brand—using the example of Amazon. Despite facing numerous public media crises that have specifically targeted its brand, Amazon continues to be recognized as one of the most desirable employers, as evidenced by its consistent high rankings in global employer surveys. The study seeks to understand this paradox and analyze the factors that contribute to Amazon's enduring appeal as an employer despite negative media attention. To examine the subject of study, this thesis utilizes Schwartz's theory of basic values (2012), Empathy (Batson et al., 1981; Wondra & Ellsworth 2015), and Consumer responsibilization theories (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) as theoretical underpinnings. Additionally, the analysis of the Employer Brand structure is approached using the Brand Equity framework proposed by Alshathry et al. (2017). First and foremost, this thesis reveals a fragmented structure within the Amazon Employer brand, demonstrating the existence of multiple employer brand images for the company. Consequently, the perception of the Amazon Employer brand significantly varies between white-collar and blue-collar employees. As a result, brand crises impacting one image may have minimal repercussions on the other, and vice versa. Moreover, this thesis proposes that personal well-being, financial success, and career growth remain primary drivers in the job search among young adults. Therefore, as long as the Employer Brand maintains its economically successful brand image, the influence of scandals and public outbreaks on it can be muted. However, this study acknowledges that continuous crises could negatively impact the employer's brand image, leading to an ambiguous perception and brand associations for Amazon. Overall, this thesis contributes to the field of employer branding studies by helping to understand the employer brand structure and proposing an updated framework for treating the employer brand in managerial studies. The findings indicate that when it comes to scandals and public crises, the influence of the Employer Brand on the Corporate Brand and Consumer Brand may be considerably less compared to the influence of the latter two in their trilateral relationship.
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Amazon is widely recognized as one of the most successful and valuable brands in the world (Forbes, 2023) and is definitely a brand everyone is familiar with. However, people’s perception of Amazon's brand might be contradictory due to the media coverage surrounding it. Some individuals may have come across reports alleging that Amazon negatively impacts small businesses (e.g. Shrater, 2019), avoids paying taxes despite its massive profits (e.g. Neate, 2019; Berthelot, 2022), or subjects its workers to unfavorable working conditions. (e.g. Kelly, 2021; Nolan, 2021). How, after all, do consumers perceive the Amazon brand? Do they view it as a successful and valuable entity or as a mogul chasing profits? And what about the Amazon employer brand?

Some employer brand rankings place Amazon on World's Best Employers list and not for the first time (Brier, 2023; LinkedIn News, 2023). It is believed they attract the best talent and the company's acceptance rate for certain positions is less than 1 % (Helling, 2023), technically, making it lower than in Harvard (The Harvard Crimson, 2023). Do these impressive parameters indicate that the media controversy and a long call to boycott Amazon (Hunt, 2021) did not affect the company's Employer Brand image?

Amazon is just one example of a company with a controversial brand reputation. Large brands are consistently subjected to public scrutiny due to the freedom of the internet and the power of social media. Consequently, they face the potential for immediate and widespread negative media feedback in response to any misconduct or mistakes they commit. The objective of this thesis is to examine and evaluate the resulting consequences.

1.1 Background and Motivation

Over time, a brand's identity and non-product attributes have gained significance, arguably becoming as crucial as the product itself (Klein, 2000). Experts in managerial fields agree that the image and value that brands communicate to the public are paramount for achieving brand success. It is widely believed that brand scandals and boycotts can profoundly affect brand image and, consequently, brand performance. When a brand deviates from established norms, values, and ethical discourse, the consequences can be severe, as consumers may distance themselves from the brand.

When the author of this research began contemplating the topic of her Master's thesis, a well-known brand COACH was caught up in a scandal. It was revealed that the company is
engaged in the practice of destroying their unsold products to prevent excess stock and maintain the brand's high-end image, thereby avoiding selling items at lower prices (BBC, 2021). This incident triggered recollections of numerous other cases that the author heard of, characterized by negative media coverage that inflicted damage upon various brand images. One such example took place in 2009 when David Caroll's guitar was broken during transportation, causing a significant public relations crisis for United Airlines (Hanna, 2010). Subsequently, in 2017, United Airlines faced severe backlash for its perceived rudeness and even violence toward customers (Zdanowicz & Grinberg, 2018). Another instance involved Dolce & Gabbana, who faced a boycott in China for several years due to an ill-advised advertising campaign that sparked public outrage (Atwal et al., 2020). Shein, the Chinese fast-fashion company, has earned a reputation for disregarding environmental problems and mistreating its employees (Singh-Kurtz, 2022). Additionally, fashion retailers like H&M, Burberry, and Amazon too have faced repeated accusations of destroying unsold garments (Farmbrough 2018; Hassan, 2021, Pinnock, 2020). The revelation of McKinsey's role in the US opioid crisis as a consultant to Purdue Pharma may have come as a shock to many (Forsythe & Bogdanich, 2021).

The list of such cases could go on, making it genuinely intriguing to explore the long-term effects of such turmoils on a brand's image. It becomes even more intriguing when considering that COACH is now again portrayed as a highly desirable brand on social media (Lenzen, 2022), United Airlines is recognized as one of the most profitable airlines globally (Statista, 2023a), Shein gathers long lines for the long-awaited openings of its new flagship stores (Testa, 2022), while McKinsey and Amazon demonstrate record-breaking profits (Wan & Fillion, 2022; Statista, 2023b), and are perceived as highly desirable employers for recent graduates (Universum, 2020).

There have been attempts to assess the impact of such media crises and consumer activism on brands, but there is no consensus in the studies. Nevertheless, the author found it interesting how the brand image suffers from such cases and if the company brand image deteriorates in the eyes of people who face the brand every day. It was curious to see whether people’s the attitude towards the brand is changing and whether they are trying to avoid it.

It was decided to approach this question from an Employer Brand perspective. Hence, it is even more interesting that some of the companies described above are listed as the best employers and are actively hiring, including current students and recent graduates. While
working for a company can be considered a very personal form of interaction with the brand, the author began to ponder how young adults perceive the possibility of working for companies whose reputations have been harmed by negative media coverage in recent times. Would that affect their decision to work for the company? Furthermore, if the managerial consensus recognizes the Employer brand as a part of the Brand structure, it is of research interest to explore the interaction structure between the brand elements: Consumer Brand, Employer Brand, and Corporate Brand.

1.2 Research Objectives and Questions

In order to explore the research topic concerning the influence of negative media image on Amazon's employer brand, particularly in relation to the perceptions and associations formed by potential employees, this dissertation poses the following research questions.

Research Question 1 (R1):
How does a brand's negative media image resulting from boycotts, scandals, or unethical conduct impact Amazon's employer brand?

The primary research question entails several subquestions.

Sub-Question 1 (R2):
What ideas and associations do potential employees form about the employer brand if this brand has a controversial media image?

Sub-Question 2 (R3):
How do potential employees feel when they apply for a position at a company whose practices have been considered unethical or unsustainable?

Sub-Question 3 (R4):
What is the relationship between a company brand and an employer brand, and how do the issues and negative media coverage of one affect the image of the other?

This thesis expands the research on employer branding by providing valuable insights into how employer brands can sustain themselves when faced with media crises and negative media coverage.

Furthermore, the research delves into the perception of Amazon's employer brand among its target audience of recent graduates and young adults. By examining how continuous backlash
affects their perception, the study highlights that audience perception may differ from the media-created image of Amazon as the best and most coveted employer. This aspect adds a detailed understanding of the employer brand's reputation and sheds light on the potential gaps between media portrayal and public perception.

Lastly, the research analyzes the interplay between the corporate brand and employer brand within Amazon, offering insights into their mutual influence and implications for brand management.

Overall, this thesis expands our understanding of employer branding, providing practical guidance for organizations facing media crises and public backlash.

1.3 Outline of the Thesis

The following part of the thesis is divided into 5 chapters. Chapter 2, Literature Review, offers an overview of studies exploring various dimensions related to the subject of the thesis. These dimensions include negative consumer-brand relationships, the impact of negative media outbreaks and consumer resistance on brands and their potential for driving social change, the role of values and norms in ethical decision-making, and the importance of empathy. Additionally, this chapter provides an examination of the current research related to employer brand equity. The chapter concludes by presenting the theoretical framework and underlying theories that serve as the foundation for the research conducted in this thesis.

Chapter 3, Methodology, introduces the research paradigm, methodology, and methods employed in collecting and analyzing the data for this study. Chapter 4, Analysis, delves into the analytical process and presents key insights and findings. This chapter is divided into two parts: the first part focuses on content analysis research, while the second part centers on the analysis of interviews. Chapter 5, Discussion and Implications, synthesizes the conclusions drawn from the findings and presents them in a more structured manner. Additionally, this chapter explores the practical implications of the research for marketers and human resources specialists, offering insights that can help guide their strategies and practices. Finally, chapter 6, examines the limitations occurred in this study and proposes ideas for future research in the field.
2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 The Broad Spectrum of Consumer-Brand Relationships

2.1.1 Exploring the Concept of Consumer Power

The concept of consumer power is not a novel idea and has been extensively studied in the field of economics. Originally, consumer power has been understood as the bargaining power of buyers and their ability to influence the market with the demand they create (Denegri-Knott et al., 2006, p. 950). Over time, however, the concept has grown and acquired a broader meaning. Consumers now have the ability to speak out, and the power to provide extensive feedback on products and services, influence brand actions and values, and force brands to move towards sustainable development and ethical behavior. Thus, in academic literature, consumer power essentially refers to a customer's perceived capacity to exert influence over a company in a manner that the customer considers advantageous for bringing about positive change (Akhavannasab et al., 2018; Grégoire et al., 2010).

The concept of consumer power has received much scholarly attention and has been explored from various perspectives. Denegri-Knott et al. (2006) proposed theoretical models describing how consumers can influence, resist or escape the market and logic of consumption imposed on them by big brands and corporations. Labrecque et al. (2013) explored sources of consumer power: demand-based, information-based, network-based, and crowd-based. Akhavannasab et al. (2022) explored personal and social levels of consumer power, where personal power implied the personal ability to avoid marketing influence, and social power implied group's ability to bring about change. This thesis is keen on exploring both levels, as it is interested in examining how consumer power can affect brand image (social level) and how individuals personally interact with the brand. Obeidat et al (2017) pointed out how consumer power across all sources has increased with the advent of digital technology and the social media era, which may have made consumers more powerful and at the same time vengeful.

Regardless of the position of consumers, whether they be brand advocates or opponents, their relationship with brands can be personal in many ways as it is often related to their identity. A significant body of research is studying this realm (e.g. Thompson & Haytko, 1997; Anderson & Simester, 2014; Hearn, 2014; Kozinets & Handelman, 2004; Kozinets, 2016),
proclaiming that practically any form of consumer-brand interaction can serve as an identity-building action. Researchers from psychological and sociological fields generally agree that our social selves “are deeply conditioned by our economic and social context” (Hearn, 2014, p 24) and organically linked to our consumption practices. Hearn (2014) stresses the idea that in a neoliberal post-Fordist economic paradigm individuals do not have much choice but create their identities around commodities. She builds on Giddens' concept of disembeddedness implying that when it becomes difficult to set up one’s identity through social institutions such as traditional family, individuals start to fill their selfhoods through consumption. Commodity capitalism “becomes culture” and the “resultant construct is a persona produced for public consumption”, a “branded self” (Hearn, 2014, p 28).

Hearn (2014) also draws attention to the abnormality of today’s reality, where the market relationships can be seen as an "ethics in itself" capable of replacing old ethical beliefs and guiding people in many areas of life outside the market. But if market relations are at the heart of our modern belief system, then naturally there will be opposing forces, advocates, and adversaries of consumption. This conclusion follows Foucault's ideas, stating that “where there is power, there is resistance”, and postulated that resistance is an inevitable response to the dominant culture (as cited in Cherrier, 2009). There can be people who construct their identities in line with mainstream consumer culture, whereas, at the other end of the identities spectrum, there are individuals looking for their voice and craving authenticity fighting the vices of consumer society. In their article, Kozinets and Handelman (2004) demonstrate how consumers start to counterpose themselves against dominating consumption discourse and undertake the role of “positive change agents” (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004, p 694). By joining anti-brand movements consumers are trying to build a “consumer-resistant identity” (Brandão & Popoli, 2022) in opposition to the mainstream consumer culture and generally accepted forms of consumer behavior. Consumer activists fight wrongful corporate practices and often stand up for their cause with a religious commitment. In this battle, corporations often appear as the evil that might be confronted, but at the same time, they come as an essential adversary, necessary for the existence of a social movement and needed for activists who reflect their identity through it (Kozinets & Handelman, 2004). Cherrier (2009, p. 2) also agrees with this line by noting that “resistance is not a process of gaining power over the dominant but rather an inner process of self-reflection and self-expression”.

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2.1.2 How Effective Can Anti-Brand Movements Be, and How Can They Affect Brands?

In today's landscape, customers play an active role in brand relationships by voicing their concerns or disagreement with brand messages and values. In their pursuit of justice and social change, consumers are transforming their hatred and anger into action by engaging in anti-brand activism and joining anti-brand communities. Through their participation, consumers strive to modify consumer behavior and “become agents of change for a better world” (Brandão & Popoli, 2022, p 641). This involvement can manifest in complex negative consumer-brand relationships such as brand aversion, brand hate, customer revenge, boycotts, and buycotts, all aimed at expressing disagreement with brand actions (Alba and Lutz, 2013; Roy et al., 2022; Grégoire et al., 2010; Zourrig et al., 2009; Hoffmann et al., 2018). The ultimate goal is to transform brands and their practices to align with ethical and sustainable principles.

However, the extent to which anti-brand movements can truly impact brand performance and development remains an open question. It is sometimes difficult to assess the long-term impact of brand public crises on brands. McKinsey continually shows a billion-dollar profit and is on the list of the World’s Best Management Consulting Firms (Wan & Fillion, 2022) despite their fall from grace with the Purdue Pharma case (Forsythe & Bogdanich, 2021). Amazon is one of the most recognizable and expensive brands in the world and along with McKinsey they are also among the most desirable employers for students and recent graduates (Universum, 2020). While it was claimed that United Airlines lost roughly 10% of its market capitalization as a result of viral United Breaks Guitars case (Andres, 2019; Hanna, 2010), analysts later concluded that the stock's drop was caused by the industry's economic crisis, and as of 2022, and despite a long-term brand-hate history, United Airlines is the third most used airline in the US (Statista, 2022b).

If considered from a New Social Movement (NSM) theory standpoint, the power of brand activism for social change is weakened due to the dynamic nature of resistance, the focus on individual interests, and the tendency for participants to abandon their activist identities over time (Buechler, 1995; Hollenbeck & Zinkhan, 2010). This often results in a lack of collective action and an inability to challenge existing power structures (Buechler, 1995).

In the same vein, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) argue that capitalism, as an unbreakable entity, thrives on its adversaries. It continually evolves and strengthens itself through the
critique it faces, utilizing every obstacle and negative reaction as fuel for change. By exposing the flaws and immorality of capitalism, activists inadvertently attempt to establish a moral foundation that the system inherently lacks, but capitalism has the ability to assimilate these criticisms and integrate them into its ideology, creating an illusion of addressing justice and incorporating mechanisms to enhance fairness, while in reality, it merely adapts to public scrutiny (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). This premise can be extended to brands as manifestations of the capitalist economy, suggesting that they often leverage criticism, boycotts, and backlash to make minimal and cost-effective adaptations. Consequently, this approach fails to bring about fundamental changes or eradicate underlying issues but instead allows the capitalist economy and its principles to persist and flourish.

The extant body of research also does not provide comprehensive analytics on the effectiveness of boycotts. But the current work indicates that they often do not affect firm performance economically (Koku, 2012; 2022). According to Koku (2012, p. 23), boycotts are incapable of “inflicting economic damage” on a firm, especially when it concerns online activities only. The author however admits that to evaluate the substantial consumer power impact, researchers have to look at other elements beyond financial performance, such as brand love and brand perception in the public eye. Delacote (2009) also doubts the changing power of boycotts and brand hate due to the tendency that activists who are most likely to take part in a boycott tend to have a low ability to damage a brand, while consumers with a higher ability are less likely to participate in consumer resistance movements. Atkinson (2012), however, is more optimistic and believes that while consumer civic action does play a greater role in self-actualization and social embeddedness, socially conscious consumers have the potential to change the majority's consumer practices by raising social concern and promoting civic and political activism. Additionally, according to the findings of Zasuwa et al (2020), consumer activism is generally more inherent in countries with stable economies and consumers become less sensitive to ethical infringement during an economic crisis.

Considering all of the above, it can be assumed that the impact of negative media coverage, brand-hate, or consumer boycotts on the employer brand, which constitutes a crucial aspect of brand structure, might be constrained in a same way as it is limited for consumer brand elements.
2.2. Ethics and Personal Responsibility in Decision-Making

The latest academic and commercial research suggests a growing awareness among consumers regarding ecological and social concerns (Krasser & Cho, 2010). However, this heightened consciousness extends beyond consumers in general, as ethics, human rights, and equality have received significant attention in recent times. From the author's perspective, there has been an increasing expectation for individuals to hold higher standards for personal consumption choices and ethical conduct. Consequently, ethical standards have gained prominence as a subject of development in business and organizational research, leading to the emergence of new ethical business models (Dacin et al., 2022).

Issues of ethics and how people tend to make ethical decisions or make choices in favor of the opposite are constantly in the research focus. This chapter aims to provide a concise overview of several existing theories on decision-making while delving into the responsibilization theory, which explores the development of responsible consumer behavior within contemporary culture.

This chapter attempts to understand how young people may tend to make work-related decisions early in their careers and what role ethical norms and standards can play in this.

2.2.1 Ethical Decision-Making and Ethical Consumption

The subject of decision-making and its ethical component has received considerable attention in the academic literature. This thesis has to review individual decision-making processes and theories to paint a holistic picture of what constitutes ethics of everyday decisions and responsibility. Typically, prevailing theories conclude that human behavior in general, as well as consumer behavior in particular, is to some extent determined by ethical norms and internal ethical motives. This subchapter will touch on a few of the most common approaches.

Since the topic of research lies in between areas of consumer responsibility (relationships with brands) and personal ethics (individual careers), it attempts to encompass various approaches concerning consumer behavior as well as individual ethics.

There are two prevailing approaches to understanding the motives of ethical behavior: first, instrumental, postulating ethical behavior as consistent with prevailing social norms, and rational, implying that people can calculate the ethical consequences of their actions and
choose favorable ethical alternatives at will (Pimentel et al., 2010). But, it is important to note that universal ethical codes of conduct and universally accepted norms of behavior do not exist. The degree of ethics is typically determined by the social environment, personal experiences, and individual value-belief systems, and can vary depending on the situational context (e.g. Hunt & Vitell, 2006; Pimentel et al., 2010). The widely used theory proposed by Hunt and Vitell (1986) postulates that two kinds of evaluation take place in a decision-making process—deontological and teleological. As for the deontological evaluation, “the individual evaluates inherent rightness or wrongness implied by each alternative” (Hunt & Vitell, 1986, p. 9) when assessing possible alternatives to the outcomes of their action. Essentially, deontological evaluation reflects how norms and ethical guidelines adopted by an individual affect their behavior and judgments. The stricter are ethical norms accepted in society, the more severe will be the consequences of their violation and the greater the likelihood that an individual will behave by them. By comparison, teleological evaluation takes into account different outcomes and identifies the most advantageous option. One important notion from Hunt and Vitell theory is that although ethical judgments and intentions act as predictors of behavior involving ethical issues and while a person may perceive a certain alternative as the most ethical, they may intend to choose a different alternative because of certain preferred consequences (Hunt & Vitell, 2006). Moreover, according to Hunt and Vitell (2006), individuals are often guided by the belief of how “the world actually works”, which entails assuming that people may not follow or take into account the most ethical alternatives when making decisions when evaluating alternatives and knowing that choosing an unethical alternative will not result in any consequences. Shultz and Brender-Ilan also stress a similar conclusion about the importance of personal attitudes in decision-making (2004). Individuals can, for example, perceive and approach ethical dilemmas differently depending on their sensitivity or personal moral philosophy.

Under Schwartz's theory, human behavior is largely driven by ten basic values: self-direction, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, power, security, conformity, tradition, benevolence, and universalism (Schwartz, 2012). Values such as hedonism, security, conformity, achievement, tradition are generally understood and do not need to be explained, but the other five may require clarification. Thus, self-direction is connected to the desire for autonomy and independence, stimulation is related to aspiration toward challenges and development, power is driven by the pursuit to enhance one’s social status and prestige, benevolence comes from the desire for welfare and well-being for people from close social circle, while universalism
values are concerned with the welfare and wellbeing of all people and for nature (Schwartz, 2012, p 7). It is interesting to note that based on the cross-cultural study, the values of benevolence, universalism, and self-direction were found to be the most important for most people (Schwartz, 2012, p. 14). However, there is an inevitable conflict when different groups of values run counter to each other. Thus, striving for achievement values naturally conflicts with pursuing benevolence values, or power values confront universalism.

Given that career planning and job search are highly personal endeavors that significantly impact individuals' lives, it is only natural that there is considerable pressure involved. This pressure can be particularly pronounced in Europe, where individualistic values prevail, emphasizing the importance of personal success in one's career (Hofstede, 2011; Pinillos & Reyes, 2011). As a result, fresh graduates and young adults may feel compelled to prioritize large, economically successful corporations over smaller, more ethical business options when making their job choices. The prevailing societal expectation to achieve career success can exert significant pressure on individuals, potentially overshadowing considerations of ethical practices or sustainability. In an individualistic culture, where personal achievements and upward mobility are highly valued, the allure of working for prestigious and financially prosperous organizations can outweigh concerns about the ethical implications of their practices. This cultural context creates a challenging dynamic for individuals who may desire to align their values with their career choices but face external pressures that prioritize economic success.

This study explores the decision-making process of job seekers when selecting an employer. Specifically, it focuses on understanding the motivations and values that drive young individuals to choose a company despite being aware of its past scandals. The study also investigates whether this decision implies that the employer brand remains unaffected during a crisis. By examining these dynamics, the research aims to shed light on the complex interplay between job seekers' decision-making, their perceptions of the employer brand, and the impact of crises on organizational reputation.

Thereby, if applying the Theory of Basic Values to the research problem, it is possible to track the conflict in individual decision-making involving career choices. For instance, the ambition to become a skilled professional in a well-known company and the willingness to improve one’s status through a career can weigh over some apprehension about the company's attitude towards its employees or unsustainable business approach.
2.2.2. Empathy and the Problems of Others

To further develop the idea of the preceding paragraph, this thesis turns to the concept of Empathy.

Empathy is an extensively studied phenomenon within the fields of psychology, sociology, and marketing. Cambridge Dictionary (2023) defines empathy as the ability to comprehend and share someone else's emotions or experiences by envisioning oneself in that person's circumstances. Understanding empathy is crucial for this study as it can provide insights into an individual's capacity to empathize with others, potentially shedding light on why young adults choose to apply for companies with a reputation for mistreating their employees.

In their study, Batson et al. (1981) conclude that the relationship between empathic emotion and altruistic behavior is strongest when the participant perceives the person in distress as similar to themselves. Similarly, in their article, Wondra & Ellsworth (2015) suggest that the ability to experience empathy and other vicarious emotional experiences depends on the way individuals appraise the emotional events they witness. According to the theory, when individuals observe an emotional event, they first appraise the event in terms of its relevance to their own goals, values, needs, and views. They then experience an emotional response that is similar to the emotion expressed by the person they are observing. The authors argue that this appraisal process is influenced by a number of factors, including individual differences in personality, cognitive processes, and contextual factors.

An essential assumption from the theory of empathy in this study is that individuals are more likely to understand and empathize with those who are closer to them on the spectrum of social status, social roles, social groups, and similar factors. Consequently, people may struggle to empathize with individuals whom they cannot easily relate to or associate with.

2.2.3 Consumer Responsibilization Pressure

Despite the fact that the focus of this study technically falls beyond the realm of consumer behavior, it is still relevant to review the theory of consumer responsibilization. This is due to the close relationship between consumer brands and employer brands, and the suggestion that the pressure for responsible consumption choices may extend to interactions with employer brands as well. Hence, it becomes crucial to delve deeper into this theory.
Consumer responsibilization theory posits that consumers are increasingly being encouraged and expected to act responsibly in their consumption choices. The theory assumes that the consumer will act "good" and choose "right" if he or she is given a more conscious option (Eckhardt & Dobscha, 2018). Responsibilization theory recognizes the influential role of brands in shaping consumer behavior and attitudes towards sustainability, social responsibility, and ethical practices. As consumers become more conscious of these issues, they are being urged to make informed decisions that align with their values and have positive impacts on society and local communities (e.g. Onozaka et al., 2010).

In extant academic research, responsible consumption is referred to as a “moralistic identity project” in which consumers are aware of the impact of their consumer decisions and try to minimize the pernicious influence of those when it is possible (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). We can observe consumer responsibilization in many areas: environmentalism and sustainability, fair trade, transparent supply chains, commonwealth, and equality. To build a brand's image, what ethical business practices a brand adheres to is of paramount importance, but for consumers themselves today it is also important whether the brand they interact with is ethical.

Giesler and Veresiu (2014) in their study of consumer responsibility conclude that the emergence of a responsible customer does not depend entirely on conscious goodwill, but involves various complex processes. According to the authors, the responsible customer is constructed and the responsibilization comes with 4 steps: personalization, authorization, capabilization, and transformation (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). Personalization proclaims an increased ethical responsibility of a consumer. When a certain social problem becomes too salient a consumer is called on as the main problem-solving agent responsible for their consumption choices. Authorization legitimates desired behavior by leveraging the dominant ethical and legal discourse. Capabilization results in new products and services allowing consumers to fulfill the new moral obligation, while finally, during the transformation the majority adopts the new moral understanding (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014).
In the view of Giesler and Veresiu, the responsible consumer has become a core myth of neoliberal capitalism, and the success of consumer resistance depends on the kind of politico-economic rationality that underpins market structures (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014). The key assumption of the authors is that responsibilization is forced upon consumers by existing elite structures and the establishment (also Bajde & Rojas-Gaviria, 2021). Consumers are held responsible for their own consumption behaviors and the environmental and social impacts of those behaviors and the responsibility is shifted away from corporations and governments. Interested in the extent to which the responsible consumer retained the freedom of choice and the true potential to resist in the neoliberal political economy where the market is intertwined and inseparable from society, the authors conclude that consumption choices are transformed into a means of control for political power. However, Coskuner-Balli (2020) (as cited in Bajde & Rojas-Gaviria, 2021) expands the theory of Gisler and Veresiu, assuming that the political system seeks to create a responsible citizen-consumer, it thrusts moral values upon consumers, who, in turn, have little opportunity to avoid this imposition and are forced to exist and build their behavior in this system of values and norms. Consequently, as Cherrier and Türe (2022) further point out, the imposed responsibility and heightened expectations
toward citizen-consumer can lead to tensions and struggles around desired responsible behavior.

Just as they evaluate brands based on their ethical practices, consumers may also scrutinize potential employers and their corporate social responsibility initiatives. The pressure to act responsibly in their consumption choices might transcend into the realm of employment, where individuals seek organizations that align with their values and demonstrate responsible business practices. And vice versa, understanding this dynamic provides valuable insights into how organizations can effectively engage with consumers and attract talent by aligning their brand image with responsible and ethical practices.

2.2.4 An attitude-behavior gap

Nevertheless, despite individuals holding value-oriented and ethically inclined attitudes, there is often a disparity between these attitudes and their actual behavior in everyday decision-making. This phenomenon, known as the attitude-behavior gap, has accumulated significant attention from scholars and is relevant to the discussion on ethical pressure.

Rajecki (1982), Vermeir and Verbeke (2006) argue that people’s behavioral patterns are not always aligned with attitudes and that the seeming willingness to care for social problems, injustice, or sustainability does not necessarily imply behavioral changes in consumption. Rajecki (1982; as cited in Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002) identified four reasons for discrepancies between attitudes and behavior:

- indirect experience with the problem lowers the likelihood of taking real action,
- normative influences such as social norms and traditions are not powerful to alter behavior,
- the temporal discrepancy, implying that people’s attitudes change over time,
- flaws in attitude-behavior measurement.

In their 2010 study, Bray et al. concluded that there could be many factors that hinder ethical consumption under the condition of a favorable attitude toward it. Listing price sensitivity, lack of information, perceived quality, effort, and cynicism among them, the authors highlight that there can be more and although intentions are seen as an antecedent to ethical behavior, individuals are not always inclined towards ethical consumption and behavior.

Although Vermeir and Verbeke (2006) place their hopes on young consumers reasoning that this category is more conscious about their consumption choices, they admit that a desire to
make more sustainable choices heavily depends on social norms and behavioral norms among peers. Shaw et al (2015) stress the importance of care, commitment, and empathy for the discrepancy between attitude and behavior. Coming to a similar conclusion as Vermeir and Verbeke (2006), authors indicate that the desire to care can go beyond personal interests but only if it is in line with dominant moral values and when these values have strong control over the observed behavioral scope. Moreover, Kollmuss and Agyeman (2002) remind us that not all actions become a habit, and starting to act responsibly individuals may return to their previous routines.

The attitude-behavior gap theory can have a direct application to the research problem. Thus, if the cultural norms in society do not expect ethically driven behavior from individuals in certain areas of life such as career planning, an attitude-behavior gap is likely to emerge at the stage of choosing an employer. An individual might omit facts that a company with an attractive job offer allegedly might conduct unethical business practices somewhere outside the local community or be involved in other unethical business practices.

2.3 Brand Equity-Based Approach to Employer Brand

2.3.1 Defining Brand, Brand Equity, and Employer Brand

By the conventional definition, a brand is a “name, term, sign, symbol, or design, or a combination of them intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of sellers and to differentiate them from those of competition” (Keller, 2018). The concept of branding and brand management holds an important place in contemporary marketing research and is widely studied in the business and academic fields. Although the classic brand definition posits the brand as a distinguishing feature of a firm, the contemporary understanding is considerably broader and sees the brand as a source of a company’s market strength and competitive advantage (e.g. Aaker, 1996; Rua & Santos, 2022). As reflected in the research from Oh et al (2020), the concept of a Brand evolved from the information era when its role was to associate a product with a specific producer, through the attribute era where brands were used to mark the value proposition, to the brand equity era where the brand has value in itself and is essential to the success and profitability of the company.

Keller (1993) defines brand equity as “the differential effect of brand knowledge on consumer response to the marketing of the brand”. According to Aaker, brand equity is “a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand, its name, and symbol, that add to or subtract
from the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm’s customers” (as cited in Oh et al. 2020, p. 154). In the view of Keller (1993), brand awareness and brand image create different associations that can be leveraged to achieve higher profits and increase the company’s value. Coming to a similar conclusion Aaker notes that brand equity assets and liabilities fall into five categories: brand loyalty; name awareness; perceived quality; brand associations; and other proprietary assets (Tumasjan et al., 2016). Lassar et al. (as cited in Fayrene & Lee, 2011), highlight another important equity attribute—trustworthiness—the confidence that consumers place in a brand. Brand equity is considered a pivotal concept in marketing research, it represents a brand’s added value, perceived brand image, reliability, and quality. And the way the brand is perceived in the eyes of consumers is currently marketers’ primary focus.

In the past few decades, companies' characteristics as employers and the perception of companies in the labor market by job seekers have come to be viewed in terms of branding. This phenomenon is now known as employer brand (EB) and it gained wide acknowledgment in recent managerial and marketing research. In business and academic literature, employer brand refers to the set of characteristics that distinguish a company's employer image from competitors. In other words, an employer brand “establishes the identity of a firm as an employer” (Backhaus, Tikoo, 2004, p 502). Whilst employer branding is understood as a set of actions aimed at promoting the values and potential benefits of the employer so that it looks attractive to future and current employees (Backhaus, Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2009).

The academic literature focuses on employer branding (EB) in various areas such as human resource management, talent acquisition, brand management, marketing communications, and internal public relations. The latest highlights the importance of current employees in shaping and promoting the employer brand through their participation in its creation and development (Špoljarić & Došen, 2023).

In the fight for talent, EB studies start to become an important research focus, and the attraction and retention of skillful, and ambitious employees becomes an essential challenge. Many authors such as Backhaus & Tikoo (2004), or for instance, Theurer et al. (2016) point out that employer image, by and large, is formed and acts similarly to the ways a product or company brands do, and therefore can be approached from a brand perspective. Hence, it gets extremely important how potential employees perceive the EB and it becomes apparent that brand boycotts or negative consumer-brand relationships can have an adverse impact on EB.
in the same way they may affect product brand. Consequently, when EB is considered a part of a holistic company brand structure, the mutual influence between different brand entities can change how customers and stakeholders perceive the brand as a whole. Thus, according to Vercic and Coric (as cited in Špoljarić & Došen, 2023), it is argued that enhancing employer attractiveness can not only strengthen corporate brands but also can provide a competitive advantage for organizations.

As the extant literature suggests, this thesis approaches the concept of the employer brand from the brand equity position. According to the conceptual framework proposed by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), EB helps to build “two principal assets—brand associations and brand loyalty” (p. 504). Brand association is a broad term denoting thoughts, ideas, or reactions related to a brand. They can form and influence brand image which results in employer attraction. Brand loyalty derives from the interaction with organizational culture and identity, and leads to employee commitment to their employer.

![Figure 2: Employer Branding Framework from Backhaus, Tikoo (2004, p. 505)](image)

Edwards (2009) argues that a holistic employer brand experience that constitutes an employer brand image includes several components — existing employer reputation, psychological contract marking expectations and obligations for both employer and an employee, values, and beliefs associated with organizational identity, as well as symbolic and instrumental personality brand characteristics identifying with the organization.
Figure 3: Employer branding elements, from Edwards, (2009, p 19).

The research part will build on the perspective of these two proposed frameworks to further explore the perceived employer brand image among young adults.

2.3.2 Factors Influencing the Perception of Employer Brand Among Job Seekers

Presently, there is a significant amount of research that examines the factors that affect the attractiveness of an organization to potential employees. Evidently, the better the company's reputation, the more attractive it looks to applicants. Cable and Turban (2003) demonstrated that brand reputation can have a direct impact on the likelihood that potential candidates will apply for a job in an organization. They identified two key factors influencing an applicant's willingness to apply: degree of familiarity with the organization and external corporate reputation ratings. Interestingly, according to Cable and Turban’s findings (2003), promoting particular job vacancies have little effect on the employer brand in the short term, although there is evidence to suggest that consistent brand promotion and recruitment activities might affect forming a positive employer brand image. Many studies have also confirmed that profitability, commercial success, and good performance are among the important factors in employer attractiveness (Edwards, 2009). In a recent study, Özcan and Elçi also proved that
a brand's commitment to corporate social responsibility has a positive effect on employer brand perception and brand image among employees (2020), which may lead to the suggestion that a brand's violation of these principles can result in employer brand image deterioration. Ronda et al. however note that the value of different organizational attributes is perceived differently by job seekers with different life paths and value systems and is not uniform (2018).

However, Wilden et al. (2010) make an important point regarding the main fears of recruits during the job search phase. Typically, these fears revolve around personal underperformance, while expectations for potential employers, on the contrary, may be lowered. Job applicants appear to be more concerned about their ability to handle future responsibilities rather than conducting a thorough evaluation of the employer's brand promises and career opportunities. It is crucial to note that this finding by Wilden et al. (2010) does not imply job seekers' indifference towards company values, brand image, and corporate social responsibility. Instead, it emphasizes that the job search process is largely owned by employers rather than potential employees, particularly when considering recent graduates with limited work experience.

Naturally, this thesis primarily focuses on analyzing the employer brand among potential employees who have not yet worked for the brand and have not developed loyalty or commitment. Consequently, the study aims to investigate employer brand associations (Backhaus, Tikoo, 2004), existing employment reputation, and brand personality characteristics (Edwards, 2009), and examine whether and how they are influenced by brand boycotts, public crises, and anti-brand activity in the eyes of job seekers. Furthermore, it will assess the impact of consumer resistance on the attractiveness of the employer. While the existing approaches to employer brand emphasize the importance of reputation and associations for employer attractiveness, there is a potential research gap in understanding how negative consumer-brand relationships or brand boycotts affect employer brand and EB associations.

However, as negative consumer-brand relationships predominantly pertain to the consumer brand domain, it becomes essential to approach the research problem from the perspective of the relationship between the employer brand and consumer brand image. The subsequent paragraph will provide a brief overview of this interconnection.
2.3.3 Mutual Influence between Corporate-, Consumer-, and Employer Brands

The concept of branding is widely recognized in marketing research as a multifaceted and influential tool for managing various aspects of an organization (Aaker, 2003). Consequently, the marketing literature presents several dimensions through which a brand can be analyzed. The corporate brand, product brand, and employer brand all contribute to the brand identity and serve as distinct touchpoints between the brand and its audience, including consumers, employees, and stakeholders. This paragraph aims to provide a concise overview of these three definitions and examine their interrelationships.

The term corporate brand encompasses various elements and levels of communication. In essence, effective corporate branding involves maintaining a consistent brand identity, brand image, mission, and values across all stakeholder groups, customers, and employees (Aaker, 2003; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). According to Sparrow and Otaye (2015), a corporate brand includes four levels: the corporate market, the consumer market, the employer market, and government market. The product brand represents the image and the connections formed between a product brand and consumers, encompassing factors such as familiarity, attachment, trust, loyalty, or antipathy (Ghani & Md. Kashedul Wahab, 2016). In turn, the employer brand is “a generalized recognition for being known among key stakeholders for providing a high-quality employment experience and a distinctive organizational identity which employees value, engage with and feel confident and happy to promote to others” (Martin et. al, 2011, as cited in Backhaus, 2016).

Extant research (Andriani & Putra, 2019; Backhaus, 2016; Foster et al., 2010) also highlights the close relationship between employer, product, and corporate brands. These dimensions can mutually influence the perception of one another by the target audience, creating a strong synergy among them. Therefore, ensuring alignment between the three elements and the values and ideas they represent is crucial (Foster et al., 2010). For instance, potential job seekers may be hesitant to join a company with a troubled Product Brand. Similarly, when consumers associate a product brand with scandals or controversies, it can lead to a decline in sales and market share. The Corporate Brand, which represents the overall image and reputation of the organization, is also vulnerable to negative media coverage and scandals. Such events can damage the public's perception of the company's values, ethics, and corporate responsibility. As a result, the brand may experience a loss of brand equity and a
decline in customer loyalty. It's important to note that negative perceptions can persist, making it challenging for the brand to recover and regain the trust of customers.

It is crucial for organizations to proactively manage their brand reputation and take appropriate actions to address negative events or media coverage. This may involve transparent communication, crisis management strategies, and efforts to rebuild trust among stakeholders. By effectively managing the interconnections between different brand components, organizations can mitigate the adverse effects of negative media coverage and protect their overall brand reputation (Foster et al., 2010).

In a similar vein, Rampl and Kenning (2014) underscore the similarities between consumer brand and employer brand, proposing that researchers can leverage approaches used in consumer brand research for studying employer brand. They concluded that brand traits like sincerity or trust positively influence the appeal of both consumer brand and employer brand. However, the authors acknowledge that using identical analytical approaches for studying employer brand and consumer brand may not always be advisable, as certain brand features, such as ruggedness, may be perceived differently by the target audience and potential employees (Rampl & Kenning, 2014).

According to recent findings in business research, a company's culture, mission, and values play a crucial role in the decision-making process of new employees during the application stage (Glassdoor, 2019). The significance of these factors is evident, with 77% of over 5,000 respondents in a Glassdoor survey indicating that they consider a company's culture before applying, and 73% stating that they would not apply to a company unless its values align with their own. This trend is particularly pronounced among younger adults. Furthermore, the intertwining of consumer and employee paths has become increasingly apparent. Recent data from LinkedIn (2022) suggests that future employees gather information about a company also from traditional consumer brand channels, while the employer brand acts as an additional source of information for potential clients regarding the company and its principles. In fact, a LinkedIn survey (2022) also reveals that exposure to corporate brand communications increases the likelihood of candidates accepting "message ads" by 44%.

This thesis, therefore, builds on the assumption that the interconnectedness of the three entities—corporate brand, consumer brand, and employer brand—results in their mutual influence. Consequently, scandals and public crises affecting the corporate brand can have a
detrimental impact on the employer brand, and vice versa. Given this close relationship, it can be assumed that if a brand is involved in unethical business practices or becomes the target of a consumer boycott, the employer brand will suffer and lose its appeal in the eyes of employees. Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of anti-brand relationships (brand hate, consumer boycotts) or negative media coverage in their influence on employer brands.

2.3.4 The Ups and Downs of the Amazon Employer Brand

The purpose of this paragraph is to briefly introduce Amazon as an employer, drawing upon academic and media sources. It seeks to highlight the existing controversy and internal conflicts surrounding the brand, while also explaining the rationale behind selecting Amazon as the focus of the research study and justifying this choice.

Amazon is known to all as the world's largest retailer (Debter, 2019). In addition to the world-famous marketplace, the company owns and manages a cloud service business (AWS) as well as streaming service Amazon Prime; it produces and sells its own Kindle e-readers, and develops a supermarket chain–Whole Foods Market (Ukeni, 2022). Amazon is known for customer centricity and is one of the most valuable brands in the world (Forbes, 2023). Recently Amazon’s CEO claimed that the company’s priority is to also become “Earth’s Best Employer and Earth’s Safest Place to Work” (About Amazon, 2021).

Indeed, according to Universum (2020), the global employer branding agency that compiles an annual ranking of the world's most attractive employers, Amazon, has been ranked as the most desirable employer for university graduates in 2020. The technology giant was declared 4th and 5th world’s most attractive employer for business and engineering students respectively. According to the latest Linkedin rating (2023), Amazon also was named the most sought-after workplace in the United States.

Given all the achievements and rankings, it is worth noting that the brand's reputation is far from ideal. For years, Amazon has been accused of intricate tax avoidance despite record profits (Gardner, 2022), harming local economies and small businesses while suppressing market competition (Mitchell, 2018), and neglecting working and human rights (e.g. Nolan, 2021). Zhang Zihan (2022) points out that the company should reconsider its salaries upwards. Furthermore, it has become known recently that Amazon is struggling with an extensive staff turnover of up to 150 % yearly which causes brand problems financially,
reputationally, and operationally (Segal, 2022). Considering all the above, it is not surprising that Amazon is sometimes referred to as the world’s most boycotted brand (Hunt, 2021) due to its expansive strategy and sometimes controversial practices, and is ranked among the most hated brands by Reddit users, for example (Reddit, 2022).

The examination of the Amazon employer brand within the context of its overall brand identity is a research area of interest, as it represents one of the most direct forms of individual interaction with a commercial brand. Additionally, it is intriguing to explore the potential conflict between Amazon's brand as a highly successful and technologically advanced corporation and the allegations of misconduct and ethical shortcomings. This contradiction applies to both the company brand and the employer brand, making it genuinely interesting to understand the extent to which it impacts the overall brand image of Amazon and its employer brand, as well as how it is perceived by job seekers, particularly recent and aspiring graduates who are just starting their professional journeys.

2.4 A Conceptual Framework for Studying Employer Brand and Addressing the Research Objectives

Based on the existing literature review and the research question posed, this paragraph and Figure 4 provide a summary of the theoretical framework for this study.

This thesis employs the brand equity theory as its theoretical foundation. According to this perspective, a strong brand is not merely defined by its commercial assets but also encompasses branding assets and liabilities that contribute to or detract from the overall value of a product or service (Aaker, 1996; as cited in Oh et al., 2020). Building upon this concept, the Employer Brand can be examined in a manner similar to the analysis of product brands, as indicated by both academic and managerial perspectives (Alshathry et al., 2017; Backhaus, Tikoo, 2004). Furthermore, the Employer Brand can be considered a constituent element of a comprehensive corporate brand entity (Backhaus, Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2009). Additionally, employees can be seen as customers of the Employer Brand, to some extent, further supporting the analogy between product branding and the formation of an Employer Brand.

The aim of this research is to investigate the impact of brand hatred and scandals on the perception of the Employer Brand among potential employees. As these individuals have not
yet experienced the company as actual employees, their perceptions are solely based on external sources such as the internet and media. This thesis seeks to analyze the Amazon employer brand in depth and understand the factors contributing to the simultaneous status of Amazon as a highly desirable potential employer and a company with a controversial reputation among the general public. This dissertation aims to examine the factors contributing to a robust employer attraction through the exploration of corporate reputation elements that shape employer brand familiarity and associations.

Figure 4: A conceptual framework for studying employer brand (from Alshathry et al., 2017)

In line with the unified framework for employer branding proposed by Alshathry et al. (2017), this research project emphasizes the various relationships that form and exist within an employer brand. By utilizing this framework, the interview part of this research seeks to evaluate the Brand Reputation of Amazon, a crucial factor in attracting potential employees. Moreover, it aims to gather associations related to both the corporate brand and the employer brand specifically, providing insights into how Amazon's employer brand is perceived by students and young graduates. To enhance the research methods and capture a comprehensive understanding of Amazon's Employer Brand, this study incorporates a content analysis of reviews from Amazon workers on Glassdoor. By integrating feedback from real workers and potential employees, this research endeavors to align the associations that shape Amazon's Employer Brand.

Additionally, this thesis recognizes the interconnectedness between different brand entities, such as the Employer Brand and the Product/Corporate Brand (Backhaus, 2016; Foster et al., 2010). Recognizing the significant interaction between these two subjects and the potential strong dependence of one on the other, the research delves into exploring this relationship. It seeks to uncover respondents' perceptions of Amazon both as a retailer and tech giant and as
a potential employer, thus capturing the dynamics between the general brand and the employer brand.

This thesis also builds upon a few social science theoretical assumptions that help approach and analyze the research problem.

First, it is based on some underlying premises of ethical decision-making theories. Since this thesis examines why large brands can behave unethically and still be successful and desirable employers in a society that is deeply concerned with ethics and human rights, it takes into account prevailing social norms and individual motives and values (Hunt & Vitell, 2006; Schwartz, 2012). In addition to norms and values, this thesis incorporates the concept of empathy and the ability to empathize and understand the experiences and emotions of others in the research framework (Batson et al., 1981; Romani & Grappi, 2014).

Second, this thesis dares to attempt to extend consumer responsibilization theory to the realm of engagement with employer brands. Consumer responsibilization theory uses the perspective that consumers have a moral and ethical responsibility to consider the social and environmental impacts of their consumption decisions, and that they should take steps to minimize negative impacts and maximize positive impacts. In turn, this leads to an assumption that ethically aware individuals should also avoid contributing to the prosperity of unethical brands by avoiding working for them.

Beyond that, the research adheres to the assumption that in human behavior there always exists an attitude-behavior gap and expectation-behavior tension implying that the willingness to act ethically does not always lead to solely ethical behavior (Rajecki, 1982), and there are many factors in ethical decision-making.
3.0 METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, the methodology of the research is presented, including a detailed examination of the methods of data collection and analysis. The primary objective of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive explanation of the chosen methods and elaborate on the research's underlying assumptions. The chapter begins by introducing the research paradigm of the thesis, followed by a research methodology explanation and an overview of the research design. Subsequently, the methods of data collection and analysis are explained in detail.

3.1 Research Paradigm

The main ontological assumption on which this thesis is based is that there is no universal knowledge that can explain social reality. Following the interpretivism paradigm, this research relies on the idea that “reality is …socially constructed” and “multiple realities exist and …are changing” (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988). The study is guided by the principle that people should be studied in the context of their frame of reference, social context, place and time and that the researcher should minimize their influence to avoid distorting the results. Therefore, the knowledge generated through interpretive research is not considered a final truth, but rather an attempt to interpret and describe reality. Moreover, the interpretivism paradigm allows the research design to adjust throughout the research process (Hudson & Ozanne, 1988) since it is in the process of research that different aspects of the phenomenon are revealed.

The study however also draws on the ideas of critical realism (Eriksson & Kovalainen 2011; Archer et al., 2016). Critical realism is a research philosophy that concurrs with the positivist philosophy that there is an observable world that is independent of human consciousness. Additionally, it suggests that knowledge of the world is constructed through socially constructed meanings (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011). Critical realists believe that social science can continually refine and improve its understanding of the real world, and can make claims about reality that are reasonable and justified, despite being contingent and subject to change over time. Thus, this thesis postulates that meanings relating to individual behavior, values, and dominant norms manifest themselves differently depending on the context in which they are articulated, for example, expected norms of ethical behavior may work differently in the spheres of consumption and career planning and is contingent on
circumstances. Also, this study cautiously uses the assumption that micro-level data in the form of people's stories about their personal consumption or career decisions can be used to explore macro-level constructs (Holt, 2002) and extrapolated to larger patterns and regularities.

3.2 Research Methodology

This research is guided by the principles of qualitative methodology, which is primarily interested in people's experiences, how they interpret them, and what meaning they attach to those experiences (Merriam, 2009). In other words, the main focus of a qualitative approach is to understand how people perceive the world and how they explain the surrounding social phenomenon. The main task of qualitative research is not to reveal final knowledge on the subject but to gain insights and interpret the phenomena under study (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011). Thus, this thesis takes a qualitative approach to understand how the perception of a large brand changes in the eyes of potential employees when the brand has been involved in negative media controversy and when it is known that the brand's internal practices might be unethical.

The qualitative methodology allows the researcher to draw inferences from a sample that does not necessarily represent the entire population. The most important thing is how rich and deep the respondents' interpretations are (Merriam, 2009). The qualitative approach allows the use of data in the form of interview quotes, notes, excerpts from documents, and electronic forms of communication. Therefore, this study employs online content analysis and interviews as methods.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

To meet the research objective of the dissertation, data collection methods must provide a thorough understanding of the personal factors, such as life goals, norms, and values, that shape respondents' interactions with Amazon as a commercial brand and as a potential employer. To get a comprehensive understanding of how Amazon is perceived as an employer and to get both perspectives of current and future employees, two data collection methods were used: content analysis and semi-structured interviews.
3.3.1 Semi-structured Interviews

For this thesis, the primary tool chosen for data collection is semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews provide flexibility in the research approach and allow researchers to build upon the responses of the interviewees. This approach enables the refinement of the concepts being explored and the inclusion of new ideas as they emerge, leading to a deeper understanding of the topic (Porta & Keating, 2008).

To conduct the interviews, an interview guide was developed. The guide includes key research questions and themes while allowing for open discussion. It serves as a flexible framework for the interviewer to facilitate the conversation rather than a strict set of directives. The interview guide is presented in Appendix 1 and covers various sections, such as respondents' self-representation, motivations in job searching, criteria for selecting employers, perceptions of Amazon as a brand (both corporate and employer), and individual career preferences and expectations. Additionally, the guide includes questions related to respondents' awareness of other brand scandals and boycotts, as well as their perspectives on the power of social change and personal responsibility.

3.3.2 Interviewees

For this thesis, a total of 10 interviews were conducted with participants who met specific criteria to ensure their relevance to the study. The inclusion criteria required all respondents to have a familiarity with the challenges of job hunting and be at the early stages of their career path while actively researching potential employers. As a result, the interviewees consisted of students or individuals who had graduated within the past three years. The sample included a diverse range of participants in terms of gender, age, and educational background. Two of the interviewees were male, while eight were female, with ages ranging from 19 to 32.

The interviewees represented various educational backgrounds, encompassing fields such as Marketing, Economics and Business Administration, Finance, Law, Computer Science or Game Design, Linguistics, and Education. This diverse mix of backgrounds provides a breadth of perspectives for the research findings.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name (fictional)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Graduation Year (real or planned)</th>
<th>University Major</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liisa</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>works as a full-time financial assistant, has a bachelor's degree, is applying for a master's degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valtteri</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>2024</td>
<td>Marketing\ changed to Game design</td>
<td>studied and worked in the field of marketing, changed his major and is waiting for the start of the new school year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Claudia</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>2024</td>
<td>Management and Economics</td>
<td>Obtaining a bachelor’s degree, working part-time as a trainee in finance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helmi</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>2025</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>Obtaining a bachelor’s degree, looking for a summer job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronika</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Russian living in the UK</td>
<td>2022</td>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>Has a Master’s degree, working part-time in the field not related to her studies, actively looking for a job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariia</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Russian living in Finland</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Has a Master's degree, working full-time in a field not related to her studies, considers changing a job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lena</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Russian living in Finland</td>
<td>2020</td>
<td>Software and Service Engineering</td>
<td>Has a Master's degree, working full-time in a desired field, but considering changing jobs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advik</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Indian living in Finland</td>
<td>2024</td>
<td>Software and Service Engineering</td>
<td>Obtaining a master's degree, working part-time in the field related to his studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucia</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Spanish living in Portugal</td>
<td>2021</td>
<td>Linguistics studies</td>
<td>Doing her Ph.D. studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samiha</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Bangladesh Living in Finland</td>
<td>2023</td>
<td>Education and Globalization</td>
<td>Obtaining a master's degree, and actively looking for a job</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Demographics and Backgrounds of Interviewees
3.3.3 Content Analysis: Online Reviews

Content analysis is a research technique that involves deriving valid insights from textual data within a specific context (Kim & Kuljis, 2010). It allows researchers to analyze large volumes of data, uncover hidden patterns and insights, and explore communication without direct contact with individuals. This method offers the advantage of non-intrusiveness, enabling researchers to observe communication dynamics without influencing the process. However, it is important to note that online data may lack a strong theoretical foundation, and caution should be exercised in drawing far-reaching conclusions from it (Kim & Kuljis, 2010).

In this thesis, content analysis of online reviews is utilized as a complementary method to explore employees' perspectives on Amazon as an employer. By analyzing online reviews, direct contact with current or former employees is not required, allowing for a broader range of experiences and perspectives to be collected. This approach enables the inclusion of insights from employees at various levels and working positions within the company, providing a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter. A detailed overview of the content analysis process is presented in the Analysis section of this thesis.

3.4 DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis involves organizing, coding, and interpreting empirical data to identify patterns, trends, and meaningful insights (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011). In qualitative research, interpretation plays a vital role in assigning meanings and significance to the analysis, although it does not generate universal knowledge. By employing the grounded theory approach, this study collected a substantial amount of fragmented textual data in the form of online reviews or transcribed interviews. The aim was to iteratively review and identify patterns, concepts, and relationships within the data.

To analyze the collected textual data and recorded interviews, the thesis follows the coding process outlined by Eriksson & Kovalainen (2011). This process facilitates the formalization of diverse and scattered textual data into meaningful units through coding. The authors describe three stages: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Despite pursuing different goals, both interview analysis and content analysis followed the same algorithm.

The analysis of the interviews commenced with transcribing them into text, followed by re-reading and highlighting significant data pieces using color, which is known as open coding.
The identified data pieces were then transferred to the Miro Board, where all the open codes were consolidated on a virtual board. Subsequently, the open codes were further analyzed and categorized as axial codes, summarizing the underlying topics and discovering common patterns in the answers. Finally, selective codes emerged from these categories, leading to the development of a broader theoretical framework (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2011).

Similarly, the content analysis underwent the same steps as the interview analysis but was conducted in Microsoft Excel due to the larger amount of material and initial codes involved.

3.5 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

In this study, ethical considerations were taken into account to ensure that the research was conducted responsibly. The following ethical considerations were addressed:

- Plagiarism. To prevent plagiarism, the researcher made sure that all sources used in the thesis were properly cited and referenced. The rules of citation were followed strictly to give due credit to the work of others.
- Informed Consent. All respondents who participated in the study were informed about the purpose of the research and agreed to participate voluntarily. They were assured of their anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research process. The researcher obtained verbal consent from participants at the beginning of each interview and informed them that the interview is going to be audio recorded. In the case of Glassdoor reviews, it was not possible to obtain informed consent from the reviewers. However, the responses of the reviewers were used only in a generalized manner, without any personal identification or mention of place or time. Therefore, no harm was caused to the privacy of the reviewers.
- Anonymity and Pseudonyms. The answers of all interviewees were anonymized, and pseudonyms were used when mentioning them to ensure their privacy. No personal information that could reveal the identity of any participant was used in the thesis.
4.0 ANALYSIS

The following analysis is structured into separate chapters to provide insights into the research questions outlined in Part 1.

Chapter 4.1 focuses on addressing the primary research question: How does the negative media image of a brand, caused by boycotts, scandals, or unethical behavior, affect the employer brand (in the case of Amazon)? This chapter aims to deconstruct the employer brand image projected by Amazon through firsthand reviews from its actual employees.

Chapter 4.2 is supported by the findings derived from the interview analysis and provides answers to Research questions 2, 3, and 4, while also generating additional insights into the main Research Question 1. Sub-chapter 4.2.1 focuses on the Employer Brand Associations that circulate among students and recent graduates regarding Amazon as a corporate brand and as an employer. Sub-chapter 4.2.2 examines the drivers that motivate young individuals to apply to Amazon, while Sub-chapter 4.2.3 explores the personal ethics, values, and moral guidelines that guide students in their career planning decisions.

4.1 Content Analysis. The Two Pillars of Amazon's Employer Brand: A High-Pressure Environment that Creates Diamonds and an Exploitative Working Culture

To provide a comprehensive representation of Amazon's employer brand image, the research collected reviews from workers in different positions at Amazon. As a result, the analysis generated two groups of reviews — those written by white-collar workers and those written by blue-collar workers. In this thesis, white-collar workers are referred to as management and professionals who typically require higher education and specialized skills for their jobs, and who are generally highly compensated, such as Software Development Engineers, Financial Managers, or Legal Advisers. Blue-collar workers, on the other hand, include those in jobs involving manual labor, such as warehouse workers, packers, delivery drivers, or lower-level managers in the same operational units.

Content analysis is used in this study to address the primary research question: "How does a brand's negative media image resulting from boycotts, scandals, or unethical conduct impact
Amazon's employer brand?" Reviews are a true representation of working conditions at Amazon, and act as a reference for potential employees.

At the time of writing this thesis, there were over 140,000 Amazon reviews on Glassdoor, making it impossible to analyze them all. As a result, a sample of reviews was selected using Glassdoor's built-in sorting function, which displays the most popular or highly rated reviews first. The analysis included a total of 150 reviews — 80 from blue-collar workers and 70 from white-collar workers. During the analysis process, it was determined that this number of reviews would be sufficient to identify the main trends in the reviews, as some common patterns began to emerge. While there are clear patterns in the reviews, it is important to note that each review is influenced by the individual's personal situation, team, and context. Glassdoor provides many insights into Amazon's working culture and conditions and one can form an idea of the internal kitchen of the company using the analytics that the website offers.

Overall, on Glassdoor, Amazon has a score of 3.8 out of 5, with the lowest score of 3.4 assigned to the work-life balance index. The indexes for Senior Management (employee satisfaction) and Culture & Values are 3.5 and 3.7, respectively. Compensation and Benefits and Career opportunities scored at 3.9 whereas the Diversity & Inclusion indicator received the highest rating of 4.1. By and large, 74 % of previous and current employees would recommend Amazon as an employer to their peers, 80 % Approve of the CEO, and 67 % think the company has a positive business outlook. Most often, however, the company received a 5-star review. The distribution of Amazon's overall review rating is shown in the picture below, indicating that Amazon can be viewed as a good and sound employer. Additionally, the graphical representation suggests that Amazon's overall rating has demonstrated an enhancement in the preceding year.

![Figure 5: Overall dynamics of Amazon's ranking as an employer, dated 09.04.2023, from glassdoor.com](image-url)
Moreover, based on reviews submitted by employees, Glassdoor displays an average employer rating per different job position. As a result, even though Amazon's overall rating is 3.8, it becomes apparent from the outset that there are variations in the ratings depending on the job position. For instance, employees with the position of Warehouse Worker or Warehouse Associate rated Amazon with an average score of 3.4, while Delivery drivers or Pickers gave their employer a score of 3.3. However, Software Engineers and Developers, who rate Amazon on average as a 4 out of 5, are the ones who boost the company's overall rating.

It is interesting to note that according to Glassdoor analytics, the most frequently mentioned pros of working at Amazon in the reviews are excellent salary and benefits, as well as great coworkers. On the other hand, the most common cons mentioned are long hours, short breaks, and poor management. The analysis presented in this study reveals similar trends to those identified by Glassdoor analytics. However, it also identifies some conflicting trends and finds that the pros and cons mentioned in the reviews vary considerably depending on the group of workers who provided the reviews.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Top Review Highlights by Sentiment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PROS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Pay is good but not worth the asks made from IT and how they are treated&quot; (in 11875 reviews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Their health benefits is good and their career choice is helpful to start a new career.&quot; (in 8707 reviews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;They people are great and the fun things that happen monthly are also really great.&quot; (in 5475 reviews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Good salary and you'll advance your technical skill set while gaining a FAANG company on your resume&quot; (in 3521 reviews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You get to learn a lot from your colleagues and the work culture is very good.&quot; (in 3192 reviews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CONS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You do work bloody hard and very long hours so there is no work life balance&quot; (in 6238 reviews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;You work long hours and not as many breaks as you would like or need at times.&quot; (in 4745 reviews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Poor management and it's difficult to get a hold of someone when there's a problem that needs fixing.&quot; (in 4303 reviews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;4. Manager quality is a high variance and there are plenty of bad managers.&quot; (in 3492 reviews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Short breaks: breaks are not breaks when you walk 5 minutes back and forth to have a break&quot; (in 1679 reviews)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6: Amazon reviews highlights by Glassdoor, dated 05.04.2023, from glassdoor.com

In the course of the analysis, the texts of reviews were collected in two Word documents—one for white-collar workers and another for blue-collar workers. The reviews from the white-collar workers resulted in a total of 70 reviews, spanning 37 pages of Arial font size 12, usually with more detailed feedback than those from the blue-collar workers. The blue-collar worker reviews totaled 80 and amounted to 29 pages. After collection, the texts were carefully read multiple times to uncover explicit insights and common patterns in how employees depicted their work experiences at Amazon. Then, the texts were segmented into
codes, selecting phrases and remarks that succinctly describe the company's work culture and internal values, management and leadership practices, opportunities for training and career growth, and reasons to work for the company. The resulting code fragments were then transferred to an Excel sheet and grouped according to their meaning.

The coding process began intuitively, resulting in hundreds of open codes that were later grouped into five axial code categories: Brand Image, Working Environment and Culture, Growth and learning opportunities, Benefits, and Working conditions. However, the last category, Working conditions, only held significant weight among blue-collar workers such as Warehouse associates, etc. Skilled professionals such as Software engineers almost never mentioned or complained about working conditions as blue-collar workers did. It is worth noting that this analysis distinguishes the two groups, with group 2 (Working Environment and Culture) representing the social aspects of the working environment, atmosphere, and set of attitudes and behavior generally accepted among teammates, while group 5 (Working conditions) refers to the physical conditions in which a person performs their job (Indeed, 2023a, 2023b). Each group had codes that identified both the advantages and disadvantages of working at Amazon. Some codes were marked as ambiguous because it was unclear whether a described experience was a definite pro or con. For example, "Great place to learn, churn n burn culture."

In the end, the coding process resulted in two large groups of selective codes that best summarize the Amazon employer brand and work experience on the Internet. These groups were labeled as High-Pressure Environment and Exploitive Culture as best describing Amazon's employer brand (groups of codes for content analysis are presented in Appendix 2). Skilled white-collar workers tended to refer to the High-Pressure Environment group more often, while blue-collar workers were more likely to mention the Exploitive Culture group. In this thesis, the term High-Pressure Environment is used to describe a working environment that is demanding and challenging, like a high-pressure environment that creates diamonds but burns everything else. Working at Amazon requires hard work, but the professional growth and the rewards are worth it. Blue-collar workers, on the other hand, face an exploitative and demanding working culture and environment. They might be compensated well, but they are required to perform at a high level and have limited opportunities for advancement within Amazon's structure which ultimately leads to their burnout.
It was evident that the two groups had different perspectives and review patterns, which will be analyzed further in the following sub-chapters.

4.1.2 Amazon as Perceived By White-Collar Employees

To answer research question 1—“How does a brand's negative media image resulting from boycotts, scandals, or unethical conduct impact Amazon's employer brand?”—this chapter examines how white-collar workers perceive Amazon as an employer, specifically focusing on how skilled professionals such as software engineers, financial specialists, and middle to high-level management view the company.

In order to address the research question, the analysis first focuses on a small category of open codes that specifically describe the Amazon employer brand image. Naturally, this group of codes turned out to be sparse since employees and former Amazon employees on Glassdoor typically described their working experience rather than the employer brand image. Nevertheless, it was immediately apparent that the Amazon employer brand holds increased value in the eyes of employees and other businesses. Here are some examples marking the advantages of Amazon EB image:

- “The name”
- “Getting Amazon on your resume”
- “It's very good for the resume”
- “adds value to your resume”
- “Working here can raise your market value”
- “If you get hired here, you will be hirable anywhere.”

Only a small number of open codes with negative connotations were assigned to the category of employer brand image. These included "poor decisions", which were mentioned a total of 4 times out of the 70 reviews from white-collar employees included in the analysis. One review went so far as to deliver a verdict on the company, stating: "It's a huge company that hasn't matured, still acts like a young, inexperienced start-up."

The most salient group of sorted-out open codes would be depicting the Working Environment and Culture. The study collected 162 open codes related to this category from various employee reviews. Overall, the analysis collected 65 positive mentions, 33 ambiguous mentions, and 64 negative mentions related to the working environment and culture at Amazon. The Working Environment and Culture category encompasses different
aspects such as the atmosphere at work, the usual practices among employees when performing their tasks, and the internal relationships between employees.

It is evident from these reviews, positive or negative, that Amazon is known for having an extremely “Intense” or “High-pressure environment”. Those same or very close in meaning phrases were mentioned repeatedly. Also, many times people have pointed out that work at Amazon is “extremely rewarding and demanding”, or is “a tough but yet sane place to work” and that it is “a lot of hard work but fulfilling”. In the views of some, Amazon is a challenging employer, but working for a prosperous tech giant requires such an environment, and the benefits outweigh the demands, as expressed in the following quote: "Does Amazon require high-quality, measurable outcomes? Yes! Is the work difficult? Yes! Is it gratifying? Yes!"

Few people mentioned that Amazon was the best company they have ever worked for. Nevertheless, the high-pressure environment seemed not as a great fit for many contributors. Thus, in the case of ambiguous reviews, when the overall rating of the review was positive, employees often pointed out the difficult and demanding culture that was not easy to keep up with. Here are a few most typical examples describing employees' feelings:

- “Exciting Work, Abusive Culture!”
- “The work environment at this company may be challenging”
- “that'll help you develop a harder edge if you can survive”
- “If you're into the work-life balance nonsense it's not the place for you”
- “it is built, quite deliberately, to be Darwinian, anyone who's been here for more than 2 years is competent and motivated or they wouldn't have survived”
- “The strong survive and the weak perish.”

Negative reviews frequently mention issues like "possible burnout," "no personal time," and "no work-life balance." One contributor even warned readers that "You will sacrifice family life and health to pay for a few to get rich." However, while the analysis of negative reviews may give the impression that long hours and overworking are significant problems at Amazon, they are not the primary causes of dissatisfaction for white-collar employees. Out of 64 negative comments about the working environment and culture, 20 complain about abusive management practices, lack of leadership, favoritism, and micromanagement. The term "abusive culture" appears 4 times, while "toxic culture" is mentioned 5 times, and in general the category of abusive culture accumulated 30 mentions. These reviews also
highlight an unhealthy working environment and unhealthy competition, which allegedly promotes dishonest behavior in one's own interests. Some examples include:

- "too much politics being played - culture is toxic"
- “culture encourages confrontation, it a straight sacrifice”,
- "your peers will stab you in the back"
- "your manager will blame you for their errors"
- "people who throw others under the bus"
- "people will take credit for other people's work and get promoted".

Management has been called “hostile”, “horrible”, “spineless”, “cynical” and again “toxic”. One reviewer wrote: “I've often called Amazon my “Sexy” Mistress...she's emotionally abusive, but she's so sexy that I go back for more punishment”.

Furthermore, when it comes to the working environment and culture at Amazon, it is evident that despite some grievances and internal conflicts, the team should be recognized as the company's standout feature and major strength. In fact, in the analyzed body of reviews, there are no less than 40 instances where reviewers refer to great team and co-workers, or supportive company culture. Reviewers describe their colleagues as "great", "nice", "smart", "strong", "brilliant", "amazing", "knowledgeable", and "the best of all teams". They acknowledge that this feature is what contributes to Amazon's success and keeps the company afloat, stating: "Everyone is smart, humble, and a workaholic, and that's how Amazon keeps its edge." In addition to having great colleagues, Amazon is also characterized by "great values and a work environment". Reviewers note that the working culture promotes thorough work and initiative and provides the opportunity to work on tasks in which employees are interested.

The second largest group of codes related to Growth and Learning Opportunities, with a total of 54 codes. Of these, 38 had a positive connotation, 11 were ambiguous, and only 5 were negative. While a few codes mentioned a "Strong lack of career growth," this research considers them minor since positive reviews prove the opposite, and so they might not represent a true situation regarding career growth at Amazon. Overall, white-collar employees praised Amazon for its multitude of learning opportunities and career advancement. Here are some of the phrases used to praise Amazon's career and learning opportunities:
- “You have the freedom to excel as much as you want”
- “The opportunities to learn here are literally unlimited”
- “Opportunities are bountiful”
- “Great place to learn and develop your career”
- “You own your career at Amazon.”

The remaining codes were ambiguous and mainly reinforced Amazon's image as an employer with a high-pressure and challenging work environment. Reviewers often mentioned that "the job might be overwhelming," "the learning curve is high," or "this job can really make or break a person," which falls into the final substantial group of selective codes called High-pressure Environment.

Considering that Growth and Learning Opportunities may not be ideal for everyone and certain difficulties exist, the thesis concludes that the learning and growth opportunities at Amazon should be considered advantageous for white-collar employees.

As for the group Benefits, it was surprising to find that this category had the lowest frequency of mentions among the analyzed reviews, with only 24 mentions, including 174 positive and 10 negative ones. It is worth noting that reviewers mentioned directly opposite views when it came to benefits, such as "competitive" or "decent compensation" as positive features and "embarrassing," "poor," and "horrible" compensation as negative ones. However, due to the limited data and conflicting results, this thesis concludes that these reviews heavily depended on the reviewer's personal situation. As a result, it is not possible to draw any definitive conclusions regarding the actual working conditions and the Amazon employer brand.

Nevertheless, this thesis posits that the low frequency of the Benefits category may be due to the fact that the compensation package is at least above average for skilled employees such as software engineers.

Before moving on to the next chapter, which is devoted to the Amazon employer brand as perceived by blue-collar employees, it is worth noting that among the collected reviews, there were no mentions of hard working conditions or violations of worker and human rights among white-collar employees. As some reviewers claimed, they "have seen none of the horror stories being communicated to the public." Only repeated recent complaints about the Return to Office policy can be assigned to the Working Conditions Category. Consequently, the chapter concludes that the Amazon employer brand, as perceived by real current and former employees, was not significantly affected by the controversies present in the media in
recent years regarding Amazon's practices. However, the situation may be different for blue-collar employees, whose experiences will be scrutinized in the next chapter.

4.1.3 Amazon as Perceived by Blue-collar Employees

For the purpose of this research, it was necessary to conduct a separate analysis of reviews from blue-collar employees at Amazon. During the analysis, it became apparent that the reviews from blue-collar workers painted a different picture of the company compared to those from white-collar employees. This included differences in the working culture, job advantages, and disadvantages. Although the high-pressure working environment remained a defining feature of Amazon, the meaning of this pressure varied among different employee groups with different working conditions.

As stated earlier in this chapter, the total number of reviews from workers was 80 pages which ultimately resulted in 193 actual open-code pieces. In addition to the axial codes common to both blue-collar and white-collar employees, such as Brand Image, Benefits, Growth and Learning Opportunities, and Working Environment and Culture, the category of Working Conditions emerged as a prominent theme in the blue-collar reviews. It is important to note that overall negative epithets and descriptions outweight the positive ones among the reviews collected from blue-collar.

In the analysis, the Brand Image category was found to be the smallest and practically non-existent. While some contributors described Amazon as a "Great Company with High Standards," others called it "Hell on Earth." It is clear that there are contradicting opinions, and the employer brand image of Amazon serves a different role for blue-collar and white-collar employees. For the latter, Amazon is primarily seen as a great company that increases employees' market value. However, for workers in warehousing and delivery, Amazon appears to be like any other employer which can be appealing or unfair, depending on the situation.

One notable difference between the reviews of blue-collar and white-collar employees is found in the category of "Growth and learning opportunities". As mentioned earlier, this category was one of the largest for white-collar employees, who highlighted the opportunities to excel in their roles and gain valuable knowledge as a reason to work at Amazon. However, for blue-collar employees, this category was practically non-existent. The analysis yielded only 8 open codes, with 3 having positive meanings, mentioning that Amazon provides
"Excellent Training" and "decent amount of growth opportunities," while negative ones stated the opposite, such as:

- “People making a career of Amazon is extremely rare.”
- “Impossible to get promoted.”
- “There aren't many advancement opportunities.”
- “not so many opportunities for growth.”
- "it is very hard to get promoted from within."

Due to the small amount the research obtained in this category, it could be concluded that Amazon does not stimulate professional growth within the company for its common laborers in the same way that it does for white-collar highly skilled employees. However, since the data on this matter is scarce, only bigger research can draw far-reaching conclusions.

Regarding benefits and compensation, the majority of the sampled reviews marked Amazon as an employer with a good salary and compensation package. In fact, out of 34 reviews mentioning compensation, the word "great" was used 12 times. Moreover, many employees mentioned that Amazon offered access to funded schooling, which they saw as a great stepping stone to furthering their education and career. Interestingly, this perk was never mentioned by white-collar employees in the analysis. This may lead one to think that the company's internal practices vary depending on the position. From the analysis, it is known that white-collar employees do not describe their pay as excellent, but rather as typical or average, even though conventional wisdom suggests that compensation for skilled software engineers should be more than satisfactory. On the other hand, blue-collar workers often describe their pay as "great," even though common sense suggests that their compensation is indeed much more modest.

The most numerous category, as in the case of white-collar workers, was the category of Working Environment and Culture. However, the employer brand image portrayed in these reviews differed drastically from one of the white-collar employees. A total of 85 codes were collected in this category, with only 22 having a positive connotation, 16 being ambiguous, and 47 having a negative connotation. The reviews described the pros of Amazon's working culture and again highlighted the high-pressure working environment:

- “Challenging sometimes fun work environment”
- “great but fast-paced work environment”
In addition, many people brought up “awesome coworkers” and “amazing” teammates creating an impression that a strong team and team spirit exist among both groups of reviewers.

The negative impression, however, dominates the perception of Amazon's working environment and culture for blue-collar employees. Thus, employees again call their working environment “toxic”, “exhausting”, “hostile”, and “super stressful” and too strict and exploitative above all (a group of 19 mentions). People complain about poor management and the lack of leadership (9 mentions) claiming the environment is not supportive and accusing field managers of bias and favoritism (9 mentions). One of the contributors wrote: “Amazon is the epitome of the Peter Principal where everyone gets promoted to their highest level of incompetence” ironically referring to common managerial incompetence. Many pointed out that people are treated like cogs in a system:

- “They will drop you and fire you (without any regrets)”
- “you’re Just a number”
- “people treated as a number”
- “Robots and non-thinkers rule”
- “only care about the companys interest”
- “You are just another person to them regardless of how hard you work”

All the ambiguous pieces of codes collected in the Working Environment and Culture category described the pressuring atmosphere prevailing within the company. Some reviews characterized their work as a "love-hate relationship" or mentioned that there was "a lot of stress but worth it." Others said that "the culture can sometimes be lively but can feel completely depressing." These descriptions closely resemble the situation that white-collar employees face.

The working conditions category, which is notably absent in reviews written by professional or executive employees, covers a relatively broad range of topics for industrial and common laborer workers. However, the majority of the codes in this category were negative (47), while positive and ambiguous codes were fewer in number, at 5 and 4 respectively. Positive reviews highlighted working flexibility and reasonable hours, while ambiguous codes
mentioned the job's ups and downs, such as physically demanding and monotonous labor, but also noted its benefits such as good teammates. When it comes to negative reviews, employees noted that the situation at Amazon for them was challenging and draining. Long hours and overtime were mentioned 23 times, for instance:

- “Hours can become a challenge.”
- “nonstop work long hours.”
- “Long hours. hectic schedule.”
- “No sleep, Low pay, endless overtime.”
- “unbelievably long hours.”
- “Overtime is mandatory.”

Another noteworthy aspect that emerged from the reviews on Working Conditions is the concern over health and safety. A significant number of reviewers expressed apprehension regarding the strenuous working conditions at Amazon, which may result in long-term health problems, injuries, and damages. Here are a few examples of such mentions:

- “the amount of injuries” [on work disadvantages]
- “not a good place for job security.”
- “No health insurance, people dropping pallets damages hearing.”
- “It is easy to get injuries, labor-induced tendonitis, and back pain!”
- “management not addressing tough working conditions.”
- “employee keeps reinjuring the problem area, because management doesn’t rotate them correctly.”
- “You will be overworked and overutilized.”
- “safety could be at risk.”
- “No 15 min breaks.”
- “Do this job if you want permanent Carpal Tunnel Syndrome.”

Several times people also noted that amazon working conditions resulted in the deterioration of their mental health:

- “no other sensory but the sound of machines. It rubbed my ADHD the wrong way and I got anxiety attacks.”
- “Entry-level positions proved hard for me mentally.”

Additionally, the reviewers pointed out that the working conditions and Amazon’s approach to work were wearisome while requirements toward blue-collar employees were overly strict and even robotic:

- “you must stay working at all times and minimize bathroom trips”
- “Breaks too short”
- “human rights violations”
- “Get fired for minute violations”
- “I took a medical leave, but they insisted that I missed over 30 days of work and said I must either resign or get fired”
- “If you run out of UPT [unpaid time off] you lose your job”
- “the performance metrics per second/hour is a bit unreal or superhuman!”
- “the labor you put out is FIERCE and VERY Intense!”
- “Short breaks they force you to use part of walking to the break facility.”
- “Work is very physically demanding.”
- “It literally feels like working in a sweatshop”
- “Team leaders watch you on break and tells you to go back to work.”

As a result, reviewers are also mentioning the “insanely” high turnover both among line personnel and among managers. One contributor even wrote, "There's no use getting to know their [manager] name.”

To recapitulate this chapter, it is necessary to highlight that the employee reviews of Amazon present a distinct picture of the company as an employer, depending on the nature of employment. White-collar workers, such as engineers and financial specialists, recognize that while there are challenges and difficulties, working at Amazon provides an opportunity to enhance their professional skills and market value. However, they pay a high price for this in terms of dedication and working under immense pressure. On the other hand, non-office workers, such as delivery drivers, warehouse workers, and packers, acknowledge that there are benefits to working at Amazon, but it can also be exploitative, exhausting, and potentially hazardous to their health in the long run.

The analysis of employee reviews resulted in two selective codes that summarize the Amazon employer brand image: a high-pressure environment and an exploitative working culture. The former implies that a high-pressure environment can create exceptional professionals, but it can also lead to burnout and stress issues for those who cannot keep up with the fast pace. The latter implies that employees must be wholly devoted to their work, leaving no space for work-life balance.

Moreover, the critical implication of the study is the notion that two distinct employer brand images may exist within Amazon's employment structure, which operates differently based on an employee's position within the Amazon hierarchy. This idea will be further developed in the Implications section.
In response to the primary research question, “How does a brand's negative media image resulting from boycotts, scandals, or unethical conduct impact Amazon's employer brand?” it should be noted that the review data collected from the Glassdoor website reveals that although Amazon's employer brand image is now highly ambiguous, negative media coverage and scandals initially only affected the perception of employees at the same level who were directly impacted by the controversy. There were no concerns about poor working conditions for blue-collar employees among white-collar employees.

4.2 Amazon as Perceived by Students and Recent Graduates

What students and recent graduates think about Amazon as a company and as an employer creates an important image of how Amazon is perceived by the public among those who have had no real interaction with the brand as an employer. It provides valuable insights into the overall brand associations, sentiments, and attitudes toward Amazon.

The Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) framework for examining the concept of the Employer Brand, which has been subsequently expanded by numerous scholars such as Alshathry et al. (2017), posits that employer brand associations act as a predecessor in employee attraction. These associations when sustained create a strong brand image for the employer and can either attract or repel job applicants. Respectively, one of the research sub-question addressed in this thesis is: "What ideas and associations do potential employees form about the employer brand if this brand has a controversial media image?

The interviews conducted with the respondents in this study were to reveal these associations with the brand. For this purpose, interviewees were asked questions about what respondents know about Amazon as a company, what experiences they had if they have been an Amazon client, and what they heard about Amazon as an employer. The brand associations to a large extent followed the general analysis of Amazon's employer brand image scrutinized in the previous chapter. Throughout our conversations not all respondents showed deep familiarity with the Amazon corporate or employer brand; in such cases, we discussed corporations in "big tech" or fashion retail that were on their minds, as they evoked the most vivid memories of brand knowledge. In this case, the interview was trying to gather associations regarding these large corporations, which also, as a rule, were involved in some sort of ethical controversy concerning their general business practices or employee policies.
The coding process is discussed in detail in the methodology section, and a comprehensive figure illustrating the entire coding process is provided below. For the interview portion of the study, the coding process involved selecting hundreds of codes, which were then, in contrast to content analysis, divided into 6 groups of axial codes: Amazon Company Brand, Amazon EB, Career drivers and motivation, Intimidating large corporations, and Unjust economic system and Values and moral compass. Eventually, these codes were consolidated into three groups of selective codes, two of which are discussed in section 4.2.1: Positive and negative Amazon EB associations.

The above-mentioned axial codes encompass the primary response patterns identified during the interview dialogue. The in-depth interviews revealed distinctive thoughts and emotions the Amazon Company and Amazon Employer brands evoked in respondents. These responses ranged from concerns regarding the perceived lack of trustworthiness and intimidating nature of Amazon and other large corporations to the recognition of these companies as symbols of an unjust contemporary economic system. At the same time, most of the respondents expressed a desire to work for such companies due to the potential for career advancement and financial success. Ultimately, this line of thinking resulted in a value conflict for the respondents, leading to a compromise wherein they acknowledged that their personal benefits would likely outweigh their moral concerns in their job search. This realization also prompted them to question the extent of responsibility imposed upon them in such situations.
4.2.1 Employer Brand Associations. The Ambivalent Image of Large Corporations: A Simultaneously Intimidating and Appealing

Research Question 2 revealed both positive and negative EB associations with Amazon or large corporations in general.

Foreseeably, the group of positive associations was reflected in open codes as exciting, fast-paced image, forward-thinking and cutting edge, with impressive career opportunities, etc. Where the possibility for excellent career development was the most prominent association.

When it comes to Amazon's holistic brand image, in the course of the interviews, it was most commonly referred to as an online retailer with cutting-edge technology that provides exceptional career and learning opportunities.

- Claudia: “I know they are huge, they're, they're like a giant. They are like really big and you can buy things cheaper from them, I think [they are so popular as an
employer] because they are so well known and have this big brand, this great brand image”.

- Liisa: “It’s a big online retailer, I know they have a lot of other services…they have advanced technologies and I think amazing development opportunities…. If I were in IT, I would work for them, because I would not think about what forklift driver does. I would think about my career and how I can develop”.

- Mariia: “people are thinking about how to grow up there. They understand that there this a ladder up and it will be very promising”.

- Advik: “[Amazon is] a tech giant. They might not be the best employer but one can learn cutting-edge things there, to become a great professional in a long run”.

- Lucia: “in these professions such as IT people, they can learn a lot from people working there. It is believed that top professionals in their field work there”.

Some respondents noted that by working at Amazon, one can be part of something interesting and big, and achieve great success.

- Advik: “[I would love to be] working in cool big tech company because that's where the really great things happen, where you can get global impact and whatnot…”

- Valtteri: “A few years ago, I thought, yes, yes, working at Amazon or a big tech company is super cool because that's where the really cool stuff happens and you can really advance your career”.

At the same time, respondents admit, that they changed their mind over time realizing that at big corporations, perhaps, especially at big corporations, employees often face routine and are only responsible for a small part of the work, which makes it almost impossible to create truly worthwhile things:

- Valtteri: “But the more I hear about the experiences of people working there. When you are working in tech, for example in coding or even in marketing you are in a big company responsible for a tiny piece of Amazon's website. You would be responsible for its product, a button. Manage a button that does something on the web. Right, and this is not a high-impact, cutting-edge situation”.
In general, respondents believe that big brands like Amazon promise young graduates endless opportunities to explore and grow. For instance, Veronica points out that investing in young talent is often an important part of an employer brand, which is why young job seekers often value these brands:

- Veronica: “There are other things, that is, we must pay tribute to these companies. Here are Amazon, Nestle, and others, they take people without experience, students after the university, and provide them with some kind of opportunity. It turns out that getting into a large company like Amazon and Nestlé is, in a sense, easier than getting into a small but ethical one.”

In addition, there was a logical suggestion in the replies of some respondents that hardship and challenges are inevitable early in a career for those who aspire to achieve great results.

- Mariia: “That's why they work for 12 hours without getting tired. To be able to move forward. They get a huge amount of knowledge, experience, and connections. They get the opportunity not only to develop in this company but also to go somewhere else, to a more interesting job... people at least understand that today they will suffer, but tomorrow they will sit there relaxed in a chair and receive a big salary then. No, [smiling]of course they will not be just sitting in a chair, but at least they work hard to have a more interesting job and excellent salary in the future.”

Taking into account all of the above, it was noticeable that respondents’ answers showed contradictions in relation to the employer brand of Amazon and other large corporations in general. Many interviewees mentioned that although Amazon had indeed created a very solid and appealing employer brand image, some facts speak the opposite, making the EB image very ambiguous.

For instance, Valtteri, who, as it seemed, was most concerned about the issue of injustice coming from large companies, says that Amazon's attractiveness as a potential employer is undeniable, however, the tech giant has not been able to hide the significant problems that the company has within. And in Valtteri’s opinion, this applies to both the employer brand and their corporate brand, their products and services.

- Valtteri: “…They have created a great image. In our heads over the past decade that it's something exciting, incredible, fast-paced, top-notch, highly paid prestige job...They are forward-thinking in the sense that they have done quite a lot ahead of
time, especially a decade ago. But the past decade, when they have focused on e-commerce and optimization and less about innovation, it just seemed grimmer and grimmer”.

On this notion he also continued:

- Valtteri: “…but the disillusionment came, the more I started here about the way that they approach work practices and exactly where the employer, the more I heard about them as an employer, the more I realize how (screwed) they are”.

The main source of negative associations for Amazon as an employer was how ill Amazon treats its employees when it comes to working specialties, such as warehouse workers or packers.

- Valtteri: “For people who work in like the tech departments, it's seemingly pretty nice, right? You get the benefits and perks. It's like at any other tech company. They seem to care very well about you…..But people in other jobs…They're not being cared for in a way that the human worker I believe should be cared for.”

- Lena: “There are some departments there, good departments, and there are other departments, where people overwork, work late hours, yeah.”

Most of the other respondents were aware of the controversial practices that Amazon uses toward its workers such as fines, enhanced control, and strict accounting of working hours or unsafe working conditions. None of those interviewed approved of this and generally called such practices unnecessarily severe. When asked what controversial practices of the company regarding employees they are aware of, the participants answered the following:

- Claudia: “they are very strict on the rules and they penalize their employees and especially at low levels like warehousing and delivery.”

- Veronica: “I heard that Amazon has incredible turnover and they don't care about their employees. There are a lot of problems, packaging [pernicious environmental influence], difficult working conditions.”

- Liisa: “in many ways, modern work is a modern form of slavery. especially if it's a low paying job. in this regard, Amazon exploits people who often have no choice.”
- Lena: “I also heard that they are very cruel to their drivers who deliver these packages, that they cannot even take a break to go to the toilet. They can suffer there. They do not have breaks for rest, lunch, and so on.”

- Lucia: “I only know about these workers who work in warehouses. Well, firstly, during the pandemic, they said something that, Uh, despite the fact that they were, risk workers, they were not paid enough there, if, even if they took sick leave, then nothing was paid to them. What else, is it that they have a terrible schedule there? Uh, and a very small salary?”

- Valtteri: “They're [Workers at Amazon and other tech companies who also have manual worker tiers] not being cared for in a way that the human worker I believe should be cared for.”

An important notion regarding the respondents’ general awareness of Amazon’s harsh working culture, is that they acknowledge the status quo, and understand the difference in working conditions but also comprehend why people would seek to work there in highly paid and skilled roles and even could imagine working there themselves.

- Mariia: “Well, in more qualified positions like IT, well, because they probably don’t have such problems as overtime or there are no some inadequate management requirements, yeah, well.”

Therefore, the ambiguousness of Amazon’s employer brands consists also of the fact that a potential job at Amazon may raise ethical concerns among respondents. On the one hand, they admit that the company can provide the new employee with good conditions, working advantages and teach a lot, but on the other hand, ponder, if they will contribute to the development of something that on the contrary is worth resisting.

The interview questions concerning this realm naturally aroused mixed feelings in interviewees, as the conversation touched on the complicated subject of social injustice and the inequalities of capitalism. However, it can be said that the interviewees for the most part did not think about issues of social justice when it came to finding a job and their personal career paths. As a result, some found these questions surprising or uncomfortable. Liisa, one of the interviewees, gave a candid response when asked whether she would accept a job offer from Amazon.
- Liisa: “And I can imagine myself working there, even knowing about this case, if they made me a good offer I at least can see myself considering it because I would believe this horror does not concern me”.

She also believes that even knowing about internal injustice, employees may not change their minds about their employer, and the company's internal and external brand may not be truly damaged by it. This happens because of natural egoism, to one degree or another, inherent in most people.

- Liisa: “I mean, it seems to me that in any company where people work in the office, they don't care what happens in the warehouse operations for example. Have you heard lately everyone was talking about Wildberries (Amazon analogy in Russia)? There is generally some kind of horror in warehouses with people, who can't go to the toilet, and they undress people to check that they did not steal anything. Now, I don't think that people who work in the office think badly about their company because they don't work in the warehouse themselves”.

In opposition to Liisa, Lena, or Claudia who believe that one’s behavior is foremost driven by individual motives, one of the respondents adhered to the philosophical views of Effective Altruism. Effective altruism, both an ideology and a movement, holds a simple principle of “aiming to do the most good one can” (Ioannidis, 2020). He himself lives by these principles, donating money and trying to do good while also building a community of people who share his beliefs. Being an IT student, he sees the likelihood of working for Amazon or another tech giant in the future as realistic.

- Advik: “Well, there's definitely a big contradiction there, you know? The thing is, when you contribute voluntarily, do volunteer work, or donate money to some NGO, you can easily offset that positive impact that you make and end up with so to say negative balance. Yeah, I guess, the problem is that working for large corporations can sometimes mean you're contributing to something bad, which really throws a wrench into the whole thing...but well, so, it's an interesting paradox, you can work for large corporations and still making a huge positive impact in a society if you choose to follow the effective altruism philosophy for instance... you have to think of a quantifiable impact that you can make.”
The interviewee concedes that within the context of effective altruism, it is reasonable for an individual to prioritize aiding individuals within their immediate social circle. Consequently, the interviewee posits that it is acceptable to seek employment within a large technology corporation, such as Amazon, given that one does not only hoard all acquired benefits and resources, but rather redirects them towards supporting one's family, community, or organization of their choice. This respondent uses the word “paradox” to explain the theoretical situation when a person works for a publicly condemned organization but with good intentions at heart.

- Advik: “... I do not think that paradox has to be eradicated”.

Since Advik himself lives according to the principle of “excelling at enjoyable things that can help others” he does not believe that by working for Amazon, even knowing their controversial employee policies, he can violate the principles of his philosophy. Because the ultimate consideration should be the extent to which he is capable of helping others and bringing about positive change.

- Advik: “Amazon is a tech giant. they might not be the best employer but one can learn cutting-edge things there to become a great professional in the long run...if someone wants to be a skilled person in the long run and have a great job and possibly make a positive impact, that doesn't necessarily mean that he or she cannot go and work for Amazon”.

However, a few respondents emphasized that Amazon has never been a company of the first choice for them because the EB image Amazon puts out there is deceiving and they showed that they even might be afraid of the competitive and challenging environment the company creates.

- Lucia: “Honestly, I've never dreamed of working for Amazon, and also I study linguistics so I don't really know what job there I could take, but, I guess, I see this company is like a huge and challenging place to work for, like, if I can get there and last there that would mean I am that good, sort of thing. But, I do not believe that this should mean that they are the best, it is just the image they are trying to create, but I personally think they might not be the best place to work for me.”
Another respondent argued similarly, noting that although she admits that large corporations can be great employers, their working approach and culture seem sometimes too challenging and exhausting, so it gets off-putting.

- Lena: “in principle, I am not attracted to such behemoths, it seems to me too difficult, too harsh a working environment. Don’t know. When I was young, I dreamed about Google, but now I don’t want to work there...because it seemed mega cool, everyone was talking about the work in Google, that it is so difficult to get there. And it also seemed you know what, there was some idea that the working day there is different from the usual. People can play table tennis there, work lying on the couch, land then you realize that it’s not all that simple, that they are lying on the couch, probably because they spend day and night at work. and it's not for me”.

The interviews revealed a group of associations related to the untrustworthy, or even intimidating image of large corporations, in particular Amazon. In a sense, the associations that arose among the respondents assigned to this group can be called emotions of fear and distrust. According to the survey respondents, Amazon and other large corporations are perceived as "too big" and “only seem nice and cutting-edge” whereas in real life they do not deserve real trustworthiness. In addition, Amazon is perceived as a company that is difficult to fully trust because its ultimate goal is always profitability and they have opportunities and resources to hide its wrongdoings if they need. Moreover, participants found it difficult to comprehend the inner operations and some called Amazon a “monstrous entity” or “monstrous corporation”. On Amazon's band image, one of the respondents points out:

- Valtteri: “they have shown how much, how there is that dark side...they have shown, that they are not true”.
- Veronica: “Big companies can exploit you and eat you alive and will spit you out”.

While Lena makes a point that she cannot trust anything they say and even assumes that the company may have a nondisclosure policy that simply prevents former employees from sharing the truth.

- Lena: “I wouldn't be surprised if they ban their ex-employees from telling the truth for like 10 years. Like conditionally to disclose such unpleasant details”.
Or Liisa is worried that their appealing corporate culture image might be more ruthless than they try to show it.

Liisa: “they all write, we are friendly and we are open-minded, but how can you know? You don't know the team until you start working”.

Some of the interviewees opened up about their ultimate unwillingness to work there.

- Lena: “ I would not work there myself, because they are too big and, most likely, problematic because they are so big...I would definitely not work for them as a driver. I have not heard how they treat their programmers, but most likely, I just do not know what people do in such large companies. I get the impression that most of the time they don't do anything. In the sense that the purpose of their work is not always obvious”
- Mariia: “well, I don't know, they are too big and I'm not sure that they are doing well. They easily recruit staff, and then fire everyone without regret”.

Needless to say, large corporations like Amazon may lack trust because they are not completely transparent in the supply chain. This can affect both the company brand and the employer brand.

- Claudia: “Again, their products and what they sell is a problem. You don't always know where these products came from, where they were made, whose hands made them, were made by some Asian underpaid child again”.
- Veronica: “At the same time, due to their huge volumes, they turn out to have a very bad effect on small businesses, that is, on the one hand, yes, this is probably a logical challenge to the market, and on the other hand, you cannot resist it giant because you can't operate at a loss, but Amazon can do it... And with companies as huge as Amazon, you never know if the labor of the worker who made what you buy was fairly paid. as you can never be sure, but in fact, it is true for all retailers, especially for fast fashion...”.

Another interviewee revealed a deep level of distrust in big business in general. When asked directly about whether she trusted Amazon's public statements or reports, she replied the following:
- Lena: “Rather no than yes, I would rather trust a small family business of some kind...they can call themselves whatever they want, but how they actually behave is another matter. That is, we do not know what kind of reports they present, or how true they are. I will not say that I have 100% confidence in large corporations. Considering how much money they earn, I don't think they are willing to spend part of their income on being sustainable. Or it will be included in the price simply”.

Furthermore, some interviewees assert that the current state of affairs endows substantial power to large businesses, enabling them to exert influence over the economic and political landscape. In fact, their influence can be so potent that they may wield a level of power equivalent to that of political parties or the government. It is not surprising that individuals may feel apprehensive about such entities, which, as generally believed, tend to prioritize profits above all else.

- Valtteri: “Part of my political opinion is that I am against monopolies and I am against billionaires and I'm against this kind of the oligarchy situation that we have with Elon Musk with Jeff Bezos and all people of this world where they have created these monstrous corporations that have insane influence that does not only now go on to the economical level, but now also on the political. And I believe that is not the way that we should run countries.”

Another interviewee draws a similar conclusion, however, for him, it is most important that large businesses do not violate the law.

- Advik: “Like yeah, it's pretty obvious that big companies have way too much power these days. I mean, they've got these powerful lobbies that can help them push through decisions that are totally in their favor, like paying less taxes...Honestly, it kinda bothers me a little... But, I'm not like scared or anything, because I figure if they started doing anything too sketchy, they'd risk losing their good rep, right? So they kinda have to keep it legit for the most part.”

The chapter puts forth the idea that Amazon, as an employer, is associated with both positive and negative brand associations, and these associations are equally notable and salient.

From one standpoint, Amazon is perceived as an appealing workplace for ambitious and talented employees, who seek engaging, stimulating, and fulfilling job responsibilities, the
opportunity to enhance their competitive skills, and the chance to develop themselves in a competitive job market, thereby increasing their worth as employees. Whereas from a different perspective, Amazon sometimes appears as a controversial business that is overly strict with its employees, values performance over individuals, and sometimes even mistreats its workers in the workplace.

Thus, this analysis infers a conclusion, that two separate employer brands exist within Amazon employer brand structure—a conventional employer brand directed at highly skilled professionals or graduates with highly valuable degrees, and a subdued employer brand, existing among blue-collar workers engaged in manual work and operations. And although both Employer Brands exist in an open information space and none of them is a secret to the other group of employees, the two images exist separately, influencing one another but not blending into one. As a result, Amazon's Employer Brand has two target groups, which perceive the Company differently, depending on their background and life situation. These two target groups, knowing about the advantages or disadvantages of the other, still decide on Amazon as an employer exclusively based on the factors and associations of their group. Moreover, this analysis discovers that Amazon in particular and large corporations, in general, may be perceived as untrustworthy and concealing the truth in their pursuit of profit.

4.2.2 Drivers to Apply for a Job

This chapter lists the most prominent factors that your graduates consider when applying for a new job. This chapter aims to achieve several objectives by examining the drivers and motivations of job applicants during interviews. First, it seeks to align the employer brand associations of Amazon, or how young job seekers perceive the company, with the reasons why the company is considered appealing to recent graduates and job seekers. Second, this chapter tests whether young people's perceptions of working at Amazon match the reality described in the Glassdoor review chapter, thereby assessing the overall effectiveness of Amazon's employer brand.

Naturally, at the initial stage of their career, the participants were striving for professional growth and development, and this was one of the most important factors. Every interviewee would like to find a job they would like but acknowledged that first, they need to learn and earn experience.

- Helmi: “I'm very like career driven actually…I would like to work somewhere abroad…It is important for me that I can develop myself, and grow professionally.”
And not do the same things for many years. Because I don't know. I don't think that's very, very healthy.”

- Claudia: “I am looking for stability, a good salary, and perspectives.”

- Advik: “Of course, I'm looking for a job that pays well and where I can learn from others and excel, but that's not the only thing I am looking for.”

- Veronica: “I will go work for experience, for some kind of social guarantees, I guess.”

- Mariia: “It's good to work in a big company because you can learn a lot, you can grow, you can learn a lot about work. In large companies, everything is usually transparent and growth prospects are clear.”

Young people understand the significance of gaining work experience and pursuing professional growth but often experience insecurity at the start of their careers. They may not feel like desirable employees for many companies, which is why they place a high value on work experience and internships. For example, Claudia and Mariia acknowledge that factors such as company reputation or sustainability aren't a priority for them when job hunting due to their lack of experience.

- Claudia: “I do not really think whether the company is sustainable, not really, because now when I'm looking for a job I don't have so much experience, so I take what I get. But in the future, when I get the choice like really when I have more experience and education, then I will maybe reconsider these things.”

- Mariia: “I have never been in a position to choose exactly which company I want to join, that is, when I had an offer, I could choose, but in fact, I feel I am forced to go where I was offered.”

Therefore, the chance to gain valuable work experience and skills that differentiate them from others and help them launch their careers is the most significant motivator. However, at the beginning of their career paths, financial compensation and job stability rank as the second most important factors. Every respondent that participated in this research admitted, that “money is an issue!” or “good salary, that's what counts!” for them, as well as that they have to get on their feet and figure out how to pay the bills.

Samiha, for example also mentions:

- “I wouldn't actually consider [company] values first. I would consider the money more, to be honest.”
However, as young graduates with big plans for the future, none of my respondents were planning to work for large companies solely for the money. On the contrary, money was the main factor in providing basic needs and the opportunity to live and develop as a person and professional.

For most of the interviewees, it was important to know what kind of tasks they would be facing at work, and that those tasks would be interesting and meaningful. Some mentioned that it was important to make an impact with their jobs. Advik, who follows the principles of Effective Altruism, emphasized that he would like "to excel at enjoyable things" so that he can help others with the job he is doing or by donating a portion of his income for the benefit of others. Overall many mentioned, that they plan to look for a job that matches their interests and what they can enjoy.

- Valtteri: “Yeah, of course, you have to love, love something at heart. And then make it your business, but it does not always work.”
- Lucia: “Ideally, I want the work to be connected exactly with my interests.”
- Samiha: “[it is important] to pursue a real goal.”
- Lena: “[it is important] that it is interesting for me to work in this job and to be paid accordingly.”

Perhaps that's why nearly half of the respondents also expressed their desire to start their own business in the future. When considering job opportunities, the respondents also frequently highlighted the significance of work-life balance, the working environment, and colleague support.

Therefore, it can be inferred that the perception of Amazon's employer brand image remains consistent among current employees and students/young graduates. For individuals in the early stages of their careers, acquiring valuable work experience to enhance their resumes and broaden their future job prospects is a priority. Subsequently, monetary compensation is a crucial factor, alongside the pursuit of fulfilling work that brings enjoyment. Analysis of reviews in the previous chapter demonstrates that Amazon fulfills these criteria by offering a prestigious reputation that bolsters one's resume, competitive compensation, and challenging assignments that facilitate professional growth. Although the employer brand image of Amazon may appear intimidating and the work environment demanding, young graduates and students believe that they can find the essential elements crucial for their early career stages at Amazon: valuable experience, fair compensation, and engaging and challenging.
Interestingly, a significant portion of participants emphasized that they were not specifically seeking employment with a large company. While they acknowledged that they would consider well-known brands as potential future employers, their motivation was not based on brand image or reputation. In fact, during our conversations, many respondents expressed a preference for smaller businesses, startups, or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) over larger corporations. It appears the individuals believe that their desire for closer-knit work environment, greater opportunities for personal growth, and a sense of purpose that they believe can be better fulfilled in smaller or more mission-driven organizations. This suggests that while established brands still hold some appeal, the allure of working for a smaller business or startup with a potentially more innovative and dynamic atmosphere is more compelling to these respondents.

However, it is also apparent that, to a large extent, young graduates do not prioritize the ethical brand image of the company.

4.2.3 Personal Ethics and Values in Job Search

In order to delve deeper into the perception of Amazon's employer brand and the impact of media backlash on it, this chapter aims to investigate how students would feel when applying for a job opening at Amazon, giving an answer to research question 3. This question focuses on understanding the emotions, personal attitudes, and motivation of potential employees who are aware of the company's unethical or unsustainable practices touching on the subject of empathy. It is important to note that this question was raised during interviews following a discussion about Amazon's contradictory internal practices and criticized policies towards operational workers. As a result, participants who were unfamiliar with the Amazon case gained an understanding.

First of all, this part of the study continued the general line of previous findings, which contradict the common perception in contemporary managerial research (e.g., Universum, 2020; LinkedIn, 2022; Forbes, 2022), that Amazon is a highly sought-after employer among young graduates. Interestingly, the participants in this study did not express a strong desire to work for Amazon nor did they consider it their top choice. Even those with a background in computer science and software engineering showed hesitation when discussing the possibility of working at the company. However, they did acknowledge that they would still consider applying to Amazon if there was a suitable job opening available.
Lena: “Probably, if I really needed a job and, if I would not have other options, it would not stop me, but it would not be, (hmm), a company of my 1st choice.”

Advik: “...if they offered me a job that fits what I'm looking for and pays well, I'd totally work there. I'm not applying right now, but if I saw the opportunity, why not, right? It just depends on whether the job is a good fit for me.”

On the contrary, some respondents, like Lucia, consider Amazon as a potentially suitable employer but not desired place to work. They mentioned that they would only consider applying for job openings at Amazon if the conditions offered were above average in the market.

Lucia: “If I was unemployed, then probably yes, if I had a job that is paid a little lower than the salary they offer, then no. I would agree, probably to work there, I don’t know, depending on how much they probably paid. But not for a salary above the average, probably not, but if they pay a lot, then probably, yes.”

Thus, it can be hypothesized that media backlash and controversy have had a detrimental impact on Amazon's employer brand after all. However, it remains to be determined whether this negative effect is primarily attributed to the company's unethical treatment of its blue-collar employees or is more influenced by the overall perception of large corporations as untrustworthy, which has been prevalent in recent years.

Examining respondents' attitudes toward applying or working at Amazon provides insights into the factors that influence their decision-making process. Since this research focuses on self-realization, career development, and personal achievements, it is expected that the drivers of decision-making will align with self-enhancement or openness to change, as proposed by Schwartz (2012), for example. As a result, young graduates tend to prioritize their own interests and the potential benefits they can gain from employment.

The findings from this research support the idea that while young graduates, including those who are particularly concerned about sustainability, equality, and human rights, are aware of and care about these issues, they still make career-related decisions based on personal motivations. According to Schwartz's theory (2012), there may be a conflict between achievement values and values such as benevolence and universalism. Achievement values emphasize personal success, ambition, and career advancement, whereas benevolence values encompass considerations for others' welfare, and universalism values relate to broader
ethical concerns like human rights, equality, and sustainability. Consequently, the primary focus for fresh graduates who prioritize achievement values may not include, for example, the working conditions of warehouse employees, which align with universalism values, when searching for a job. This implies that their main goal is to establish a successful career, potentially overshadowing ethical considerations related to social responsibility during their job search.

Claudia and Helmi confess that if the job would promise great things for them, they would still like to work for a company whose reputation has been damaged by allegations of unethical practices. However, they admit that this would require some moral effort.

- Claudia: “I would, I would [consider working there]. I would still because I need the experience and yeah. I am just a student and I do not have a lot of money and I would like to have a better job and a high-paying job in the future”.
- Helmi: “I think I would. I would apply even knowing (about the bad things), but then in my conscious, I would be like battling against it because you need to think about yourself and what is best for yourself.”

Mariia has a similar opinion on this matter, and is forced to admit that a recent graduate does not always have a choice in the labor market:

- “I never dreamed of working anywhere in any specific companies, so I really don’t care. If I don't see anything as if it's completely blatantly bad, I'm fine with it. People are more interested and more and more concerned about their personal lives. I don't care where to be a lawyer.”

Later in the discussion, Mariia does admit that she would not be able to work for a military organization or a weapons manufacturer because it conflicts with her personal values.

Some interviewees elaborated on the subject of values and pointed out that everybody has their own moral compass and acts according to their personal values.

- Samiha: “It also depends on the person, how they want to perceive their work ethics because it might not be like, you know, they might not even care like what Amazon did. It's their problem, their situation. I don't have to care about work, care about that. I just want my job. I just want to work for Amazon and be happy about it... These kinds of like values might differ from person to person, so depending on their values... The media coverage might affect them or not affect them so.”
Naturally, personal values and individual thinking play a decisive role in people's behavior, including job search strategies. While people who have a deeper understanding of human rights or sustainability or build their identity around these topics may find it impossible to work for a multinational corporation, most average people simply follow accepted social norms.

- Veronica: “When people aren't immersed in sustainability topic, they don't really think, they don't think what's the coolest employer brand or the most sustainable. They go to work for experience, for some kind of social guarantee, I guess.”

Although some respondents who adhere to stricter ethical standards in their personal lives say they cannot imagine working for a company that engages in unethical behavior or business misconduct, they nonetheless understand why people do this so often. For example, Veronica said during an interview that she herself would not go to a large corporation, because working in a large company is contrary to her principles. However, she realizes that some of the other fresh graduates have no choice.

- Veronica: “I would not go to work at Amazon, most likely, not even because they might be somehow unethical. In general, I don’t want to work in a big company, because a big company dehumanizes you, doesn’t consider you a person very often, and it’s hard...probably, students do not think, because students also need to get some kind of experience. Unfortunately, this is not always the case, even if ethics is a factor in your decision-making, you cannot be guided only by this.”

Claudia also supported this idea, saying that she would be more conscious in her choice of employment if she had more experience and, as a result, more options for choice:

- Claudia: “I do not really think whether the company is sustainable, not really, because now when I'm looking for a job I don't have so much experience, so I take what I get...But in the future, when I get the choice like really when I have more experience and education, then I will maybe reconsider these things. So for now it's the job and the experience that I might acquire from it is more important”.

It should be noted that recent graduates often overlook the ethical implications of employer branding, except in the case of brands with severely damaged reputations. These are brands that have faced scandals, negative media coverage, or sustained periods of boycotts. For instance, many respondents expressed strong opposition to working for prominent fast
fashion retailers such as Shein, Zara, or H&M, citing them as prime examples of unethical large-scale business models. While one could argue that there are businesses that are both less ethical and more environmentally harmful, it is clear that fast fashion retailers have faced significant media scrutiny in recent years, with numerous repetitive cases of negative coverage. For instance, Samiha revealed, that although she has heard many accusing things of Amazon, she does not consider it a bad company or a bad employer:

- Samiha: “So Amazon is not really that bad for me, like among the list of the bad ones.”

The analysis may also suggest that the concept of empathy and the ability to put oneself in another person's shoes may be closely related to the phenomenon described in this chapter.

Throughout the interview conversations run a premise, that individuals tend to prioritize their own interests or those of their immediate circles, and it is important to recognize this as a normal tendency rather than criticizing it. For example, Advik, who devotes a significant portion of his life to helping others in ways he can and promotes the ideas of Effective Altruism philosophy, emphasizes that he is not striving to be an ideal person. Instead, he considers himself an ordinary person who sympathizes with and tries to help others. Regarding his possible employment in a company that may not be perfect for all its employees but offers favorable opportunities for skilled and educated workers like him, Advik says the following:

- Advik: “First of all we are all responsible for our close circle and their wellbeing, then we can think of others.”

Other interviewees also raised the issue of how sincerely can people emphasize with others from different circles, job roles, or classes. Thus, Liisa was saying that in her point of view, it is normal when people do not associate themselves with others whose life experience is substantially different.

- Liisa: “You know, in companies where people work in back offices, it feels like they don't really care about what's happening in other divisions. Like with Amazon, there's been a lot of talk about the terrible conditions in their warehouses. It's like a horror show, with workers not being allowed to use the restroom, denied breaks. So, I don't think the folks sitting in the office have negative opinions about the company in general because all these horror stories are not about them.”
Based on the prevailing scientific consensus (e.g., Batson et al., 1981; Wondra & Ellsworth, 2015), empathy towards others necessitates an individual's ability to relate to the experiences of others. In other words, individuals could perceive unpleasant, painful, or dangerous situations involving others as personally threatening, if they can see the possibility of such situations happening to themselves. Therefore, the reasoning of respondents about how people “don't care” and are “concerned about their personal lives”, as Mariia says, could lead to the conclusion that many people do not genuinely associate themselves with blue-collar employees who suffer from unfavorable working conditions. A possible support to this idea could be found in the analysis of Glassdoor reviews, where no office worker expressed concern about the working conditions of non-office workers during a period when media controversy surrounding the issue was prominent. While this observation is understandable, given that employees provide insights based on their own experiences, it also indicates that the poor working conditions within the company did not appear to bother them.

Another participant develops the same idea about how people often put up with social injustices.

- Valtteri: “... you know, it's a class difference thing that for people who are like you and me, [assuming] are highly educated, from, most likely, usually wealthy families who have lived in a very decent environment and have worked jobs in the office on the kind of white collar. They don't associate themselves with the people in the warehouse in the same way that we don't associate ourselves with people who work in cleaning, the people who work in construction, the people who work in service.”

Thus, as if admitting that people often cannot truly put themselves in the place of another when there is a cultural or class difference between us and them. And thus giving a place for the life of two Amazon employer brands at once, for us and for them.

For young graduates to truly be aware of the brands they potentially choose as future employees, the tenets of social responsibility, sustainability, or equity must be an integral part of their identity projects. The logical notable extension of this idea could be a premise that the Consumer Responsibilization theory considered in the theoretical section might be not applicable to the subject of employer-brand and young individuals relationships. Namely, the pressure that exists in the consumption field and that conscious consumers experience when making their consumption choices does not transcend to the employer-brand-young individuals relationships. On the contrary, when young individuals make career choices, they
are often driven by the desire to build a successful career, climb the corporate ladder, and contribute to the economy. Even if they are aware of potential controversies surrounding a brand's practices, they often face the dilemma of compromising their ethical values in favor of decisions that can yield the greatest personal career benefits.
5.0 DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In this chapter, the findings of the thesis are presented and discussed in connection with the previous literature review and the theoretical framework. The research questions posed in the study will be addressed and answered.

The primary research question and its corresponding sub-questions are as follows:

Research Question 1 (R1): How does a brand's negative media image resulting from boycotts, scandals, or unethical conduct impact Amazon's employer brand?
Sub-Question 1 (R2): What ideas and associations do potential employees form about the employer brand if this brand has a controversial media image?
Sub-Question 2 (R3): How do potential employees feel when they apply for a position at a company whose practices have been considered unethical or unsustainable?
Sub-Question 3 (R4): What is the relationship between a company brand and an employer brand, and how do the issues and negative media coverage of one affect the image of the other?

The main conclusions drawn from this study are that negative media coverage, boycotts, and scandals indeed have the potential to influence the Employer Brand (EB), but their impact is not immediate and does not necessarily result in irreparable damage. The Employer Brand is shaped by multiple factors, and public crises do not have an instantaneous effect as the influence on EB can be delayed in time and the effect itself is more muted over time. Furthermore, even in cases where the Employer Brand does experience the negative consequences of media coverage, scandals, or boycotts, other factors and motivations can still contribute to maintaining a positive image for the brand. The Key findings are explained in the following paragraphs in greater detail.

5.1 Key Findings and Theoretical Implications

5.1.1 Moderate Impact of Negative Media Coverage and Negative Consumer-Brand Relationships on the Employer Brand

As suggested in the existing academic and business literature, negative media coverage, scandals, and public relations outbreaks can have a profound impact on a brand. Such events can cause substantial damage across different dimensions of the brand structure, including the Employer Brand, Product Brand, and Corporate Brand, as they are interconnected (Foster et
The main conclusion of this research however suggests that although the adverse influence of public controversy on a brand is undeniable, for Employer Brand it is often not dreadful and at the same time can be controllable.

Answering Research Question 1 (R1), the conducted study suggests that EB image experiences minimal to moderate adverse effects resulting from boycotts, scandals, or the brand's unethical behavior when it comes to non-recurring, fragmented, and non-systematic public outbreaks. However, this study does not establish a definitive threshold at which public crises become too dangerous for the brand and the damage becomes irreparable, nor does it provide a specific number of incidents that would be considered excessive. The study acknowledges that there is a point at which the influence of scandals and boycotts becomes too intensive, particularly when negative situations are too numerous, frequent, or cause real shock to the public.

The conclusion is supported by several observations derived from the conducted research. Firstly, despite every interviewee's familiarity with Amazon's Employer Brand and the controversy surrounding its brand image, it did not impact their personal inclination to apply to Amazon or, in other words, their subjective assessment of the likelihood of applying to the company. The only respondents who expressed a lack of willingness or stated they would only work for Amazon as a last resort were individuals actively engaged in consumer resistance movements or those concerned about human rights issues, for whom working for a large corporation would go against their identities.

The finding supports the argument made by Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) in the context of employer branding. Brands have a remarkable ability to survive even in the midst of the public backlash, using public brand hate to develop and grow, ultimately working to appease public opinion.

5.1.2 Possibility of Complex Fragmented Employer Brand Structure

Additionally, the conclusion from the preceding paragraph is further reinforced by observations obtained from a content analysis conducted using reviews gathered from the Glassdoor website. The analysis revealed that the perception of the Amazon Employer Brand varied significantly among different groups of employees within the company structure. It can be noted that Amazon presented itself as an entirely distinct employer for white-collar employees compared to blue-collar employees.
For white-collar employees, Amazon was viewed as a challenging environment that provided abundant opportunities for growth and development. They experienced an atmosphere characterized by intelligent, supportive, and dedicated teammates. On the other hand, for blue-collar employees, Amazon was perceived as an exploitative and excessively demanding organization. Both groups expressed feelings of fatigue and weariness, but in distinctly different ways and with divergent outcomes. While the experience at Amazon enhanced the market value of talented individuals within the white-collar group, it resulted in mental exhaustion and potential health issues for the blue-collar employees.

At the same time, different problems of one group are not mirrored in the reviews of another group; consequently, scandals involving blue-collar workers do not significantly impact the brand image for white-collar employees, and vice versa. What was the most valuable for this research is that employees belonging to the white-collar group did not raise concerns about the poor working conditions experienced by other groups. In other words, the negative impact on Amazon's employer brand image resulting from the mistreatment of workers in different departments was not a factor in their perception of the company's employer brand image.

Therefore, these findings suggest that within the structure of the Employer Brand of large companies, where diverse and contradictory processes may coexist and working cultures and conditions can vary significantly among different groups of workers, there is room for the formation and development of multiple employer brand images. The conceptual framework presented below summarizes this implication, drawing upon the framework proposed by Alshathry et al. (2017).

According to the introduced framework, it is possible for multiple employer brand images to coexist. These employer brand images can exist independently or be interconnected, while still exerting a mutual influence on one another. However, these employer brand images function as distinct entities, targeting and attracting substantially different groups of employees. Employer brand images are constructed and shaped by the same elements such as employer brand familiarity, employer brand associations, and work experiences. It follows naturally that these elements, when perceived differently by various employee groups, lead to the formation of distinct employer brand entities.

Consequently, the level of employer attraction for potential employees and the degree of employer brand loyalty and retention rates vary among different employee groups who hold different employer brand images of the same company.
In the case of Amazon, there is evidence to suggest that it is perceived and functions as a distinct type of employer for two employee groups. The first group comprises high-skilled workers engaged in business and tech operations, research and development, as well as managerial roles. The second group consists of operational workers, including warehouse workers, drivers, packers, and similar positions. Based on the analysis presented in Chapter 4, two distinct representations of Amazon's employer brand image emerged. The first representation depicts a higher-pressure environment that fosters personal growth akin to the process of creating diamonds. This implies a challenging working culture that pushes employees to their limits, enabling them to quickly develop into highly skilled professionals. However, this representation also acknowledges the potential risk of burnout in the long run. On the other hand, the second representation portrays an exploitative working culture. It suggests that employees face tedious and monotonous tasks that also push them to their limits but lack a greater purpose beyond completing the job.

This thesis also suggests that this conclusion about the possibility of a Complex Fragmented Employer Brand Structure can be extended to other large brands that have similar operational principles or similar internal conflicts as Amazon.
5.1.3 The Ambiguous Employer Brand Image of Large Corporations, including Amazon

In response to Sub-Question 1 (R2), this study presents a unifying perspective on the perception of Amazon and other major corporations among young adults. Drawing upon the Employer Brand Equity study framework proposed by Alshathry et al. (2017) and building on the findings of previous research by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), this thesis extensively examines the Employer Brand Associations related to Amazon's employer brand. By uncovering these associations, the study sheds light on the comprehensive patterns in how young job seekers perceive large prominent brands.

Building upon the findings presented in the previous paragraph (5.1.2), this study unveils that Amazon is often associated with conflicting employer brand (EB) perceptions among young graduates and students. The existence of two employer brands and the negative media coverage and scandals surrounding the employer brand for blue-collar employees contribute to this phenomenon. However, the ambiguity in Amazon's company brand overall also plays a significant role in shaping these contradictory associations.

The research conducted for this thesis has uncovered a dual perception of Amazon's employer brand, which is simultaneously viewed as attractive and disturbing. On one hand, it is seen as a desirable company to work for, a cutting-edge tech giant, and an extremely valuable experience to enhance one's CV. On the other hand, it is perceived as an inhumane, non-transparent, monstrous corporate entity wielding excessive power. On a positive note, Amazon is frequently associated with excitement, appeal, prestige, career advancement, and professional growth, offering interesting working tasks and competitive salaries. However, its negative associations give rise to concerns related to human rights, equal rights, environmentalism, sustainability, distrust, and the overall well-being of society. It is important to point out that this research uncovered profound personal concerns among respondents, which they might not readily disclose to a recruiter. Many respondents expressed apprehension about their ability to perform well in a large company like Amazon and their potential for advancement within such a complex organizational structure. These findings reinforce the notion of the ambivalent nature of Amazon's employer brand image.

The study suggests that with certain modifications and inherent constraints, this image can be extended to many other large corporations within the current economic system. So, large
corporations possess both an intimidating and appealing nature, thereby making their employer brand simultaneously alluring and daunting.

5.1.4. The Influence Dynamics between Corporate Brand, Consumer Brand, and Employer Brand

Continuing with Sub-Question 3 (R4), this study builds upon the premise proposed by Foster et al. (2010), which suggests a mutual influence between the elements of brand structure: Corporate Brand, Consumer Brand, and Employer Brand. While contemporary academic consensus supports the idea of significant interconnectedness between corporate brand, product brand, and employer brand, this research confirms this premise with certain limitations. It suggests that the influence of the Employer Brand on the other two elements is less impactful compared to the influence of the Corporate Brand and Product Brand on the Employer Brand.

People tend to possess more knowledge about a company's product and are often less familiar with the intricacies of the Employer Brand unless they have extensively studied it or have personal experiences shared by someone who worked for the company. Individuals often assume that if a company has a great product and a strong corporate brand, it likely offers interesting jobs and opportunities.

Conversely, the backward influence of the Employer Brand on the Corporate Brand is relatively weaker. Scandals related to poor working conditions or other mishaps involving employees do not remain prominent in people's memories unless they are repetitive and receive significant media coverage. Therefore, Amazon primarily retains its image as a large retailer and a fast-paced tech giant—elements of Amazon product brand image, rather than being solely associated with poor working conditions for its warehouse team. Moreover, even when the Employer Brand does impact the Product Brand, this influence tends to diminish over time. Many individuals have only a vague understanding of Amazon's misconduct, although they are aware that the situation is somehow not right there. At the same time, Amazon and other prominent corporations possess strong and highly influential product or corporate brands, which can directly contribute to the strength of their employer brand.

In summary, scandals initially impact the perception of the Corporate Brand and Consumer, while their influence on the Employer Brand is relatively slower. Scandals related to the Employer Brand have a lesser impact on the Product Brand and the Employer Brand itself.
5.1.5 Inability to Be Selfless: The Dominance of Personal Motives in Job Search

One of the key implications of this thesis is that personal aspirations and motives largely guide the scope of career planning and job search, while values such as universalism or empathy play a lesser role. The answer to Sub-Question 2 (R3) depends on an individual's personal values and identity projects. Employing Schwartz's framework (2012), this research suggests that it is highly likely that young individuals are primarily driven by values such as achievement, power, hedonism, and stimulation in the early stages of their careers. This conclusion is supported by the finding that the majority of respondents do not perceive working for Amazon (or another large corporation) as unethical, despite being aware of controversies surrounding the brand's internal practices. Students and recent graduates are predominantly focused on career advancement, personal achievement, and financial independence, with less emphasis on the well-being of unfamiliar individuals. It can be challenging for young individuals to develop a strong sense of empathy towards the issues faced by employees with whom they do not personally identify. Nevertheless, this takeaway has one constraint. In the case of fast fashion retailers like Zara, Shein, and H&M, their employer brands have been significantly tarnished due to scandals surrounding their practices. As a result, respondents often expressed reluctance to consider working for these companies, despite admitting occasional interactions with the brands as consumers.

Additionally, the research confirms the point stated by Hoffmann et al (2018) pointing out that for individuals to take action the factor of simplicity plays an important role. Therefore, asking young graduates to be ethically conscious regarding the company of their potential career choice might be simply too difficult for them, as it requires largely limiting possible career options and therefore possibly limiting their own career success and development.

Furthermore, the study challenges the applicability of the consumer responsibilization theory (Giesler & Veresiu, 2014) in the employer brand realm, suggesting that it may have limited or restricted relevance. While consumers are increasingly pressured to make ethical consumption choices and consider the consequences of their actions, young job seekers and recent graduates face a different kind of pressure. They are compelled to prioritize success in their careers, rapidly climb the job ladder, and become accomplished professionals who contribute to the economy, particularly in individualistic Western cultures (Hofstede, 2011; Pinillos & Reyes, 2011).
As a result, the ethical pressure faced by consumers conflicts with the pressure to build a successful career, which often involves working for large brands. Young individuals may find themselves torn between their desire for ethical behavior and the allure of working for prestigious and well-established brands. This suggests that the dynamics influencing consumer behavior and employee choices may differ, and the factors that drive ethical decision-making in consumer contexts may not have the same influence when it comes to employer brand choices.

Simultaneously, this study acknowledges that if respondents engage in consumer activism or adhere strongly to the principles of universalism and fairness, they are likely to reject employment opportunities with large corporations whose brands have been associated with unethical conduct.

5.2 Practical Implications

This study proposes several practical implications for marketers specializing in Employer Branding and Human Resource managers.

Firstly, it highlights the ambivalent employer brand image of companies like Amazon and other large corporations, which can be simultaneously alluring and intimidating. Based on this finding, Employer Brand managers and Human Resources managers can adjust their strategies to present the employer brand as enticing yet challenging, rather than daunting. For example, they could focus on developing initiatives that emphasize the humane aspects of the organization. This could involve implementing programs that prioritize employee well-being, work-life balance, transparent ways for professional development, and positive company culture. By showcasing these aspects, organizations can enhance their employer brand image, positioning themselves as desirable workplaces that offer growth opportunities and support for their employees.

Secondly, this study suggests approaching the concept of Employer Brand from the perspective that large companies can have multiple Employer Brand images within their brand structure. These different employer brand images may arise from variations in working conditions, work culture, leadership styles, and other fundamental aspects of the working environment. This premise leads to the understanding that each distinct Employer Brand image may require specific strategies and approaches for its nurturing and development. Recognizing the diversity within the organization's employer brand allows Employer Brand
managers to tailor their efforts accordingly. They can focus on understanding the unique characteristics, values, and expectations associated with each employer brand image and create strategies that align with those specific attributes. Additionally, they can work towards establishing a unified Employer Brand Image that reflects the inherent identity of the company while seeking to eliminate the conflicting images.

Lastly, the findings of this study indicate that Employer Branding is not immediately affected by brand scandals or public relationship crises, although there is still a possibility for potential damage. Moreover, the influence of corporate and product brands on the employer brand image appears to be stronger than the reverse influence of the employer brand on the product brand. This insight provides marketers and human resource managers with an advantage and flexibility in managing public crises and negative media incidents, allowing them the necessary time to address and repair any damage to the employer brand.
6.0 LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This thesis aimed to assess the impact of negative media coverage, brand hate, or consumer boycotts on the employer brand using a qualitative methodology. While this approach provided valuable insights and a deeper understanding of employer brands in large established companies, the research does have certain limitations. The study's scope was constrained, relying on data from only 10 semi-structured interviews supplemented by reviews collected from Glassdoor.com. A more extensive dataset would allow for a more comprehensive and robust research outcome. In addition, the use of a quantitative methodology can provide a more complete picture of the research problem and a better understanding of the degree of influence of various factors that affect the employer brand.

Furthermore, this thesis deliberately focused on gathering data from young adults, students, and recent graduates to capture their perspectives while they are navigating the pressures of starting their careers. However, it is important to acknowledge that results concerning the same topic may differ among different demographic groups. Future research endeavors could explore these variations and compare the perceptions of employer brands among diverse respondent groups.

Considering possibilities for future research, this thesis concluded that an employer brand can potentially have a dual or more complex structure, comprising multiple employer brand images. Investigating the interconnections among these employer brand elements or gaining a deeper understanding of different employer brand perspectives within a single company could be intriguing avenues for future studies.

Beyond that, this thesis revealed but did not sufficiently explore a comprehensive negative attitude of young adults toward the employer brands of fast fashion retailers. These brands have become the target of widespread accusations of irresponsible business practices, exacerbated by increased pressure on consumers to consume responsibly, especially in the fashion industry. A potentially interesting line for future business research would be to conduct a study analyzing strategies for fashion retailers to redeem their employer brand and regain public trust. This research could focus on identifying practical actions and initiatives that can help these companies address the concerns and criticisms associated with their employer brands.
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Appendices

Appendix 1 Interview guide

1. Can you tell me a few words about yourself?
2. Do you have a dream job?
3. What is your dream company? Which company in your opinion has the best employer brand? Why?
4. For which company would you never work?
5. What factors are most important to you when looking for a job? How important is a company's reputation for ethical conduct when you consider potential employers? Are such factors as sustainability, gender equality, etc important for you when you are looking for a job?
6. Can you recall any cases where a large corporation faced public backlash due to alleged business misconduct or unethical practices, such as boycotts or public outrage?
7. What do you know about Amazon?
8. Would you like to work at Amazon one day? Why or why not?
9. Do you think Amazon can be a great employer?
10. Do you think it is hard to get into Amazon?
11. If you think it would be a great company to work for, what makes this company so attractive, and what sets its employer brand apart from others?
12. Have you heard or read about any controversies or scandals about Amazon's business practices in the media? If so, what was your reaction to these stories? Did they influence your perception of Amazon as an employer?
13. If you were considering a job at Amazon and were aware of negative media coverage about the company, would that impact your decision to apply?
14. How do you think negative media coverage affects a company's ability to attract top talent?
15. Have you ever worked for a company that faced negative media coverage or a scandal? If so, how did it impact the company's employer brand and employee morale?
16. In your opinion, what steps can a company take to maintain a strong employer brand?
17. What in your opinion makes large corporations so attractive for the employees despite the monetary factor such as good salaries?
18. To what extent do you think job seekers should consider a company's reputation when looking for a job if it doesn't affect the working conditions of the specific job they want?
19. Have you ever boycotted a brand yourself as a customer? What company or brand was it targeted at?
20. What is a definite reason for you to boycott a brand?
21. Do you have any other thoughts or insights on the relationship between a company's media image and its employer brand?
22. Can a large corporation be sustainable?
## Appendix 2 Generating initial codes for Content Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>White collar: professional, managerial positions</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Group of codes</th>
<th>Axial codes</th>
<th>Selective codes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Great name for the resume</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Pros</td>
<td>Brand Image</td>
<td>High pressure environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An Amazing Place to Work</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Pros</td>
<td>Brand Image</td>
<td>High pressure environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top-tier tech company, with caveats</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>Brand Image</td>
<td>High pressure environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor decisions</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>Brand Image</td>
<td>Exploitative culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive Compensation and Benefits</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Pros</td>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>High pressure environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not great benefits</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>Benefits</td>
<td>Exploitative culture</td>
</tr>
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<td>Great place to learn</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Pros</td>
<td>Growth and learning opportunities</td>
<td>High pressure environment</td>
</tr>
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<td>Unlimited learning opportunities</td>
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<td>Growth and learning opportunities</td>
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<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>Growth and learning opportunities</td>
<td>High pressure environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Great place to learn churn n burn culture</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>Growth and learning opportunities</td>
<td>High pressure environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong lack of career growth</td>
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<td>Cons</td>
<td>Growth and learning opportunities</td>
<td>Exploitative culture</td>
</tr>
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<td>No work life balance</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>Working conditions</td>
<td>Exploitative culture</td>
</tr>
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<td>Exploitative culture</td>
</tr>
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<td>High pressure environment</td>
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<td>Pros</td>
<td>Working Environment and Culture</td>
<td>High pressure environment</td>
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<td>Challenging but rewarding</td>
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<td>High pressure environment</td>
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<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>Working Environment and Culture</td>
<td>High pressure environment</td>
</tr>
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<td>Too political - and too competitive internaty.</td>
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<td>Ambiguous</td>
<td>Working Environment and Culture</td>
<td>High pressure environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Culture is eroding/disappearing.</td>
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<td>Working Environment and Culture</td>
<td>High pressure environment</td>
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<td>Poor leadership and managerial decisions</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Cons</td>
<td>Working Environment and Culture</td>
<td>Exploitative culture</td>
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<td>Your peers will stab you in the back</td>
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<td>Cons</td>
<td>Working Environment and Culture</td>
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<td>Blue-collar: warehouse, delivery, field operations workers</td>
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<td>Axial codes</td>
<td>Selective codes</td>
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