EMPLOYEE ATTRACTION AND RETENTION THROUGH THE LENS OF EMPLOYER BRANDING – A STUDY OF CHINESE EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Employer branding is an effective marketing strategy with the objectives of attracting, motivating and retaining the best employees. The benefits of applying employer branding include attracting more qualified applicants and improving employee selection systems. In the long term, employer branding is helpful for reducing recruitment cost, as well as preventing the loss of intangible knowledge and value.

An in depth study based on interpretive research has been undertaken to investigate the role of employer branding in employee attraction and retention in China. **19** in-depth interviews were carried out with employees in a range of different positions in a number of Chinese companies. Research results firstly identify employer branding's attributes that improve job seekers' intentions to apply for jobs and the attributes that motivate existing employees' job retention. Secondly this study discusses employee attraction and retention within the developed employer branding framework and brings in 'needs theory' from a psychology perspective to explore employees' choices. The 'fit' theory is also used to explain employees' branding behaviour from HR perspective. Thirdly, employees' behaviour is further explained within the Chinese culture system in order to understand why employees' personal situations and social influences would shape their choices.

Contributions of this thesis include advancing the understanding of employer branding by further explaining employees' role in companies' marketing activities. A conceptual framework is built to provide theoretical foundations of employer branding concept, demonstrate how employer branding is related to traditional branding theories and discuss how it can be applied to employee recruitment and retention. Secondly, a broader range of branding attributes that contribute to employee attraction and retention are identified and each attribute is discussed in detail. Thirdly, the existing employer branding research is limited in that it primarily relies on explaining employer branding attractiveness by following the instrumental-symbolic framework within the marketing discipline. This thesis successfully incorporates HR management knowledge to explain job seekers and existing employees' perceptions towards employer brand. This bridges Marketing and HR together, as these two research streams have evolved relatively separately from each other. Therefore, both theoretically and practically, this study contributes to developing interest in the links between marketing and HR theory. Fourthly, this research extends the employer branding study to a non-western setting and provides a theoretical framework to understand the subject in the emerging market - China. Chinese employees' unique perceptions toward employer branding attributes are explored in detail and provide insights for better implementing employer branding within Chinese organisations.

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Declaration

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on 12/10/2012.

I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 82,985 words

Name: Chen Ren

Signature:

Date:

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a broad introduction to the overall thesis. The reasons for the topic selection are discussed followed by a brief introduction to employer branding which helps to set the context of the study. This chapter also outlines the research questions and objectives. Finally, an overview of thesis structure is presented showing how the different chapters link together.

1.1 Introduction to employer branding

1.1.i The challenge of talent shortage and low employee engagement

In the growing knowledge-based economy where skilled employees are in short supply, many large economies, including China, Japan, and the U.S. are currently experiencing a talent shortage. Globally, 35% of employers report they have difficulty in filling jobs due to the lack of available talent, which is the highest talent shortage rate since 2007; furthermore, only 13% of employees are engaged in their jobs, whilst 63% are not engaged and 24% are actively disengaged (ManpowerGroup, 2013). Low levels of engagement among employees can lead to high turnover. Recent research shows that 74% of employees would consider leaving their jobs today (Hedges, 2014) and that 32% of employees are actively looking for new jobs globally (Hall, 2013).

Clearly the talent shortage and low levels of employee engagement are becoming increasingly significant problems globally. The problem of attracting the right people and keeping employees who are attached to the company may have a negative impact on company performance. As a result, attracting and retaining employees is now a key issue in the business arena. For example, articles such as 'Make Sure Your Employees' Emotional Needs Are met' (David, 2014) and 'The Secret to Delighting Customers' (Bhattacharjee et al., 2013) can be found in the Harvard Business Review, whilst 'How Managers Keep Employees From Jumping Ship' (Hedges, 2014) and 'I'm Outta Here! Why 2 Million Americans Quit Every Month' (Hall, 2013) have recently been published in Forbes.

On the other hand, companies who have a reputation for treating their employees well are able to attract more applicants. For example, current young job seekers and new graduates appreciate companies such as Google and Facebook because these companies are famous for treating their staff members as family. Articles such as 'Here's What Happens To Google Employees When They Die' (Casserly, 2012) and 'This is what life is actually like working for Facebook' (Smith, 2013) have attracted much attention.

Therefore, to face the challenges of the talent shortage and high rates of employee turnover, identifying an effective strategy which helps companies build their reputation as 'a good employer' is becoming more and more urgent.

1.1.ii Employer branding

Employer branding emerges from the application of marketing principles to the field of employee recruitment and management (Lievens et al., 2007). The core idea within the employer branding concept is that employees are seen as the company's internal customers (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). It applies branding strategy to internal customers (employees) by branding the internal products (employees' experiences related to the company) to match the functional and emotional values with employee needs (Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Berry & Parasuraman, 1991).

Employer branding emphasises how an organisation-level variable affects employee behaviour and aims to establish the identity of the firm as a unique and desirable place to work, alongside its aim to attract, motivate and retain current and potential employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Similarly, Lloyd (2002) also defines employer branding as the sum of a company's efforts to communicate to prospective and existing staff that it is a desirable place to work (Lloyd, 2002). Lievens (2007) further confirms that employer branding involves promoting internally to existing employees and externally to potential employees, 'a clear view of what makes a firm different and desirable as an employer' (Lievens, 2007, p.51). Therefore, in the context of employer branding, the central concern and the primary target customers include both existing employees, as well as the potential employees companies would like to attract (Wild et al., 2010; Ambler & Barrow, 1996). The products offered to these potential and existing employees include their experiences as job seekers who know the company through job advertising and other social media, and being a member of organisations who serve for the company (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

It is argued that applying employer branding strategy can enhance employee based brand equity and add value to the company (Cardy et al., 2007). Employee equity is defined as the effect of brand knowledge on potential and existing employees of the company (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). It is the total lifetime value of an employee to the company, with the aims of increasing employee retention and loyalty, ultimately profitability (Cardy et al., 2007).

Specifically, employer branding recognises employees as human capital. It is based on longer-run perspectives that focus on attracting and keeping employees who provide the best long-term value for the company. It helps to increase the number of the applicants which provides companies with more choice in the selection stages (Turban & Cable, 2003). Meanwhile the opportunities for recruiting the right employees are greater which increases employee value equity. Employer branding also helps organisations to find their ways to engage their employees more fully. Engaged employees can contribute financially and non-financially to company performance (Gallup, 2013; Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Miles & Mangold, 2007; Heskett et al., 2003, 1994; Ulrich et al., 1991). Finally, retaining engaged employees for longer helps to create retention equity. This can lead to benefits in terms of saving on direct costs through avoiding expensive recruitment, selection and training costs, as well as saving on indirect cost by reducing disruption of performance, decline in morale and loss of strategic opportunities. The other big loss for companies these days happens when highly-performing or long-tenured employees leaving their job, the priceless tacit and intangible job knowledge, processes and procedures, as well as organisational history are difficult, in some cases, impossible to recreate (Chi & Gursory, 2009; Cardy et al. 2007; Gursoy et al., 2007; Hurley & Estelami, 2007; Fishman, 2000; Day, 1994). Therefore, employer branding helps to build employee retention and thus maintain high levels of employee-based equity which is hard for the competitors to imitate (Cardy et al., 2007; Ulrich, 1991).

1.2 Reasons for topic selection

1.2.i Research gaps

In light of the significant benefits for the organisation which can be attributed to employer branding strategy, both scholars and practitioners are eager to identify effective approaches to employer branding for the attraction and retention of talented and skilled personnel. Among existing studies that focus on employer branding implementation, many efforts have been made to understand the factors job seekers perceive as attractive and how to adapt and adjust a company's employer branding strategy accordingly (Lievens, 2007; Berthon et al., 2005).

A distinct and believable image of the employer brand is highlighted as an effective strategy in attracting target groups of job seekers (Wilden et al., 2010; Knox & Freeman, 2006). Brand attributes, including both instrumental and symbolic attributes are presented through the employer brand's distinct and credible image. Research shows that those brand attributes contribute to job seekers' selection intention. For example, Ambler and Barrow (1996) were early proponents of the concept of employer branding in their paper and they explain how employer branding's instrumental (economic) and symbolic (functional and psychological) attributes improve the attractiveness of the employer (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). Lievens (2007), Lievens and Highhouse (2003) and Lievens et al. (2005) also indicate that employer branding's instrumental (such as good salaries, advancement opportunities, job security etc.) and symbolic (organisational culture, working environment etc.) attributes improve organisational identification and attractiveness (Lievens, 2007; Lievens et al., 2005; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Wilden et al. (2010) and Berthon et al. (2005) also conducted a similar study of employer branding and further identified more instrumental and symbolic attributes that build the attractiveness of the employer brand (Wilden et al., 2010; Berthon et al., 2005). Backhaus and Tikkoo (2004) explain this phenomenon by drawing on similarity attraction theory and social identity theory. They indicate that job seekers are encouraged when brand attributes match with their needs. Job seekers' decisions are also encouraged when they feel they are members of certain social groups within the company (Backhaus & Tikkoo, 2004).

When moving to the post-employment stage, employer branding's role in keeping newly-hired employees has also been studied. For example, it is argued that the extent to which the employer branding's attributes are true and employers can successfully deliver the promised benefits in the job market will influence how employees perceive the quality of the company. Employees will be motivated to stay and trust the employer when these attributes and benefits are delivered successfully. On the other hand, a mismatch between the promised benefits and reality can lead to employee dissatisfaction and ultimately high levels of staff turnover. In addition, employers' investments into employer brand building are also perceived as a positive sign, which shows that companies value their employees (Wilden et al., 2010). Other researchers have focused on the role of employer branding in staff retention. For example, Maxwell and Knox (2009) and Backhaus and Tikoo's (2000) studies identify the different employer branding characteristics which motivate employees to stay, such as company successes and organisation culture (Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2000).

It is argued that employer branding research is relatively scarce and still in its early stages; several research gaps have been identified which motivate me to explore the employer branding concept further.

Firstly, the need to identify a broader and more detailed range of employer branding's attributes that enhance job seekers' likelihood to apply for jobs is highlighted (Lievens et al., 2007; Knox & Freeman, 2006). Within the limited existing employer branding literature, it is observed that employer branding attraction has been explained using marketing knowledge and frameworks, such as exclusively following the instrumental-symbolic framework (Lievens et al., 2007). Further exploration of employer branding attractiveness and its effect on job seekers' behaviour are needed.

Additionally, while studies reveal that the extent of employer branding attractiveness varies between individuals, the importance of exploring the factors that influence job seekers' perception of employer branding attractiveness are highlighted. For example, there are calls for research into the ways in which different brand attributes perform in different conditions, the way different individuals react to influential factors and how the sources of the influences can be identified (Wilden et al., 2010; Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

Secondly, limited attention has been paid to employer branding's effect on employee retention when considering that motivating and retaining the hired employees is a further essential characteristic of employer branding (Lievens, 2007; Berthon et al., 2005). Empirical studies to explore the effect of employer branding in the post-recruitment stage are needed (Wilden et al., 2010; Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

Thirdly, employer branding is a multi-disciplinary, cross-functional approach. Employer branding shares a theoretical foundation with product-based branding so that implementing the employer branding strategy initiates from the marketing department. Employer branding is also an approach of managing the company human resources. Therefore combining the brand-centred human resources activities, brand communications and brand leadership behaviour is highlighted as a means to generate employee brand commitment behaviour (Burmann & Zeplin, 2004). However, whereas the fields of marketing and branding have documented extensive empirical work on employer branding, for example, employer branding attractiveness has been explained primarily under the instrumental-symbolic framework within marketing discipline (Lievens et al., 2007), studies which link employer branding with the fields of organisational psychology, human resource management and the employer branding in a single study are notably scarce (Matanda & Ndubisi, 2013). HR literature is still 'almost silent' in exploring employer branding strategy (Martin et al., 2004, p. 77).

1.2.ii Personal reasons

On a personal level, I have long held an interest in the concept of employee attraction and retention in the Chinese sector. As part of my Master's dissertation, I investigated how to build internal branding within Chinese companies from a management perspective. This led to an interest in branding related studies within Chinese sectors. Additionally, coming from a background of both Management (Undergraduate) and Marketing (Postgraduate), the nature of employer branding as a cross-disciplinary study also motivates me to bring in management and marketing knowledge to further explore this interesting and important topic.

This study aims to understand employer branding in the context of Chinese organisations. I think it will benefit from my personal experiences of living and being educated in China. In particular, my working and internship experiences in Chinese companies has helped structure my knowledge about how Chinese employees perceive their employers. The practical contribution of this study will also help Chinese employers to face the fierce challenge of talent shortage and low employee engagement. Additionally, my experiences as an employee in Chinese companies have also helped in the recruitment of suitable potential participants for the primary research.

1.3 Employer branding in China – A brief overview

Despite the fact that Chinese employers are facing the challenge of talent shortages and low employee engagement, employer branding is still an under-explored area within Chinese companies (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). The country is reporting an increasing in talent shortage currently, with 35% of the surveyed employers indicating they are experiencing talent shortage. Moreover, compared with 2012, talents shortage in 2013 has increased by 12%, which put China as one of the 10 countries who are experiencing the biggest changes in talent shortages (ManpowerGroup, 2013). The country is also facing the challenge of low employee engagement with only 6% of the employees fully engaged in their work (lowest in the world), 68% of them are not engaged and 26% are actively disengaged with their companies (Gallup, 2013). It also reveals that on average, only 15% of Chinese employees are very satisfied with their job, 17% of Chinese employees are not satisfied with their current roles (LinkedIn, 2014). Predictably, employees who are not engaged with companies and are dissatisfied with their roles will leave the company once better job offers are available.

Clearly the talent shortage and low levels of employee engagement can impede Chinese companies' development. The competitive drive to hire and keep highly skilled, specialist, value-adding employees is predicted to increase so organisations will have to compete more vigorously in the 'war for talent' (Martin et al., 2003).

Whilst recognising that employer branding can help employers to recruit the right employees and keep them for longer, however, it is also noticed that existing studies of employer branding dominate in the context of Western companies (Knox & Freeman, 2010; Maxwell & Knox, 2010; Wilden et al., 2010; DelVecchio et al., 2007; Berthon et al., 2005; Lievens &

Highhouse, 2003; Lievens et al., 2003). Managers find it difficult to apply existing models of employer branding strategy to their daily management as Chinese employees have certain perceptions towards the employer branding attributes due to the unique social and national environment. For example, comparing to individualism dominated Western culture, Chinese culture is collectivism dominated. Therefore, rather than making their job decisions independently, Chinese people make their job decisions by considering different perspectives, including opinions from parents and friends and their decisions may well be based on the best outcome for all. Additionally, Chinese culture is also characterised as having a high level of power distance with low tolerance for ambiguity, low employee commitment, low interpersonal trust and low tolerance for conflicting ideas and interests which are all different from Western cultural systems (Edwards & Zhang, 2003). The unique value perception also shapes Chinese people's attitudes and behaviour (Adler, 2002; Bond, 1996). For example, Chinese people value harmony and vanity in their social relationships. Also the concept of 'Guanxi' and the Confucianism traditions both influence Chinese people's behaviours. Therefore, research is needed to assess what attracts Chinese job seekers and what motivates them to stay as these factors are likely to differ from those in the west (Jiang & Iles, 2011; Bjorkman & Lu, 1999).

This study aims to investigate employer branding practice in China. Chapter 8 particularly explores Chinese culture and value systems to understand employer branding attraction and retention in detail. It is hoped that the findings of this study will provide further insights to improve the attractiveness of Chinese companies' employer branding.

1.4 Research questions and objectives

1.4.i Research questions

The gaps identified within the existing literature guide the focus of this study. The four research focal points are:

- Employer branding attraction. This research will identify the employer branding attributes that increase the likelihood of job seekers applying for jobs with a particular company. It will then focus on exploring what factors have shaped job seekers' perceptions towards the brand attractiveness.
- Employer branding commitment. Through exploring the application of employer branding in employee retention, the influences which motivate employees to be loyal to the employer brand will be identified. Companies' employer branding strategies can be

adapted accordingly. Moreover, factors that may shape employees' perceptions towards the brand commitment will be explored.

- Cross-disciplinary study. The third research focus is to understand and explain the concept of employer branding and the research findings by integrating literature from both marketing and HR. Theories from both human resources and organisational psychology will be explored to pursue a better understanding of employee brand attraction and commitment behaviour.
- Employer branding in China. Chinese employees are predicted to have their unique perceptions toward employer branding attraction and commitment due to the social culture and value systems. Therefore, the fourth research focus is to explore employer branding implementation in China.

Accordingly, three main research questions are developed with the aim of addressing them in this study:

1. What are the employer branding attributes that improve job seekers' likelihood of applying for the jobs?

2. What motivates hired employees to be loyal to the employer brand and stay for a long period of time?

3. What shapes employees' perceptions of employer brand attraction and retention, in the context of Chinese companies?

1.4.ii Research objectives

To successfully address these three research questions, a number of detailed research objectives are developed. These objectives also ensure that I follow a structured research process, from the initial literature review, research gap identification, research question generation to the methods implication and findings interpretation. These objectives will be reviewed in conclusion chapter (Chapter 9) to ensure they are satisfactorily achieved.

Table 1.1 in the next page outlines the research objectives and the relevant chapters which will contribute to the research objective fulfilment:

Table 1.1: Research objectives

Research Objectives	Relevant Chapters
RO1: Thoroughly reviewing the extant literature in the field of employer branding	Chapter 2
RO2: Identifying research gaps and developing research focuses and questions accordingly	Chapter 3
RO3: Designing suitable methodology to collect and analyse data	Chapter 4&5
RO4: Providing insights into employer branding attraction and retention through interpreting participants' experiences	Chapter 6&8
RO5: Understanding employer branding as a cross-disciplinary strategy and explaining employees behaviours accordingly	Chapter 7
RO6: Exploring employer branding attraction and retention in the context of Chinese organisations	Chapter 8
RO7: Drawing the research findings and developing models to elaborate the research results and provide a holistic view of employer branding	Chapter 9

1.5 Outline of the thesis

This thesis has nine chapters; each chapter is structured and linked to each other as following:

- The first two chapters present the academics' voice of existing employer branding literature:

Chapter 1 is the introduction to the thesis.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the extant literature relating to employer branding. It starts with introducing the role of employees in company marketing activities and the internal marketing concept. Employer branding as an effective internal marketing strategy is introduced in detail. Definitions of employer branding, theoretical foundations of employer branding and the benefits of applying employer branding strategy are presented. A conceptual framework is developed in the end which provides an holistic view of the employer branding concept.

The definition and theoretical foundation of employer branding form the basis of data interpretation in Chapter 6 and 7. Benefits of employer branding highlight the needs of applying such strategy within the company which are further discussed in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 further examines the employer branding literature. The results of employer branding studies are presented and four of the research gaps within the employer branding research are identified. They highlight the need for further exploration of the following areas:

- employer branding's role in employee attraction;
- employer branding's role in employee retention;
- employer branding within the HR paradigm;
- employer branding in the context of China.

Four research focal points are developed accordingly which structure the research questions generated in Chapter 4. Data interpretation in Chapter 6, 7 and 8 is also centred on the four research gaps and therefore aims to answer the research questions accordingly.

➢ Chapters 2 and 3 provide a theoretical foundation for employer branding. The next two chapters reflect the researcher's voice in terms of research methodological choices and experiences:

Chapter 4 centres around methodological issues instead of focusing on the methodological approach employed. It explores the nature of the topic (what) and the philosophical assumptions behind the research (why). Two different world views (logical positivism and interpretivism) are discussed. With a focus on employee experiences, the aims of the research, the nature of the research as well as the role of the researcher are presented. This chapter informs and directs the detailed accounts of the research method, interpretation and analysis which are presented in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 presents the research methods decisions and steps taken. It provides a reflexive account of the research experience. Through interjecting my own voice and experiences, my ideas and understandings about the research design are presented in detail. This chapter is structured to include: the methodological choices and decisions made, the detailed approaches employed and the data analysis method applied.

➢ In Chapters 6, 7 and 8, the empirical results corresponding to the research focal points are presented. Chapter 6 and 7 present discussion of the findings and developed a conceptual model. Chapter 8 goes further and presents a further understanding of research topic with analysing the same dataset:

Chapter 6 presents a general discussion and interpretation of the findings. The data are presented based on participants' own accounts of their experiences. Data are organised in light of how employer branding's attributes influence employees' behaviour in Chapter 2. Employer branding's tangible and intangible attributes that improve job seekers' intention to apply for jobs and employer branding's attributes that motivate employees to commit to the employer brand are both presented. These findings elaborate and develop the framework in the first stage and answer the first and second research questions.

Chapter 7 explains the findings of Chapter 6 in relation to the objectives of this study and the current literature. Chapter 6 shows the way in which employer branding attributes contribute to employees' attraction and retention, and describes this process in detail through the voices of the participants. Chapter 7 brings in the researcher's voice to explain individual participants' employer branding choices within the existing theoretical framework. Participants' employer branding choices are explained firstly within the marketing discipline; secondly this chapter also brings in HR knowledge to further analyse participant's decisions. The model in the second stage aligns the above research results together and presents an holistic model of the employer branding concept. The first and second research questions are further answered.

Whilst the extent of employer branding's attributes can be controlled and tailored according to employees' personal requirement and the affordability of the companies, there are still factors which influence individuals' decisions significantly and are difficult to predict or change. **Chapter 8** goes beyond the previous results and identifies what shapes employees' perceptions of employer branding attraction and retention. The third stage model is built based upon the results. It elaborates the overall research results by presenting the findings in the previous chapters and also adding in the findings of Chapter 8. This model contributes to a fuller picture of the employer branding attraction and retention.

Chapter 9 draws together the conclusions and presents potential research proposals.

Figure 1.1 on the following page outlines the organisation and structure of this thesis (See Figure 1.1: Organisation and Structure of the Thesis).

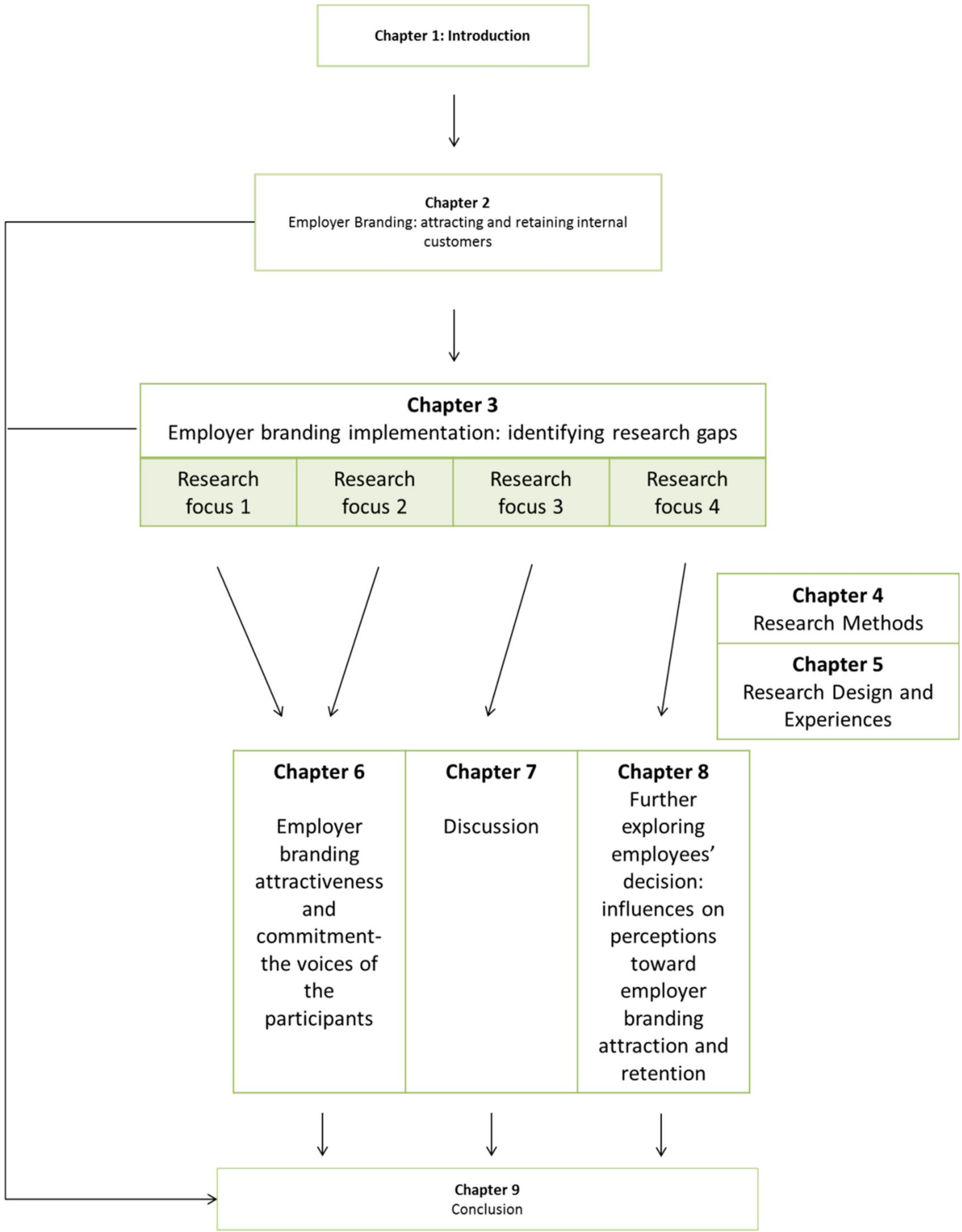

Figure 1.1: Organisation and Structure of the Thesis

CHAPTER 2 EMPLOYER BRANDING: ATTRACTING AND RETAINING INTERNAL CUSTOMERS

This chapter presents an overview of the extant literature relating to employer branding. It starts by introducing the role of employees in company marketing activities and the internal marketing concept. Employer branding as an effective internal marketing strategy is introduced in detail. Definitions of employer branding, the theoretical foundations of employer branding and the benefits of applying employer branding strategy are presented. A conceptual framework is then developed which provides an holistic view of the employer branding concept.

2.1 Employees create competitive advantages for the organisation

> *'The most important component of our brand is the employees. The people have created the magic. The people have created the experience'.*
>
> -Howard Schultz, CEO of Starbucks (Mosley, 2007)

It is generally agreed, both in marketing literature and in practice, that the functional differences between products are playing a less important role in driving competitive advantage. This is due to rapid globalisation and the pace of technological development, hence the time before competitors imitate products is increasingly diminished (Mosley, 2007). The competitive advantages that can be gained from the low cost of raw materials and labour, moving and storing inventory, and new technologies, have been levelled significantly: 'today, competitors can rapidly decipher and deploy the recipe for your product's secret sauce and use it against you' (Dawar, 2013). Mosley (2007) takes the airline industry as an example: 'as EasyJet succeeded in doing in the airline business, it is only a matter of time before competing companies, like Ryan Air, start beating you at your own game' (Mosley, 2007, p.126).

Contemporary competitive advantage, as indicated by Dawar (2013) in his new book, lies in the unique value created when a company interacts with customers in the marketplace. An advantage of this unique value is that 'unlike product-related advantage, this value is cumulative, continuously building over time' (Dawar, 2013). Mosley indicates that customers' preferences are no longer largely derived from technical expertise, rather, the interpersonal quality of trust and commitment between the customers and companies predominantly influence customers' total experiences and preferences (Mosley, 2007).

Many other researchers agree with Mosley's view and observe the important role of employees in creating this competitive advantage. For example, Boxall (1998) explains that advanced technology can only create competitive advantage when talented employees utilise it (Backhaus & Tikko, 2004; Boxall, 1998). Ulrich et al. (1991) identifies employee created strategy advantages as organisational capability. Organisational capability contains unique organisational histories, cultures, characters, patterns of behaviour, management and leadership capabilities. These factors are all rare, valuable, non-substitutable and nearly impossible to replicate (Ulrich et al., 1991). Pfeffer (1994) confirms the importance of employees by claiming that 'as other sources of competitive success have become less important, what remains as a crucial, differentiating factor is the organisation, its employees and how they work' (Pfeffer, 1994). In addition to this, survey results show that within different industries, 'person-to-person experience' is identified as more important in creating value for organisations than any other factor (Mosley, 2007; Julian, 2006; JD Mobile survey; McEwan & Buckingham, 2001). Therefore employees, by interacting with customers through service and products, and delivering the distinctive experiences, play an important role in helping organisations create value and competitive advantage (Mosley, 2007).

2.2 The role of employees in the marketing mix

> *'The idea of the marketing mix is the same idea as when mixing a cake. A baker will alter the proportions of ingredients in a cake depending on the type of cake we wishes to bake'(Goi, 2009, p.2).*

The role of employees in creating competitive advantage also calls attention to broadening the marketing scope. Lings (2004) claims that the modern marketing concept should not be viewed as exclusively an external focus, treating the customer as king (Lings, 2004). Kotler (1972) also indicates that '… marketing is a relevant subject for all organizations in their relations with all their publics, not only customers' (Kotler, 1972).

The evolution of broadening the marketing scope results from the realisation that the traditional marketing paradigm is no longer sufficient in meeting the needs of the contemporary marketer. For example, McCarthy's 4Ps model (1964), which indicates that the marketing mix contains product, price, place and promotion as the instructional guideline for most marketing practises (Duncan & Moriarty, 1998; McCarthy, 1964). Arguably, the 4Ps framework is a product orientated strategy which undermines the role of the interactivity and personalised communication in the marketing mix. As a result, it was recognised that this framework fails to reflect the key idea of a more contemporary marketing philosophy which emphasises interaction and retaining a long relationship with customers rather than 'one-time' trade and immediate sales (Moller, 2006; Goldsmith, 1999; Gummesson, 1997, 1994; Gronroos, 1994).

Over time, scholars have modified the original 4Ps model and added new elements to it. The human element, as one of the most widely accepted new elements, is added to the 4Ps model to complete the marketing mix. Among different human elements, company employees – as the goods and service producer who intermediate the relationship between the companies and the customers in the marketing activities – have been highlighted as the most important human element (Constantinides, 2006; Fryar, 1991; Cowell, 1984). For example, Payne and Ballantyne (1991), and Judd (1987) both suggest the addition of employees in the marketing mix (Payne & Ballantyne, 1991; Judd, 1987). Moreover, Process, People and Physical evidence – the three new 'P' elements that Booms and Bitner (1981) added into the 4Ps model – also explicitly identify the role of employee in the marketing mix (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1995; Booms & Bitner, 1981).

Introducing the employees (as the new 'P' element) into the marketing mix has theoretical foundations. Kotler (1972) indicates that the real problem in the marketing area is 'not outside marketing but inside marketing'; it is about how to '[get] others in his organization to accept his ideas'. Kotler continues that employees are companies' co-marketers who direct the marketing strategy. As such, companies need to 'find, train… assign' and motivate their employees for a better marketing effort (Kotler, 1972). Harris and de Chernatony (2001) also consider employees in the centre of company's marketing activities for their ability to positively or negatively impact the results of a marketing program (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Therefore, in the current marketing mix employee equity comes first in order to create customer based equity so that company staff are the first customers (Ambler, 2001).

Another factor which motivates marketing researchers to pay attention to employees is a keen awareness that employees are helpful for enhancing business effectiveness (Moroko & Uncles 2008). King and Grace (2006) observe that only when all staff members realise that employees contribute to organisation performance by building excellent relations with customers, can a company achieve their marketing objectives (King & Grace, 2006). More specifically, customers actively interact with company employees and this on-going personal contact largely influences the way in which customers view the company (Moroko & Uncles

2008). The outcomes of this interaction (purchasing and re-purchasing decision) will be largely directed by the quality and consistency of the products and the services. Therefore, whether employees can effectively respond to company strategies and their consequent performance will heavily influence customer satisfaction; contributing to sales, profits growing and marketing performances (Mosley, 2007; Gounaris, 2006).

Specifically, the employees' role in marketing activities includes balancing the relationship between organisation and customer, creating value for the company and helping companies to build healthy relationships with the key stakeholders.

2.2.i Employees's role in balancing the relationship between organisation and customer

Kotler (1994) highlights the role of employees in balancing the relationships between organisation and customers through marketing activities. Kotler also indicates that marketing excellence requires support from external, internal, and interactive marketing (Kotler, 1994). External marketing focuses on the relationships between company and customer, while interactive and internal marketing emphasise the employee-customer and organization-employee relationships respectively (Kotler & Keller, 2011). The relationships between external, internal and interactive marketing and how these three markets support marketing excellence are demonstrated in the marketing triangle framework (See Figure 2.1: The Marketing Triangle, Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996). It is argued that a well-rounded marketing triangle ensures effective value transfer between companies and their customers (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1993).

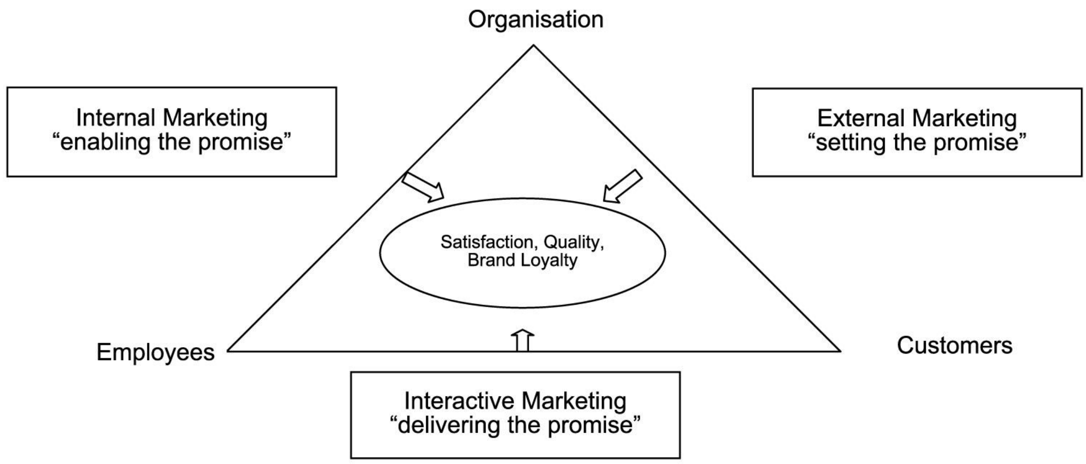

Figure 2.1: The Marketing Triangle

Source: Zeithaml & Bitner, 1996, p.23

Within the marketing triangle concept, the company's relationship with customers in particular, will be strengthened when customers – generally viewed as the ultimate value receivers – are satisfied with the received value in the external market (Varey, 1995; Rafiq & Ahmed, 1993).

Employees help to strengthen the relationship between company and customer and keep the marketing triangle well circled (Varey, 1995). Christopher et al. (1991) explains that employees help companies to formulate created value according to the customers' preferences and bridge the gap between companies and customers by delivering the value (Christopher et al., 1991). Gummesson (2000) expresses a similar idea by emphasising that value creation requires the engagement of every piece of the organisation; if one piece is missing the outcome will be of an unsatisfactory quality. Employees, the coordinating agents who contribute to value creation and transfer, should not be neglected in this value creating process (Gummesson, 2000; Ballantyne et al., 1995).

2.2.ii Value Exchange Theory

The importance of employees in marketing activities is further demonstrated in the value exchange process within an organisation.

Kotler (1972) and Kotler and Levy (1969) emphasise that exchange is an essential part of marketing activity: 'The core concept of marketing is the transaction. A transaction is the exchange of values between two parties' (Kotler, 1972; Kotler & Levy, 1969). Service-Dominant (S-D) Logic studies also emphasise the idea of exchange, service-for-service exchange between different parties, resource integration and the consequent value co-creation. It proposes that essentially, companies, markets, and society are fundamentally concerned with exchange of the applications of competences, such as knowledge and skills for the benefits of a party (Wieland et al., 2012; Gummesson, Lusch & Vargo, 2010; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Value is created when a party interacts with the resources and capabilities provided by other parties. As a result, the overall value of a company is derived as a result of value exchanges between all of its stakeholders invovled in the marketing activities (Lusch & Webster, 2011).

The fundamental basis of exchange in a business is the process of using one's resources to create value with and for the benefit of another party (Wieland et al., 2012). Similar to customers exchanging cash for goods and services, employees exchange their time, energy and values with the benefits provided by the company (Lings, 2004). As a result, organisational value can be created as a consequence of interaction, reciprocity and benefits exchange between the company and its employees. Ballantyne (2003) also explains that developing the relationship between employees and organisations is mainly about exchanging the benefits (value) that are of mutual interest. He further demonstrates the exchange process as: 'if we (do something), will you (do something)?' (Ballantyne, 2003, p.1254).

Payne and Holt's (2001) Relationship Value Management Model also illustrates the interaction between organisations and their employees (See Figure 2.2: A framework for Relationship Value Management). The key idea of the model is that value propositions are crafted by creating mutual value between company and the employees (Payne et al., 2005). Employee recruitment, satisfaction and retention create benefits and reduce costs for the company. However, the effectiveness of the value is largely dependent on the degree of the exchanged benefits from the company, both financial and beyond monetary (Payne & Holt, 2001).

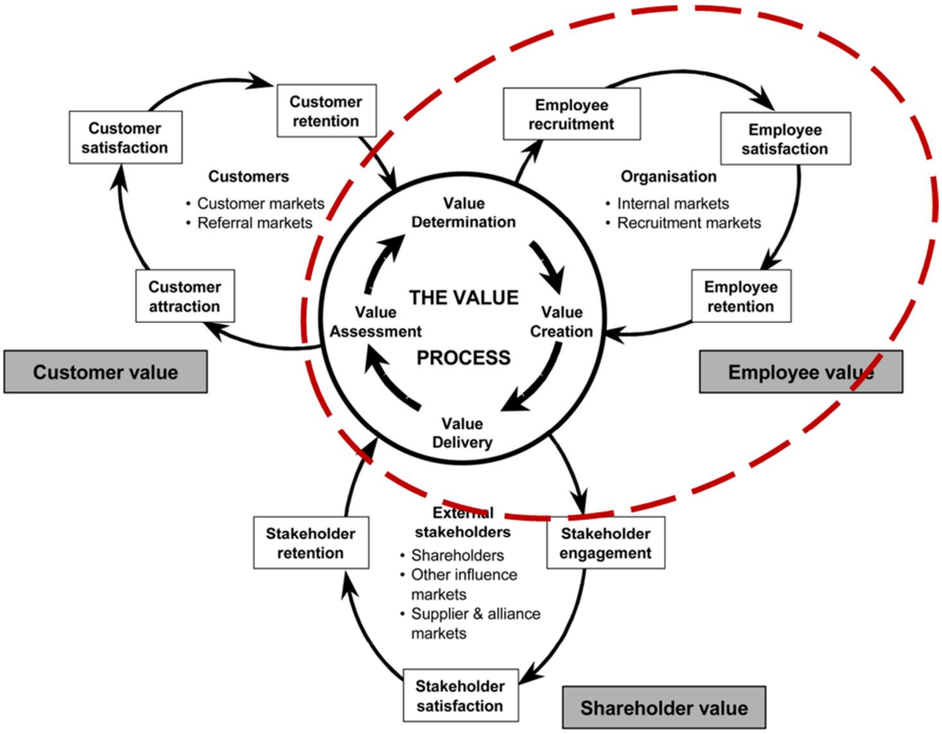

Figure 2.2: A framework for Relationship Value Management

Source: Payne & Holt, 2001, p.173

2.2.iii Employees' role in building relationships with other key stakeholders

The term 'stakeholder' is gaining an increasing popularity in both scholarly and practitioner literature. Stakeholders are groups or individuals who can affect or are affected by the accomplishment of organisational purpose (de Bussy et al., 2003). Additionally, stakeholder's behaviours and views towards the company can be influenced by other stakeholder groups (Simmons, 2009). Ballantyne (2000) confirms that organisations cannot avoid collaborative relations among different stakeholders when marketing is increasingly seen as a disciplinary synthesis for creating and delivering value. Therefore the company's attention needs to be broadened to include multiple stakeholders (Daub & Ergenzinger, 2005; Payne & Holt, 2001).

Organisations are required to understand and manage the relationships with all relevant stakeholders as marketing is arguably grounded in interactions, networks and relationships (Payne et al., 2005; Gummesson, 1999; Gronroos, 1997). The Relationship Marketing concept, for instance, emphasises that companies are operating within a network of exchange relationships. Additionally, building long-term relationships with both external and internal stakeholders allows different groups of stakeholders to seek mutual benefits (Sirgy & Lee, 2008; Ballantyne, 2003).

Christopher et al. (2002) developed the Six-market model to help organisations undertake an holistic view of the key market domains and stakeholders (Payne et al., 2005; Christopher, Payne & Ballantyne, 2002). This model covers all the major market disciplines that the company operates in, including customer market, influence markets, recruitment markets, referral markets, internal markets and supplier/alliance markets. Each market is made up of key participants (stakeholders) as shown in figure 2.3 in the next page (See Figure 2.3: Six-Market Model, Payne et al., 2005). The model represents the relationships between each group. It shows that each group, either working alone or together, can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of other groups and the organisation's marketplace (Payne et al., 2005).

Relationship Marketing highlights the role of employees; the Six-market model also shows that employees are one of the main components in the marketing mix (Simmons, 2009; Payne & Holt, 2001). Relationship marketing divides key stakeholders into external and internal stakeholders. Employees are the key constituencies of the internal stakeholder group and play a key role in building relationships with customers, who are the main contributors to a company's business performance (de Bussy, Ewing & Pitt, 2003). In the six market model, both potential and current employees play an important part in recruitment markets and internal markets. Furthermore, their performances in these two markets may influence the performance of the other four markets and eventually affect business performance. Ultimately, the role of employees in balancing and retaining the relationship with other stakeholders, including customers, has been emphasised in the marketing literature (Ballantyne, 2003; Payne & Holt, 2001).

Figure 2.3: Six-Market Model

Source: Payne et al., 2005, p.860

The traditional marketing paradigm, with its focus exclusively on technological innovation and external stakeholders' satisfaction are increasingly being challenged. Although the marketing orientation under traditional marketing paradigms can improve marketing performance, its capability is limited due to the lack of focus on internal resources. This particularly neglects employees, who play an important role in balancing and retaining the relationship with other stakeholders and further contributing to overall marketing performance. Therefore, the call for research to examine the impact of internal orientations on business performance is increasing (Lings, 2004). It is therefore crucial that corporate marketers adopt a strategy which incorporates both an internal and a traditional, external perspective to ensure the synergy between different employees' actions, which will eventually result in optimising consumers' satisfaction (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

2.3 Adopting a marketing strategy for employees

Following the tendency of broadening the sphere of marketing and realising the vital role employees play in the marketing activities, companies are apprehensive of adopting suitable internal programs that complement the existing external market programs (Lings, 2004). As a result, applying marketing programs internally is necessary and urged (Gounaris, 2006). Internal marketing was a rapidly growing literature through the 1990's which focused on the application of marketing programs internally to employees (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000; George, 1990; Berry, 1981; Gronroos, 1981; Sasser & Arbeit, 1976).

2.3.i Internal Marketing: shifting the marketing strategy to employee management

The internal marketing concept represents a paradigm shift towards applying an employee based marketing strategy, according to Ballantyne (2003). It parallels and matches the existing marketing framework and represents its internal focus on organisation employees (Lings, 2004; Piercy & Morgan, 1991). Compared with marketing approaches that usually apply only in external markets, the internal relationship between employees and the employer is the focus of internal marketing discourse (Lings, 2004). Internal marketing is a philosophy of managing the employees through adopting an active, marketing-like approach and moving the marketing-like activities internally (George, 1990). The purpose of applying an internal marketing strategy is to 'create an internal environment which is flexible and responsive, and nurtures common values and behaviour which reflect organisational goals and its synergy with the market place' (Foreman & Woodruffe, 1993). With such a working environment, internal marketing will further motivate the employees at all levels to better achieve the needs of external customers, thus improving business performance (Gronroos, 1981).

Internal marketing directs attention to employees and emphasises the vital role of employees in improving the marketing performance (Simmons, 2009; Rafiq & Ahmed, 2003). Rafiq and Ahmed (1993) emphasise that effective marketing implementation needs to be done to achieve customer satisfaction, which is recognized as the central role of employees (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1993). Therefore firms should upgrade their capabilities for satisfying the needs of their customers through satisfying the needs of the employees because *'To have satisfied customers, the firm must first have satisfied employees'.* Extending into the marketing concept, George (1977) argues that '*to serve the needs of the market, the firm must first serve the needs of its internal markets*' (George, 1977, p.91). George (1990) confirms the above idea by stating that the effective internal exchange between the company and its employees is the premise of a successful external marketing strategy (George, 1990).

Traditionally, the marketing process involves firstly communicating with the target customers in order to understand their needs and set marketing goals accordingly. Secondly, the overall marketing strategy must be developed to ensure marketing decisions and actions will contribute to the achievement of marketing objectives. The third stage involves designing the tactics and methods to implement the marketing strategy, then utilising control mechanisms to correct and improve any activities which are not efficient (Varey, 1995). Following Kotler's definition of internal marketing's aims as 'successfully hiring, training, and motivating able employees to serve the customer well' (Kotler, 1994), the process of implementing internal marketing strategy also involves steps which are similar to the way in which marketing strategy is implemented in the external market: choosing target customer, identifying the expressed and latent needs of the target customer, developing operating strategy and designing a detailed strategy delivering system (George, 1990). After successfully processing these four steps, an effective internal marketing plan is formulated. Table 2.1 summarises the processes of internal marketing implementation; it also shows that internal marketing implementation parallels with external marketing strategy implementation (See Table 2.1: Marketing strategy in external and internal markets).

Table 2.1: Marketing strategy in external and internal markets

External Marketing	**Marketing strategies**	Internal Marketing
Potential customers in the market	Choosing target customer	Company potential employees
Understanding the needs of the potential customers	Understanding the needs of the target customer	Understanding the needs of the potential employees
Setting operating strategy aims at fulfilling customers' needs	Developing operating strategy	Setting operating strategy aims at fulfilling employees' needs
Designing the detailed strategy to fulfilling customers' needs	Designing the detailed strategy delivering system	Designing the detailed strategy to fulfilling employees' needs

2.3.ii Focusing on the job applicants: Internal marketing in relation to employee recruitment

The process of applying internal marketing indicates that the internal marketing programme is a multifaceted employee management program which includes employee recruitment, training, motivation, communication and retention management. Internal marketing scholars highlight the role of employee recruitment as the pioneering practice and indicate that without recruiting the right people the internal marketing processes in the following stages will be difficult to implement (Tansuhaj, et al., 1987). For example, Kanter (1983) claims internal marketing's aim is to ensure job applicants who are capable and willing to give excellent service and customer-oriented are attracted. Achieving this goal requires effective recruitment practices which can attract the employees with the requisite skills and attitudes (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000; Berry & Parasuraman, 1991; Berry, 1981).

Internal marketing adopts the traditional marketing model by indicating that recruitment is similar to a company marketing its products to customers. Employers must also market their job opportunities to attract job applicants. For example, front-line employees' performance largely influences the customers' buying intention and similarly, internal marketing pays attention to the recruiters' behaviour that will significantly influence the job applicants' decision, including whether the right amount of information is provided in the recruitment process and whether the interview questions are able to help the company to select the right employees. In addition, internal marketing strategy also focuses on the match between the job attributes, employers' characteristics and the employment offering with job applicants' skills, preferences and needs (Maurer et al., 1992).

2.3.iii Moving to the existing employees: Internal marketing views employees as internal customers

> '*In any business there are two types of customers- internal customers and external customers'*.
>
> -Tom Farmer, founder and CEO of Kwik –Fit plc (Piercy, 2002)

Companies who adopt the internal marketing strategy view employees as their internal customers. As Simmons (2009) points out, internal marketing is the paradigm shift which implies an employee-based marketing strategy that recognises employees as internal customers. Internal marketing researchers further emphasise that the core idea of the internal marketing theory is viewing employees as internal customers. For instance, De Bussy (2003) points out that the core concept of internal marketing - realising the important role of employees - requires employees to be treated with respect as internal customer.

The original definition of internal marketing by Berry et al. (1976) (also the first paper that proposed the internal marketing concept), points out that internal marketing involves 'making available internal products (jobs) that satisfy the needs of a vital internal market (employees) while satisfying the objectives of the organization'(Berry et al., 1976, p.23).

Berry and Parasuraman (1991) specify that internal marketing is 'the philosophy of treating employees as customers… and it is the strategy of shaping job-products to fit human needs', more specifically, internal marketing is about '…viewing employees as internal customers, viewing jobs as internal products, and endeavouring to offer internal products that satisfy the needs and wants of these internal customers while addressing the objectives of the organisation' (p.174). A similar view about treating employees as customers can also be found in the early work of Sasser and Arbeit (1976), where they state that when managers view their job offerings as products and their employees as customers, this can encourage employees to 'devote the same care to their jobs as they devote to the purchasers of their services' (p.65). Cardy et al. (2007) argue that viewing employees as internal customers is reasonable from both an ethical standpoint, which emphasizes 'treating others as one would like to be treated', as well as from a social exchange perspective, which claims that employees should not be viewed only as part of the mechanisms of economic exchange (p.145).

2.3.iv Benefits of applying internal marketing strategy

As discussed above, internal marketing shifts marketing activities inwardly and treats company employees as internal customers. A company's degree of marketing orientation influences its business performances by identifying and meeting the stated or hidden needs of the customer, similarly, the company's degree of internal marketing orientation is achieved by creating value to match the their employees' needs. The match between the value and the needs will positively influence the relationships between employees and company, further impact the employees' satisfaction and strengthen the business performances (Gounaris, 2006). In effect, applying internal marketing strategy is beneficial for companies and can enhance their external market performances, improve the value delivery result, encourage collaboration between different departments and reduce cross-disciplinary conflict.

- **Enhancing external market performance**

It is well recognised in the literature that the internal performance of employees largely facilitates the external performance of the company, including customer attraction and retention. Ultimately the financial performance of the company will be enhanced (Lings, 2004).

Some may argue that internal marketing focuses excessively on employees and neglects the essence of any marketing strategy of improving customer satisfaction and organisation business performance (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1993). However, although the original focus is improving employee satisfaction, internal marketing strategy still has its origins in conventional marketing theory and the marketing concept itself (Woodruffe, 1995). As such, the strategic orientation of internal marketing still follows the rules of optimising consumers' satisfaction and maximising the organisation benefits (Cardy et al., 2007; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). In fact, Woodruffe (1995) points out that internal marketing should act as a supporting strategy which provides optimum support and commitment to the success of the external marketing objectives, such as sustained market share growth (Woodruffe, 1995). As Rafiq and Ahmed (2000) summarise, internal marketing is still a customer orientated approach (Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000).

The statement that internal marketing is a customer orientated approach is widely agreed among the internal marketing scholars. For example, Gounaris (2006) claims that internal marketing strategy requires the company to align the internal resources with the company's external market objectives (Gounaris, 2006). A similar argument can also be found in Gronroos' (1981) study in which he points out that '… [the] objective of internal marketing is to get motivated and customer-conscious personnel' (p. 237). Dunne and Barnes (2000) also emphasise that the internal marketing process starts serving the interests of the individual employee and meeting the demands of the organisation to create value. However the created value will ultimately flow to the end of the value chain - the customer in the external market to attain company's market objectives.

- **Enhancing the service-value chain to better deliver value to customers**

The body of knowledge of internal marketing originally focused on the service industry rather than other industries (Gounaris, 2006). Rafiq and Ahmed (2000, 1993) explain that in service industry, most of the employees work in the front-line and have direct contact with customers. Whether the delivered services are of a high quality influences the customers' buying decision significantly. Therefore, initially the concern of internal marketing strategy was to focus on employees in the service industry.

More examples which support the idea that internal marketing should centre in the service marketing can be found in different studies. For example, in Sasser and Arbeit (1976)'s paper of 'Selling Jobs in the Service Sector', they suggest that '*The service firm must now realize that its most critical productive resource is its work force and the key to success is to regard its employees as its most important customer'(p.61).* Clearly, their understanding of internal marketing lies heavily on the role of service employees because *'whatever the competence of the electronic genie in the back room, service employers are all at the* *forefront of their employer's public image' (p.64).* Although later research moves away from the 'service industry' circle, however studies still largely focus on front-line employees or sales personnel who are *'closest to the customers and their perspectives matter in the way the brand is lived on a day to day interaction between the company and the market'* and *'central to… sales and related performance measures such as market share, sales growth and profitability'* (Anisimova & Mavondo, 2010, p.788).

Gronroos (1983) and George (1990) develop the scope of internal marketing by emphasizing that internal marketing should target all employees, not only the ones who are in the front-line and contact customers directly, but also employees whose main duties are production, deliveries, technical service or claims handling in the supporting role, for example. As such, all employees, not just front-line staff are prepared and motivated to act in a service-oriented manner rather than employees in different positions working with separate goals. This, it is argued, helps to ensure that everyone understands and is involved with the business. Matanda and Ndubisi (2013) further indicate that company must consider support staff in their internal marketing strategy implementation, the reason being that customer contact employees can only provide high quality service and products when they are well supported and the products from the production chain are exceptional.

Gronroos (1983) explains that from a value creation and delivery perspective, employees, *'regardless of their organisational position and hierarchical power, influence the value that the company's customers receive'* (Gounaris, 2006, p.435). More specifically, the traditional marketing concept emphasises that in general, organisations create value to attract customers in the market. Hence the organisation is the supplier in the value chain, the customer is the final value receiver and employees help to successfully transfer value to customers (Gounaris, 2006; Varey, 1995). Figure 2.4 summarises this idea and illustrates the value chain within the traditional marketing paradigm.

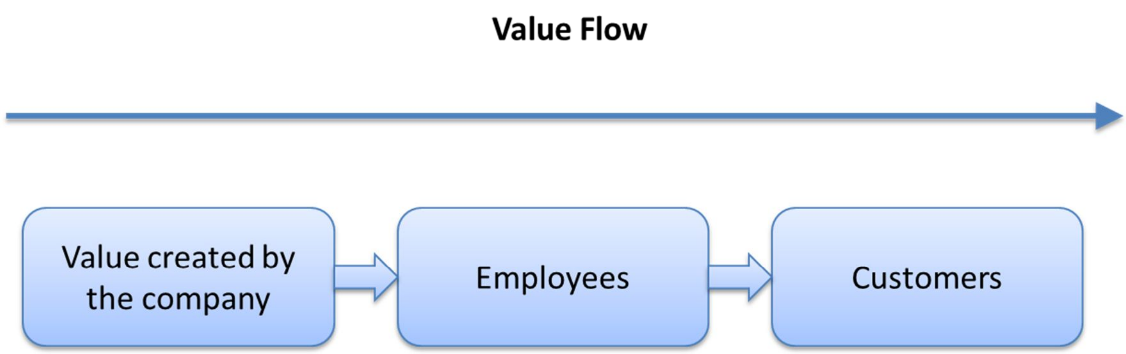

Figure 2.4: Value supplier-customer chain within the traditional marketing paradigm

Adopting the same idea, from an internal marketing perspective, value creation and transfers also exist within the company. However instead of creating the value outwardly, internal marketing emphasises on the value creation circle within the company (Varey, 1995).

The internal value creation circle is grounded in the belief that every employee and department is *'simultaneously being internal customers of, and internal supplier to other employees and departments in the firm'* (Lings, 2004, p.407). In particular, back-office support staffs are internal suppliers. They supply firstly the tangible products, as well as the intangible support that helps the front line service employees to deliver value to the external customer. Therefore, value transfers exist within the organisation from the support staffs to the front line employees. Ciampa (1991) and Gummesson (1987) named the value transfers process which happens inside of the organisation as the internal value chain. Figure 2.5 shows the internal value chain within the internal marketing paradigm.

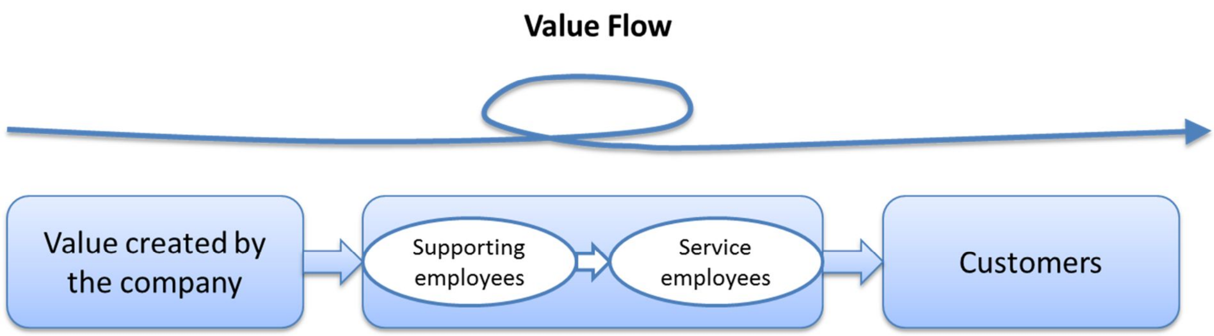

Figure 2.5: Supplier- internal customer chain within the internal marketing paradigm

In summary, the internal marketing concept emphasises the employees' role in value creation. Moreover, within the value creation process, not only the role of front-line employees is highlighted, the role of the back-stage support staff as the internal value supplier is not ignored. It is argued that identification of the internal customers and internal suppliers is beneficial for delivering value to the ultimate value receiver – external customers. Therefore, organisation managers are inspired to identify and satisfy the expectations of both the front-line employees and support staff who act as internal suppliers. As a result, the internal suppliers will be motivated to adjust their behaviour for a better delivery of the required services to the front-line employees. As such, the quality of the value that will be delivered to the final customer is ensured, the value chain is well circled (Lings, 2004).

- **Implementing internal marketing strategy encourages the integration of different functional departments**

The issue of who is responsible for implementing the internal marketing strategy has drawn attention in the literature. For example, Rafiq and Ahmed (1993, 2003) suggest that *'…amongst marketers it is generally assumed, particularly those in services marketing, that because of the word marketing in the phrase "internal marketing" that internal marketing ought to be undertaken by markers'* has limited the potential achievement of internal marketing (p.63). To address the above issue, internal marketing scholars indicate that the idea of applying the internal marketing strategy is not to increase the influence of the marketing function within the organisation. Rather, as the target internal customers are employees from service, manufacturing, finance, HR and the rest of the company departments, different departments work in unison is the aim of the internal marketing paradigm. As such, an effective internal marketing strategy delivery calls for co-ordination between multiple organisational sectors (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1993).

However, acknowledgement of internal marketing is not the sole responsibility of the marketing department; a means of integrating the different functions may also raise the issue of functional conflict. For example, Piercy and Morgan (1991) realise that applying the marketing strategy inwardly to employees involves the functional overlap between marketing, HR and other supporting departments. Therefore, this collaboration between different departments may come into conflict (Ballantyne, 1997). In fact, internal marketing's role as encouraging integration between different departments helps the company to overcome cross-functional conflict as each department will work harmoniously to motivate the employees to deliver a high quality, customer-sensitive service towards achieving its external market objectives. The very nature of the function of avoiding inter-department conflict posits internal marketing as a strategic management method, which meets the call for an holistic management method that sits above the organisational departments (Gounaris, 2006; Rafiq & Ahmed, 1993).

2.3.v Implementing the Internal Marketing Strategy

Early studies, such as that of Kohli and Jaworski (1990) demonstrate the three main implementation steps to help practitioners apply the internal marketing strategy. The three steps include: identifying internal market intelligence, disseminating the intelligence to employees and finally choosing the right internal marketing strategy that responds to the intelligence well. However these three steps fail to provide a clear guideline of internal marketing strategy implementation as the instruction given for each step is too general and vague.

Later studies explain each of the three steps in detail, for example, Lings (2004) explains that the intelligence that needs to be identified in the first stage includes identifying the value to exchange with the employees, understanding the labour market conditions and recognising the employees' needs. Also disseminating the intelligence process in the second stage involves communicating between employees, employees and managers as well as communicating between different departments to build effective internal marketing strategy and inter-organisational relationships. Finally choosing the right approach in the third stage is about designing and conducting the appropriate detailed activities (Lings, 2004). However, criticism has arisen due to unclear definitions and instructions in each stage. Several issues are of concern. For example, what exactly are the value and needs that need to be identified in the first stages? How can we define the communication in the second stage? Is it involved in daily management practices or just purely communication between two parties? Who is responsible for designing and conducting the detailed activities in the company? What do the detailed activities include? Lings (2004) summarises the above queries and explains, *'despite more than 20 years of academic and managerial discourse on the subject, there remains a great deal of confusion as to the exact nature of internal marketing'* (Ling, 2004, p.407; Rafiq & Ahmed, 2000, 1993; Varey, 1995). Specifically, what exactly internal marketing is supposed to do and who is supposed to implement the strategy are both unclear in the existing literature.

Other researchers also express concerns about the lack of an efficient internal marketing implementation strategy. For example, Ballantyne (1997) indicates that most of the current works on internal marketing focus on describing and conceptualising the internal marketing concept and emphasising the benefits when applying the strategy, leaving the strategy operation guidelines under explored. Ahmed and Rafiq (2003) also claim that internal marketing strategy is still an *'unusually slippery concept, easy to visualise and yet exasperatingly difficult to operationalise'* (p.1186). Woodruffe (1995) confirms that although the importance of strategy is widely accepted, the marketing literature still calls for studies of internal marketing implementation tools.

Practically, marketers expect that internal marketing can be applied simply by copying conventional marketing strategy based on the assumption that the internal and external markets behave in a similar fashion and can be treated in an identical manner. However, it is argued that '*although it has been shown that marketing techniques and concepts can be* *applied to the internal marketing area, great care needs to be taken as to how these concepts and techniques are applied in practice'* (Rafiq & Ahmed, 1993, p.170). The reason is that the internal and external markets have their own individual and distinctive characteristics. Copying and pasting conventional marketing techniques will limit the benefits of applying the internal marketing strategy. For example, although Lings (2004) asserts that applying the internal marketing strategy involves managers paying the same attention to the design of jobs as when they design products for (external) customers, criticism has arisen, suggesting that the techniques used for attracting customers are not completely applicable to the employees (Lings, 2004). Woodruffe (1995) concludes this idea by indicating that *'the internal market should be researched and approached as a special and unique entity'* (p.134).

In conclusion, the problem emerging is that extant studies of internal marketing are lacking a response to the highly requested strategy details that will help company managers to implement internal marketing. In other words, company managers are still waiting for the answer to 'we know what internal marketing is, but how do we do it?' Moreover, the fact that internal marketing is still not widely adopted in practice is argued to be the consequence of the above issue. Practically, internal marketing remains a confusing concept, a broad strategy to those companies (Gounaris, 2006). Therefore, the need for developing a clear understanding of how to implement internal marketing strategy is obvious.

2.4 Employer branding: using branding strategy to reinforce employment quality

Internal marketing emphasises that whether a company is able to deliver distinctive and consistent customer experiences is largely dependent on the interpersonal interactions between employees and customers. Kotler (1994) argues that *'successfully hiring, training, and motivating able employees to serve the customer well' (p.22)* will help companies to deliver a high quality service to their customers. Mosley (2007) confirms this idea by pointing out that companies need to ensure they have attracted the right people; their daily management can reinforce the right working environment to retain the employees. However, internal marketing strategies lack a specific guide as to how to attract and retain high quality employees. The need to design an effective method which can be applied to internal marketing strategies is obvious in both academic and management practice (Gounaris, 2006).

To address this issue, marketing researchers move the customer-based branding strategy inwardly and implement it on their employees. Employer branding emerges from the application of marketing principles to the field of employee recruitment and management (Lievens et al., 2007). The idea is inspired by the core concept of internal marketing which emphasises organisations offering internal products which satisfy their internal customer. This eventually addresses the organisation objectives – to satisfy the external customers (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991).

Branding plays a unique and important role in increasing the customer's interest and trust when making purchasing decisions (King & Grace, 2006). Usually companies apply branding strategy to promote their products, and by matching the functional and emotional values of products with the basic and psychosocial needs of consumers, companies retain and attract customers (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Branding strategy can also be implemented for internal customers by branding the internal products to match functional and emotional values with employee needs (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991). Gounaris (2005) argues that this calls for companies to firstly understand employees' expectations, but more specifically to understand what most attracts the employees in the labour market, and how direct competitors handle their employee recruitment. Secondly, after acknowledging the needs of the employees from the labour market, it is important for companies to deliver value to the employees to retain them longer (Gounaris, 2005).

2.4.i Defining the employer branding and the steps to build a strong employer brand

Regarding employees as the internal customers within the company when applying the branding strategy for internal customers, means the employer is seen as a brand with which the employees can build a closer relationship (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). The experiences of employees which relate to the company appear to be the core products. This internal product includes employees' experiences as job seekers in the job market, knowing the company through job advertising and other social media, and being a member of an organisation who serves for the company. Therefore the quality of the internal product is largely shaped by the employer (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

The concept of employer branding adapts the ideas of branding from the marketing area and applies it to the recruitment and human resource management phase to develop value propositions for employees (Martin et al., 2004). While product-based branding facilitates consumer-related marketing goals, employer branding contributes to employee-related marketing objectives (Simmons, 2009). Similarly, brand management is concerned with delivering a consistent and distinctive customer brand experience. Employer branding is developed from the internal marketing concept and it aims at delivering a consistent and distinctive brand experience for their internal customer: job seekers and company employees

(Mosley, 2007). To achieve this objective – when the branding strategy involves a company's effort to differentiate itself with products and services – employer branding focuses on the perceptions of an company 'uniquely in its role as an employer' (Maxwell & Knox, 2009, p.896; Knox & Freeman, 2006). Therefore employer branding emphasises how organisation-level variables affect employee behaviour, and aims to establish the identity of the firm as a unique and desirable place to work, alongside its aim to attract, motivate and retain current and potential employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Similarly, Lloyd (2002) also defines employer branding as the sum of a company's efforts to communicate to existing and prospective staff that it is a desirable place to work (Lloyd, 2002). Lievens (2007) further confirms that employer branding involves promoting internally to existing employees and externally to potential employees, *'a clear view of what makes a firm different and desirable as an employer'* (Lievens, 2007, p.51). Therefore, in the context of employer marketing, the central concern and the primary target customers cover both existing employees, as well as the potential employees companies would like to attract (Wild et al., 2010; Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

Product-based branding theory emphasises that successful branding is consistent with the realities of the products. Successful branding shows the differences of products from competing companies which are attractive to target customers. Maxwell and Knox (2009) argue that successful employer branding also should reflect the realities of the organisation consistently, be different from the competing employers, and be attractive to the target audience (including both potential and current employees) (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). To achieve these objectives, it has been suggested that building employer branding involves four steps (Lievens, 2007; Berthon et al., 2005; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Firstly, employers develop the value proposition which will provide the central message of their brand. This value proposition will present clearly what benefits the companies can offer to create a compelling brand promise for their employees. Secondly, companies market their value proposition outwardly in the labour market to attract potential employees. This second step is also identified as creating 'employer attractiveness', a creation of *'envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organisation'* (Berthon et al., 2005, p.151). Thirdly, employers market the value proposition inwardly, to hired and existing employees by fulfilling the brand promise of the previous stage. The benefits offered by the companies will increase employees' job satisfaction and decrease post-employment dissonance. Satisfied employees tend to contribute more and stay longer. Finally, employer branding will develop a workforce who will commit to their companies' value and goals (Lievens, 2007; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). A healthy employer brand, which can reflect the interests of potential and existing employees, as well as the distinctive identity of the organisation, will be expected to build after these four steps (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). Figure 2.6 summarises the process of building up a strong and healthy employer branding (See Figure 2.6: Building employer branding step by step).

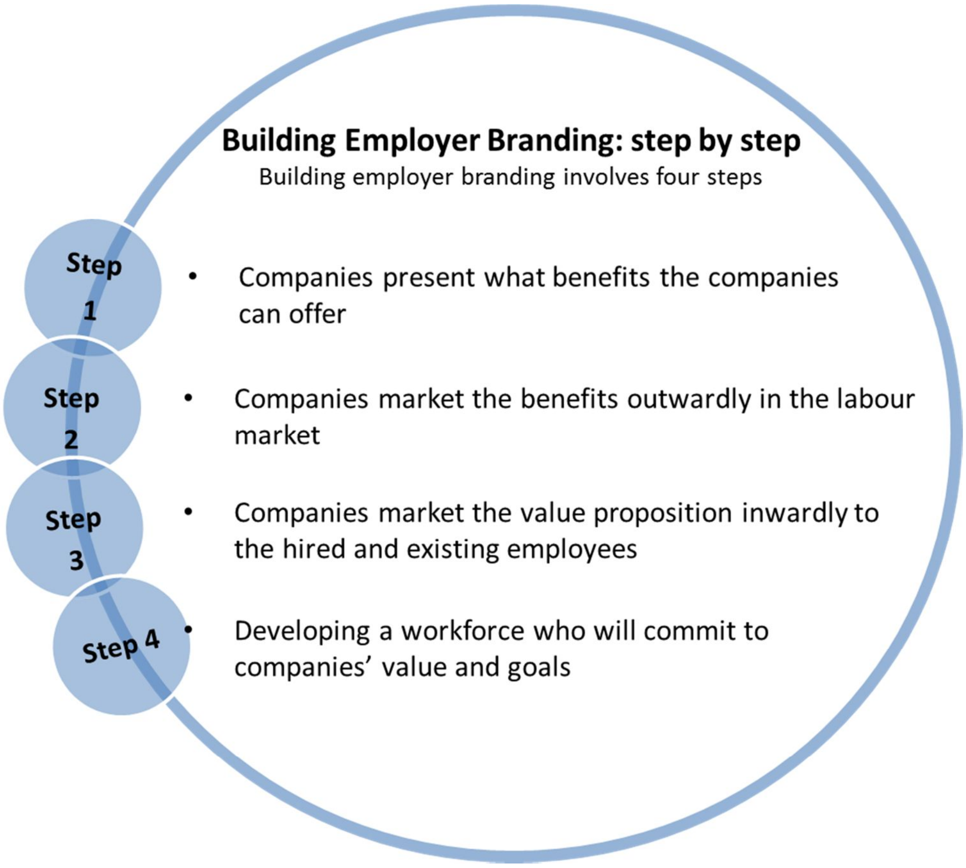

Figure 2.6: Building employer branding step by step

2.4.ii Theoretical foundations of employer branding: customer-based branding knowledge provides a guideline to understand employer branding

- **The importance of reviewing how branding activities influence customer behaviour**

The term 'employer branding' is the application of branding principles to employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Employer branding should focus on keeping the same clarity and coherence as traditional branding strategy, which usually defines and manages the customer brand proposition. It progresses through an application of the same principles as branding strategy. Accordingly, *'traditional marketing techniques, particularly research should be…applicable*' in employer branding (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p.188). Mosley (2007) even identifies employer branding as '*a reinforcing counterpart to the marketing-led role of customer brand management*' (Mosley, 2007, p.130). Wilden et al. (2010) also claims that our knowledge of customer-based branding provides a guideline to help understand how employer branding influences employees' job decisions (Wilden et al., 2010).

Therefore, it is necessary to reviewing how branding activities in the external market influence customers' behaviours in the first place, as the extant knowledge of customer-based branding provides a theoretical foundation for the emerging employer branding concept. The following section reviews the traditional branding knowledge and section 2.4.iii explores the application of such strategy on companies' internal customers-employees.

- **How do branding activities influence customers' behaviour?**

Heskett et al. (2003)'s 'Hierarchy of Customer Behaviors' explores customer's buying behaviour and how they build relationships with companies. It suggests that a company-customer relationship starts with a company offering its customers purchase benefits in order to establish customer satisfaction. This relationship will progress to the loyalty stage in which customers show their interest in repurchasing. Customers in the next stage exhibit a high degree of loyalty by introducing and convincing others to purchase. Over time, customers will even take responsibility and get involved in product or service improvement. This hierarchy of customer behaviors is presented in Figure 2.7 in the next page (See Figure 2.7: Hierarchy of Customer Behaviours, Heskett et al., 2003).

A company's branding strategy influences its customer's behaviour and their relationship with the company. Marketing researchers generally view consumer behaviour based on their basic needs for living and their higher psychosocial needs (Lam et al., 2012). Branding is an effective marketing strategy which helps companies to demonstrate their functional and socio-psychological benefits to meet with customer's needs. According to categorisation concepts in the brand management literature, customers usually perceive the brand as an holistic package of benefits, including the physical functional benefits of the products, as well as the psychological benefits from the branding (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Park et al., 1986; Katz, 1960; Gardner & Levy, 1955). For example, Park et al. (1986) divide brands' attributes into three categories: functional, symbolic and experiential (Park et al., 1986). More recently, Harris and de Chernatony (2001) indicate that brands are multidimensional entities; a cluster of functional and emotional values to offer customers unique experiences. They also further indicate that a brands' success relies largely on how much the firm's functional and emotional values are matched with consumers' performance and psychosocial needs (de Chernatony, 2001; Harris & de Chernatony, 2001).

Figure 2.7: Hierarchy of Customer Behaviours

Source: Heskett et al., 2003

Specifically, the brand's product-related functional attributes describe the products' *'objective, physical, and tangible attributes that a product either has or does not have'* (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003, p.77). These functional attributes tend to fulfil a customer's physical needs through using the products. The non-product-related emotional attributes, also named as psychological and symbolic attributes, describe the products' *'subjective and intangible attributes that accrue from how people perceive a product and make inferences about it rather than what they think a product does or has'* (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003, p.79; Park et al., 1986). These symbolic attributes can fulfil a customer's social approval and personal psychological needs (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Marketing researchers point out that these two attributes can influence customers' buying behaviour. Specifically, establishing an attractive brand image which successfully shows the benefit offer by the company is an initial step to attract customers. According to Kennedy (1977), '*[an] image is a subjective impression in a person's mind, it is the sum total of* *knowledge, feelings and impressions about the activity, attitude or service of a company, a brand or a product*' (Kennedy, 1977, p.130). Brand image has been conceptualised based on its different attributes, including its functional and symbolic attributes. In the early stages of the discussion of the brand images, Gardner and Levy (1955), Keller (1993) and Padgett and Allen (1997) all decompose brand image into the product-related functional attributes and non-product-related symbolic attributes (Padgett & Allen, 1997; Keller, 1993; Gardner & Levy, 1955). In the recent study, researchers indicate that customers associate both functions and symbolic meaning with a brand (Lam et al., 2012; Van Hoye & Saks, 2011; Lievens, 2007, Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Marketing literature also indicates that product brand equity can be strengthened when the brand image is perceived as healthy and positive; especially when the symbolic meanings emanating from the brand image resonates with the customers' self-identity (Keller, 1998). Furthermore, this affinity between the customers and the brand image will help to enhance the intensity of the psychological bond between the customer and the brand. The psychological bond can then be transferred into customer's buying and re-buying decisions. Thus strong customer loyalty will be built. Customers may even exhibit a high degree of loyalty by introducing the products to others and convincing them to purchase (Kim et at., 2010).

Figure 2.8 in the next page demonstrates how branding strategies influence customers' behaviours. The left side of the framework shows customers' buying behaviour and how they build relationships with companies. The right side of the framework explains that a company's branding strategy influences its customers' behaviour and their relationship with the company.

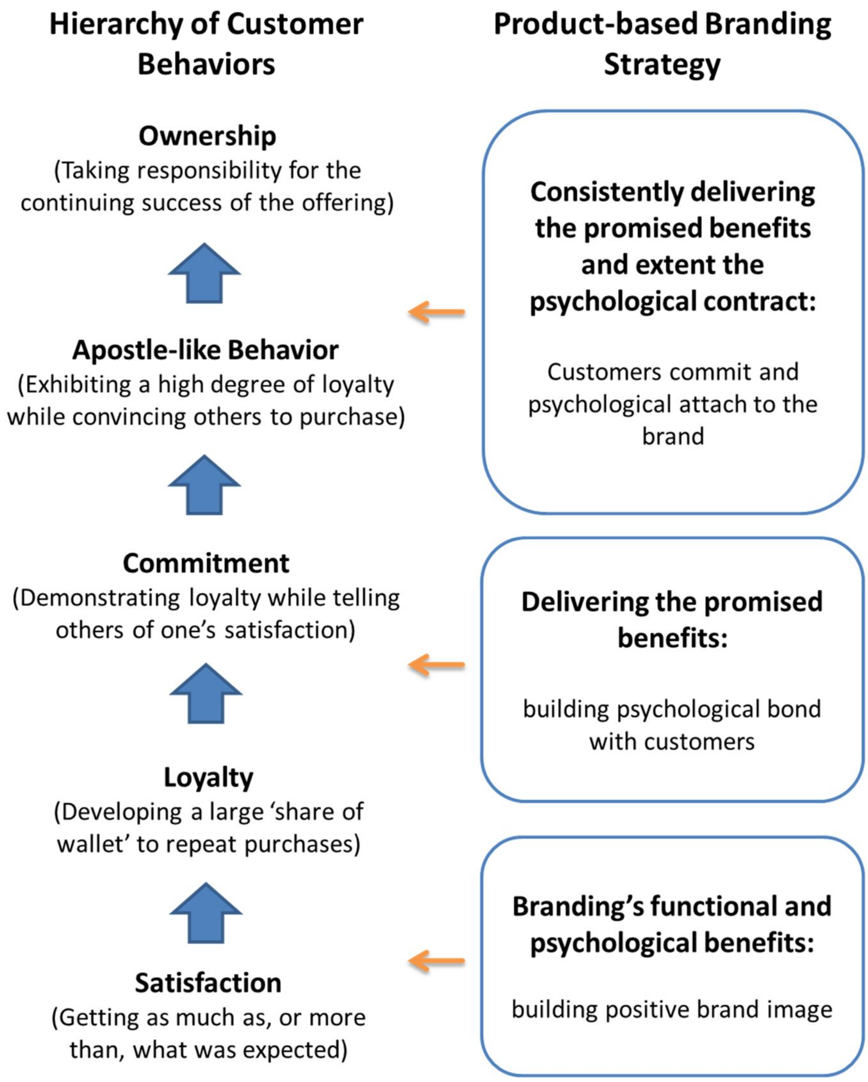

Figure 2.8: An interpretation of how company's branding strategy influences customers' behaviours

2.4.iii Employer branding as a reinforcing counterpart to traditional product-based branding

Product-based branding offers benefits and aims to match those benefits with customers' needs. Employer branding shares the similar goal of providing benefits to attract job seekers for applying for jobs, and retain newly recruited and existing employees (Lievens et al., 2007; Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

Usually, an individual's evaluation of employer branding is influenced by their own expectations, perceptions and experiences (Simmons, 2009; Lievens et al., 2007). To understand how the employer branding attributes meet with individual employees' requirements and expectations, as people's choices are driven by the demand of satisfying their unsatisfied needs, it is important to identify the employees' needs in the first place (Haslam et al., 2000).

According to the 'needs theory', individuals' behaviour is motivated by the drive to satisfy unmet needs. People's needs are differentiated in a hierarchy ranging from lower-order needs (which largely comprise basic needs for living such as shelter), to higher-order needs, which are grounded in psychological and social needs (such as esteem) (Ramlall, 2004; Haslam et al. 2000; Alderfer, 1969).

Within the broad array of theories of people's needs, perhaps the best known is Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (See Figure 2.9: An interpretation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs). In Maslow's theory, human's needs are hierarchically arranged from basic physiological needs to higher sets of needs (Maslow, 1987).

Maslow (1987) understands basic physiological needs as the most fundamental among all the other needs. Physiological needs are individuals' requirements of existence, such as food, warmth, air and sleep. He argues that people's physiological needs are required to be satisfied first and other higher needs would not be motivationally relevant if the lower needs are not satisfied in the first place. Maslow gives the example that when people are *'missing everything in life in an extreme fashion, it is most likely that the major motivation would be the physiological needs rather than any others'* (Maslow, 1987, p.16).

The needs of safety emerge when the physiological needs are well satisfied. Safety needs include the needs for security, stability, dependency, protection, freedom and so on. When both physiological and safety needs are gratified, people's needs of belongingness and love emerge. The fourth level concerns esteem needs which Maslow subdivides into two groups: firstly the needs for strength, achievement, adequacy, confidence in the face of the world, independence and freedom; secondly, the needs for reputation, prestige, recognition, attention, importance or appreciation (Maslow, 1987). When the needs of esteem are gratified, people tend to feel self-confidence, worth, strength, capability and adequacy-feelings of being useful and necessary in the world. The highest level of needs is self-actulisation whose satisfaction would result in the realisation of one's full potential.

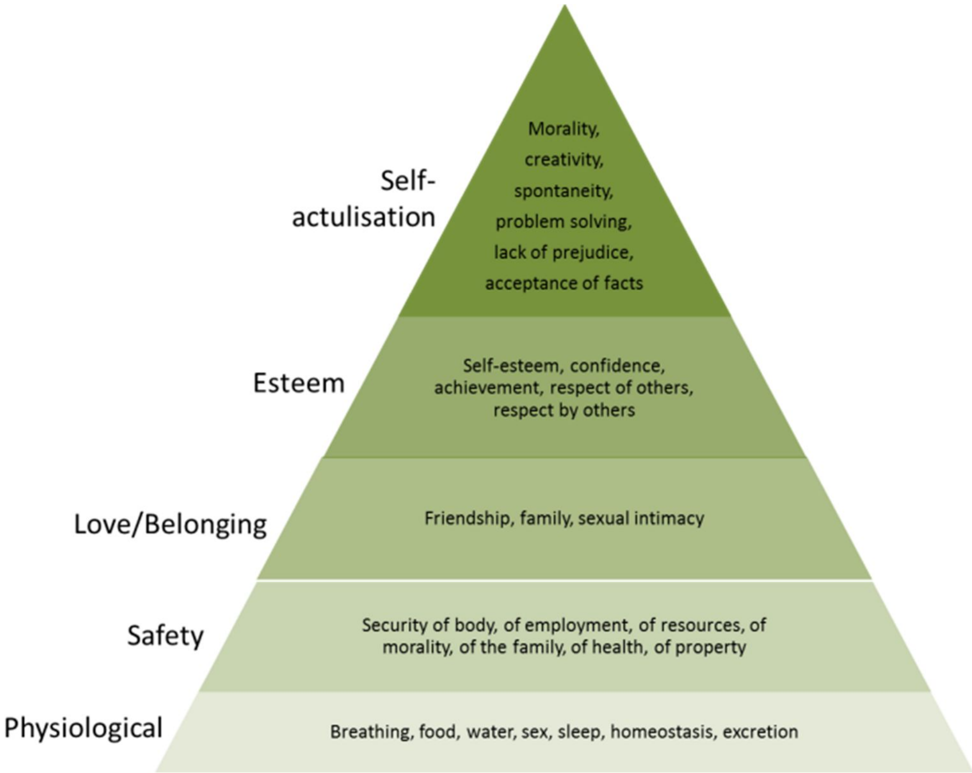

Figure 2.9: An interpretation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Alderfer (1972, 1969) also points out that a person's needs include the needs for existence, relatedness and growth. Existence needs refer to material and physiological desires. Relatedness needs are the higher level needs which involve relationships with others and the growth needs occur when people make efforts to develop additional capacities (Alderfer, 1972, 1969). Similarly, McGregor's (1960) theory agrees that people' motivation is driven by their basic needs and underpinned by their drive to better themselves. Clearly McGregor's theory also relies heavily on the view that people's needs are arranged in a hierarchical order (Haslam et al., 2000; Alderfer, 1969).

Applying the 'needs theory' in management practice, Herzberg (1974) proposes the 'motivation-hygiene' framework to understand employees' motivation in work and its effects on their job satisfaction. He holds the idea that humans tend to continually strive for psychological growth after fulfilling their basic needs. The 'hygiene' factors or 'maintenance' factors in the framework refer to the factors that help employees to fulfill basic needs and avoid physical pain. The factors related to people's psychological needs are the 'motivation' factors. Herzberg proposes that employees' psychological growth also appears in a hierarchical order in which each step is a higher development of the previous one (See Figure 2.10: An interpretation of employees' psychological growth) (Herzberg et al., 2008; Pugh & Hickson, 2007; Herzberg, 1974).

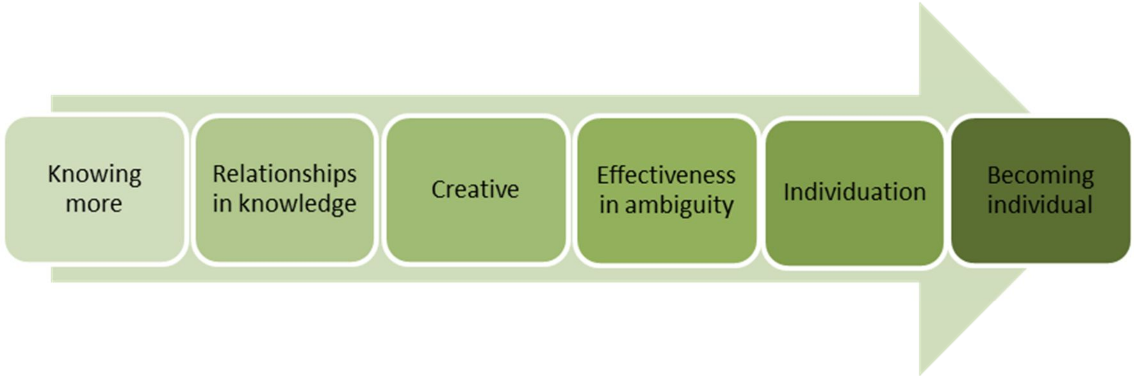

Figure 2.10: An interpretation of employees' psychological growth

Source: Herzberg et al., 2008; Pugh & Hickson, 2007; Herzberg, 1974

In job market, job seekers have expectations of employers before they look for jobs. They also compare their hierarchical needs with the benefits offered by the employer. After these job applicants are successfully recruited, they will continually evaluate the company, influenced by their working experiences in the company as employees. The relationships between job seekers with prospective employers and between employees with employers are depend on in which level their needs can be satisfied and whether or not the promised benefits can be delivered successfully and continuously (Gounaris, 2006; Hoeffler & Keller, 2002). The following sections will explain how employer branding attributes, as the provided benefits, match with job seekers and employees' different needs.

- **Offering benefits: building positive employer brand image to attract potential employees**

While corporate brand image is associated with the holistic perception of the company across wider audiences, employer brand image is 'in the eye of the [employees]'. It is the image associated with an organisation uniquely in its role as an employer (Knox & Freeman, 2006).

Companies show their desire for talented employees by transmitting information in the job market (Miles & Mangold, 2007). Employer branding's functional and symbolic characteristics structure the positive information conveyed in the job market. Early impressions of an employer brand image, generated from both functional and psychological benefits offered by the employer branding, form the basis of job seekers' perceptions towards what life will be in the company. The brand image building process includes companies offering tangible job benefits, or instrumental benefits such as salary, position and company location. Burmann and Zeplin (2005) suggest that in this stage, job seekers' preferences are largely shaped by their wish of gaining specific rewards or avoiding penalties to fulfil their instrumental needs. They choose to work because they have to (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005).

Moreover, branding literature also emphasises the significance of the symbolic function within brands. A brand's strength relies more on the power of its symbolic attributes than its instrumental functions. Accordingly, Backhause and Tikko (2004) indicate that using the symbolic meanings to attract prospective employees is helpful in enhancing the power of employer branding in the job market. Employer branding offers intangible job benefits, or symbolic benefits which cannot be observed directly, such as job promotion opportunities, a friendly working environment and an organisational culture. Symbolic benefits can be explained as employees' perceptions about company's prestige, and the social identity job seekers believe they would gain or enjoy if working for the company. For example, if the job seeker feels proud to work for a company with recognised brands, the symbolic benefit is that job seekers will feel their own social identity has been enhanced.

Table 2.2 illustrates the relationship between product-based branding and employer branding within a branding strategy that delivers functional and psychological benefits to customers and employees (See Table 2.2: An interpretation of the role of branding with customers and employees).

Table 2.2: An interpretation of the role of branding with customers and employees

Product-based branding	**Brand Benefits**	Employer Branding
Tangible benefits that fill customer's physical needs when they using product or service	Functional	Tangible instrumental benefits that fill employee's physical needs
Intangible benefits that fulfil customer's social approval and personal psychology needs	Psychological	Intangible symbolic benefits that fill employee's psychological needs

Employer brand image impacts on potential recruits when it comes to selecting which jobs to pursue (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). In fact, Gatewood et al. (1993) find that *'employer brand image is a particularly significant predictor of early decisions made by new recruits* *about their employers'* (Knox & Freeman, 2006, p.698; Gatewood et al., 1993). Specifically, if the brand image is considered as insufficient, inconsistent, or incorrect, job seekers may perceive the company as unattractive, even risky to join. Consequently, job seekers may move the companies without a positive brand image from their list of potential employers and seek an alternative (Wilden et al., 2010). However, a positive brand image inspires job seekers to consider the company as an attractive prospective employer. Especially when the brand image resonates with the job seekers' perception towards their self-identity, the possibility that the job seeker will choose the company is high. Furthermore, resonance with the brand image can be seen, it is argued, as a starting point to develop and enhance the intensity of the relationship between the job seeker and company in the later stages (Wilden et al., 2010).

- **Delivering the promise: building psychological bonds with employees**

Moroko and Uncles (2008) emphasise that among the varied definitions of branding, the notion of the brand as 'promise' is well established. To build a positive relationship, the company must successfully and consistently deliver the promised benefits to the customers. Similarly, once hired, employers start to develop and enhance the intensity of the relationship with the employee depending upon on the delivery of the promised benefits (Gounaris, 2006; Hoeffler & Keller, 2002). As Moroko and Uncles summarise, successful employer branding is seen as a process of consistently delivering promised benefits (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Ambler and Barrow (1996) also point out that the degree of value created from employer branding depends on how many and what kind of benefits are promised by the company, and, more importantly, how many of those promises can be successfully delivered to the hired employees.

A psychological contract is the 'subjective beliefs regarding an exchange agreement' between individual employees and their employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p.507). According to this, when the promised benefits, such as agreed salary, are perceived to be true, an individual employee's subjective beliefs toward the company are that they consider the company as trustworthy. In exchange, employees will start to build a psychological contract with the company. The extent of an employee's perceptions of this psychological contract, it is argued, influence their motivation, trust, performance, commitment and satisfaction. If a job seeker was told previously by the recruiter that promotion is exclusively linked to their level of performance, her/his psychological contract can be built if she/he perceived this to be true after observing the company's promotion practices, or after being promoted (Mangold & Miles, 2007). The psychological contract can be upheld if the promises can delivered consistently for a long period of time. A long and stable psychological relationship with the company will positively impact employees' job retention decisions. Employees tend to stay longer and will be loyal to such companies (Wilden et al., 2010).

However, an inconsistency in promise delivery, or the mismatch between expectations and reality, will undermine the relationship and result in psychological contract violations. Violations of the psychological contract are felt when employees believe that the company has reneged on its obligations. Such violations are shown to correlate to the negative impact on employees' organisational citizenship behaviour, motivation, trust, commitment and satisfaction, resulting in employees pursuing their own agendas instead of striving for the good of the company. Especially when company appears able but unwilling to fulfil the promised benefits, employees are reported to eventually leave the company when they find a better employer who promises to fulfil their needs (Wilden et al., 2010; Mangold & Miles, 2007; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Therefore, as indicated by the Head of Group Marketing of the international financial services provider Allianz Group, 'you have to deliver what you promise' (Burmann & Zeplin, 2004, p. 279). It is important for companies to offer tangible and intangible benefits to attract employees, but it is more vital that they deliver these benefits consistently to extend their relationships with hired employees and keep these employees for a longer time.

Burmann and Zeplin (2005) also explain the psychological contract from the perspective of value matching. They indicate that employees' identification with the company usually occurs after a period of observation. During this period of time, employee perceptions of the company are partly judged by the values represented by the company (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). For example, an employee whose philosophy is 'work hard for what you want in life' may appreciate companies who value a similar ideal. Companies who emphasise innovation will be accepted by employees who prefer working in an environment which promotes innovation. Therefore, an employee's decisions to stay or leave will be influenced by the level of accordance between their own values and the values represented by the company. When the perceived values held between employee and employer are matched with one another, employees will feel a sense of 'belonging' and will be proud to stay within the company. This congruence between an employee's self-value-definition and the company's definition aligns the interests and behaviours of both parties. As a result, employees would be motivated to engage with the company as exertion on behalf of the company is the exertion on behalf of themselves (Dutton et al., 1994).

- **Brand Commitment and psychological attachment**

Consistently delivering promised benefits and extending the psychological contract will encourage employees to commit to the employer brand. Brand commitment is the extending of employees' psychological contract to the brand (Burmann & Zeplin, 2004).

Employer brand commitment enhances the employees' retention decision. Customers purchase the same product even the product is not necessarily of superior quality if they are committed to the brand. Similarly, employees who are committed to brands will not leave the company even when the working situation allows them to consider other employers (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

The impact of employer brand commitment also includes encouraging employees to link their personal development with companies' future. More specifically, brand commitment involves 'an understanding of and identification with the values and strategies of an organization' (Heskett et al., 2003). Burmann and Zeplin (2005) observe that when employees' values are in congruence with companies' values, their identification with the company is strong. Employees are likely to focus on tasks that benefit the entire company rather than on only self-interested tasks (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Dutton, 1994).

Considering the welfare of the company is labelled as employees' citizenship behaviour. Employee's citizenship behaviour includes tasks they perform beyond the role requirements which are not contractually guaranteed (Dutton, 1994). Therefore the other benefit of employer brand commitment is the willingness of employees to exert extra effort to help company achieve their brand goals. This is because employees who are psychologically attached to the company will act out of cooperation and altruism and offer spontaneous unrewarded help. O'Reilly and Chatman (1986)'s research indicates that commitment related behaviour includes high motivation for extending effort beyond the job requirements, out of consideration for the company's welfare. Evidence from their own research suggests that employees' commitment could relate to voluntary participation and contributions beyond the basic job requirements. As such, employees' intention to leave can be reduced.

Figure 2.11 presents a conceptual framework which shows how the characteristics of branding influence customer and employees' behaviour. The left side of the framework summarises how branding strategy influences customers' behaviour in external marketing (explained in section 2.4.ii). The right side of the framework summarises the discussion of section 2.4.iii and shows how employees react to the same branding strategies. It is found that employees' branding behaviours parallel external customers' branding behaviours. For example, in the first stage, customers make their purchase decisions when they are attracted by branding's functional and psychological attributes, similarly, job seekers are also attracted by branding attributes such that they apply for jobs. In the later stages, branding characteristics influence both customers and employees' brand related behaviours accordingly. Therefore, this framework emphasises again that employer branding is a reinforcing counterpart to the traditional product-based branding (See Figure 2.11: How the characteristics of branding influences customer and employees' behaviour).

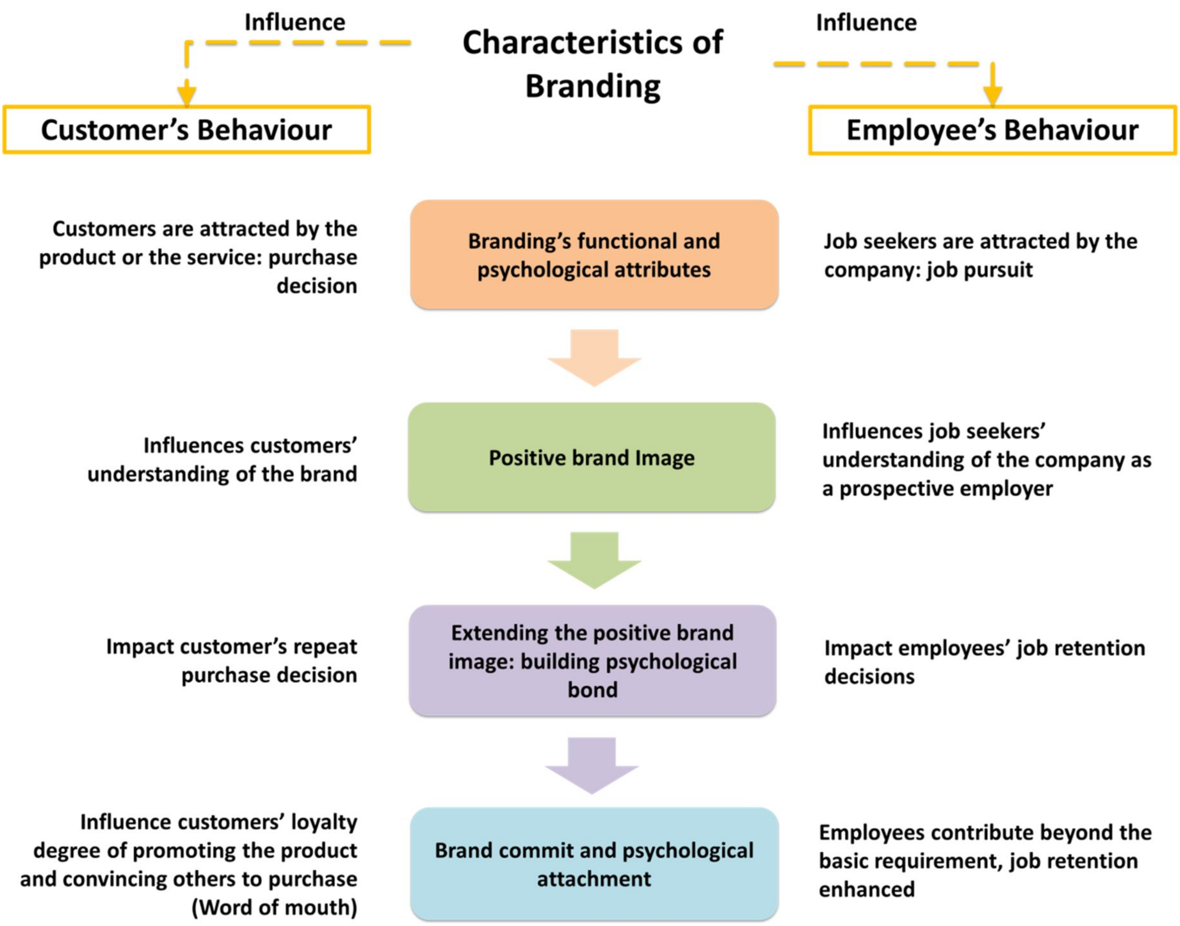

Figure 2.11: How the characteristics of branding influence customer and employees' behaviour

- **Summary: how does employer branding successfully attract and retain employees?**

This chapter so far presents an overview of the employer branding concept by introducing the theoretical background and definition of employer branding. Through adopting the traditional branding theory, how employer branding works as a strategy to attract and retain employees is explained in detail.

Theoretical background: an employee's role in delivering an exceptional service to the customer and contributing to business performance has been emphasised in the marketing literature – especially in relation to the marketing concept and the Six-market model. Internal marketing theory views employees as internal customers to help companies better manage relationships with their staff. Whilst the necessity of applying the internal marketing strategy has been well discussed in the literature, it has been acknowledged that internal marketing is underdeveloped with a lack of detailed implementation guidelines. Therefore, marketing academics and practitioners are required to continue exploring the concept, focusing specifically on finding an effective implementation strategy. Product-based brand management in the marketing area has inspired studies of internal marketing to address implementation strategies.

Definition: Employer branding adapts ideas of branding from the marketing arena and applies them to the recruitment and human resource management phase to develop value propositions for employees. Drawing on the branding literature, this research argues that employer branding provides an efficient way to attract more job seekers in the job market and motivates recruits and existing employees to stay longer (Wild et al. 2010; Maxwell & Knox 2009; Lievens, 2007; Mosley, 2007; Knox & Freeman, 2006; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, Lloyd, 2002; Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

Building processes: Through exploring how branding influences people's behaviour, it is suggested that a strong employer branding strategy will help in attracting and retaining employees through offering desired benefits to attract more job seekers, delivering the promised benefits to the hired employees and finally motivating them to commit to the company. Figure 2.12 in the next page highlights the role of employer branding in employee attraction and retention. It presents a detailed conceptual framework of how the characteristics of employer branding influence employees' behaviour as it critically reviews the literature from a marketing perspective.

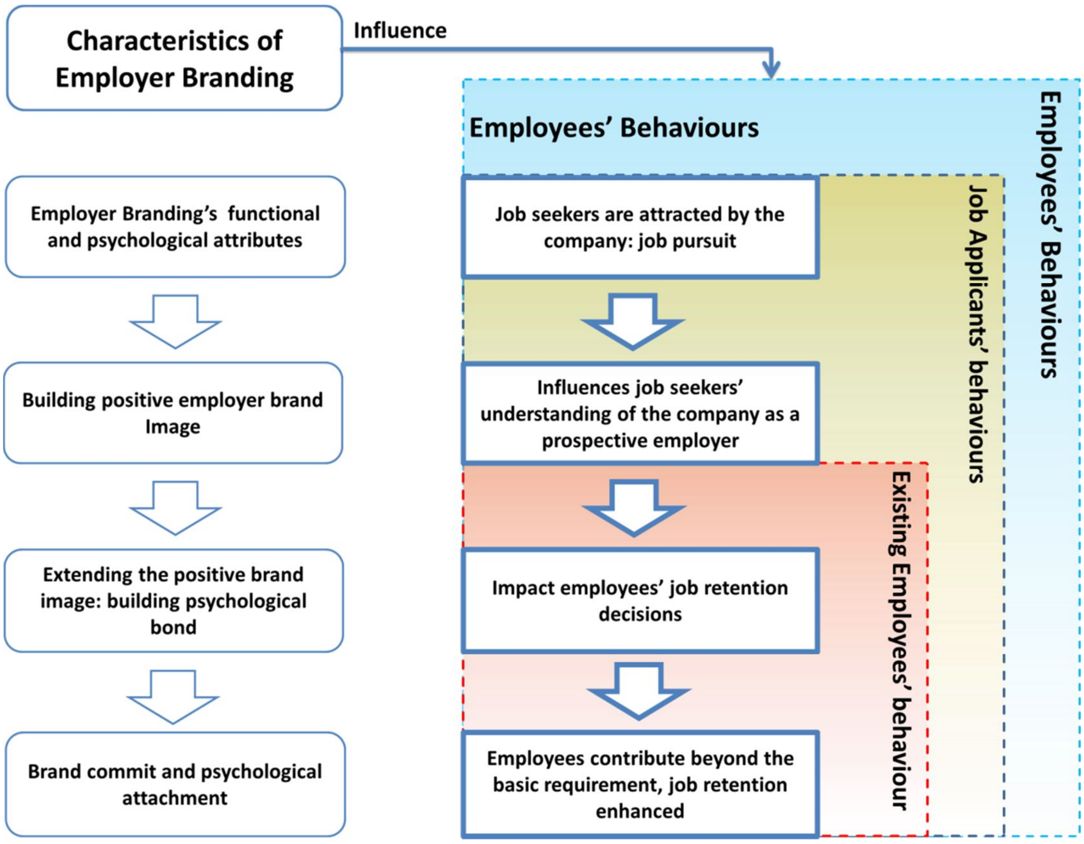

Figure 2.12: How the characteristics of employer branding influence employees' behaviour

2.4.iv Application of employer branding theories: exploring different relationships between employees and employer brandings

Based on the assumption that branding is an effective marketing strategy which helps companies to demonstrate their functional and socio-psychological benefits to meet with customers' needs (discussed in section 2.4.ii), Fetscherin and Heinrich (2014) propose that there are four types of relationships between brands and their customers. These four relationships are presented in the 'Brand connection matrix' (See Table 2.3: Brand connection matrix, Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2014).

Table 2.3: Brand connection matrix (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2014, p.368)

Functional Connection (Thinking/Cognitive) \ Emotional Connection (Feeling/Affective)	*Low*	*High*
High	Functionally invested	Fully invested
Low	Un-invested	Emotionally invested

Within the Brand connection matrix, when functionally invested towards brands, customers are satisfied with a brand's functional benefits, however they are not emotionally connected to these brands. They may switch to other brands when similar functions are provided. Emotionally invested customers like the brands even when the brands' functional benefits fail to meet their needs. Fully invested customers are satisfied with a brand's functional benefits and are emotionally attached to this brand. They are the most loyal to this brand and are less likely to switch to other brands; they are even willing to pay extra money for supporting the brands they are loyal to. They are attached to these brands and see the brands as part of themselves. However, in contrast, un-invested customers exhibit no brand loyalty and the risks of switching to other brands are high (Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2014).

The brand connection matrix provides a guideline to explore the different relationships between employee and employer branding. When applying the previously discussed employer branding theories, each employer branding characteristic (section 2.4.iii) can be explained in the developed employer brand connection matrix (See Table 2.4: Employer brand connection matrix):

Table 2.4: Employer brand connection matrix (Adapted from Fetscherin & Heinrich, 2014, p.368)

Emotional Connection (Feeling/Affective)

Functional Connection (Thinking/Cognitive)

	Low	*High*
High	Functionally invested (Job seekers are attracted to employer branding)	Fully invested (Existing employees build psychological bond with employer branding)
Low	Un-invested	Emotionally invested (Employees commit and psychologically attached to employer branding)

- Offering the benefits: building positive employer brand image to attract potential employees

Employers offer benefits to build positive employer brand image and attract potential employees, job seekers are functionally invested to employer branding because at this stage they are not emotionally connected to these brands. They may switch to other employer brands when similar functional benefits are provided.

- Delivering the promise: building psychological bond with employees

In this stage employees are fully invested to employer branding as the promised functional benefits are delivered consistently. As a result, a psychological contract between employees and their companies are developed. The possibilities of leaving the company are low as employees trusting and are committed to their employers (Mangold & Miles, 2007).

- Brand Commitment and psychological attachment

Employees are emotionally invested to employer branding when they fully commit and psychologically attached to the brand. They like the employer brands therefore employees stay in their companies even if these brands perform less well than competitor brands. In addition, employees who are emotionally invested to employer branding volunteered to perform beyond the role requirements and exert extra efforts to contribute to company performance.

2.4.v The benefits of applying employer branding strategy

According to Wilden et al. (2010), the existing research on customer-based brand equity provides a framework for the study of the employer branding, especially for understanding how can employer branding contribute to company's performances (Wilden et al. 2010). Hence employer branding researchers start to borrow the customer-based brand equity theory to understand the equity established by the employer branding. For example, Cardy et al (2007) shift the well-known customer equity in the marketing domain to the HR area. They applied customer equity theory to the workforce and termed this employee based equity as the 'employee equity' (Cardy et al., 2007). The employee equity theory is argued to capture and integrate various functions to clarify how employer branding can be helpful to add value to an organisation.

- **Customer equity theory**

Customer equity is defined as the total lifetime value of a customer to the company. Cardy et al. (2007) indicate that customer equity contains value equity, brand equity, and retention equity. Value equity describes customers' purchase decisions based on the objective features of the products and service. For example, products price, quality and convenience. Brand equity, on the other hand, refers to the customers' purchase decisions based on the subjective features of the products. For example, products' brand, the social meanings of the products. Retention equity is generated by loyal customers when they decide to extend their relationship with the company. Especially when customers feel they are emotionally connected to the products, even to the companies who produce the products, the retention equity will be enhanced significantly (See Figure 2.13: Components of customer equity, Cardy et al., 2007).

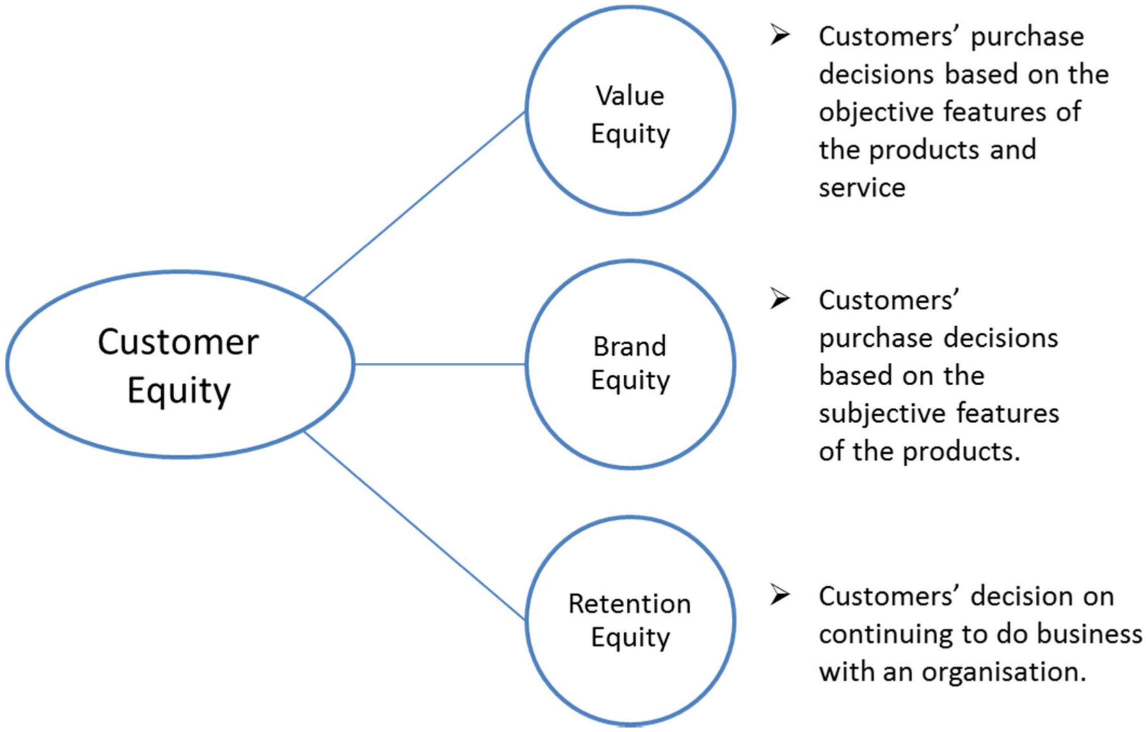

Figure 2.13: Components of customer equity

Source: Cardy et al., 2007, p.142

- **Employee equity**

Cardy et al. (2007) translate the customer equity concept which centred on the external customer to the internal customer, the employee. Employee equity is defined as the effect of brand knowledge on potential and existing employees of the company (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). It is the total lifetime value of an employee to the company, with the aims of increasing employee retention, loyalty and, ultimately, profitability (Cardy et al., 2007).

Employee equity is increasingly recognised as an important value of a company (Wilden, 2010). Employee equity theory argues that building employee lifetime value allows companies to develop a distinctive competitive advantage based on its workforce. This strategic advantage, according to Ulrich (1991), is called the organisational capability. Organisational capability contains organisational unique histories, cultures, characters, patterns of behaviour, management and leadership capabilities, which is rare, valuable, non-substitutable and nearly impossible to replicate (Ulrich, 1991).

Employer branding is an effective approach to attract the right employees and retaining them longer. Companies who follow an implicit employer branding strategy will be able to attract the best candidates more easily in the first place, they also will have a higher retention rate of the highly skilled employees who fits the organisation value well (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). A more stable and committed workforce can provide high employee equity for the company. Hence the life time value of employees will be enhanced. Arguably, a significant strategic advantage based on the life time value of employees can be generated for companies to compete in the market (Cardy et al., 2007).

More specifically, by translating the three components of customer equity to employees, employer branding contribute on strengthening the employee equity through improving the employee's value equity, brand equity and retention equity perspectives (See Figure 2.14: An interpretation of employee equity).

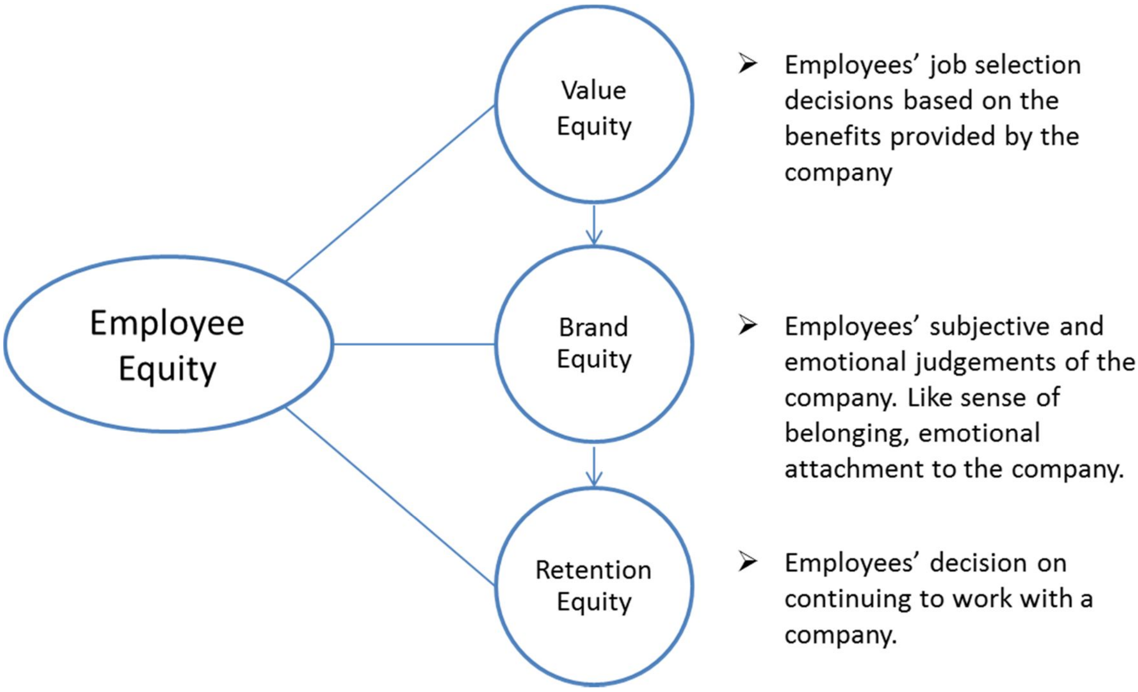

Figure 2.14: An interpretation of employee equity

a. Value equity

Customer value equity describes customers' purchase decisions based on the objective features of the products and service. Similarly, employee value equity is the employees' job selection decisions based on the benefits provided by the company. Clearly the more talented and skilled individuals the companies can attract as future employees, the higher employee equity will be generated to the company (Cardy et al., 2007). Developing employer branding helps managers to understand what benefits employees find attractive.

These benefits are helpful to attract the right employee when they meet with job seeker's requirements. Similar to customer based value equity, competing on price is the main approach to increase the employee value equity. Hence whether employees are happy with the salary and benefits will influence their decisions on job choice and how much value they will provide for exchange (Galizzi & Lang, 1998). Other factors, including working environment, personal development investment, and work/life balance can also contribute to employee value equity growth.

The literature argues that attracting the potential employees is important as it is the first human resource practice, also the effectiveness of subsequent human resource activities are largely dependent on the size and quality of the applicant pool. One of the benefits of applying employer branding strategy is that organisations who can attract more qualified applicants would obtain a greater utility in their employee selection systems- firms' applicant pool. This applicant pool, it is argued, can offer companies a potential competitive advantage. Clearly companies who offer more tangible and intangible benefits in the labour market are able to attract more applicants than others; hence the size of the applicant pool is bigger. Therefore the interviewee number is increasing so that companies' choices in talent recruitment are bigger (Turban & Cable, 2003).

On the other hand, it is believed that talent shortages reduce the competitiveness of the company. One of the most obvious problems associated with talent shortage is diminished ability to satisfy external customer needs and reductions in productivity and company performance. Later the employee shortage can lead to company creativity and innovation decreasing. Employers also complain that talent shortage can result in employee turnover increasing and a detrimental influence on employee engagement (ManPower, 2013).

b. Brand equity

Employer branding strategy encourages companies to build a close relationship with their employees. Employees' brand equity will be generated when employees develop emotional ties and engage fully with a company. Unlike value equity which can be developed through offering tangible benefits, to develop an emotional tie, employees usually judge the company through subjective, intangible factors. These subjective factors include organisational reputation, culture, management style, leadership style, relationship with other colleagues and so on (Cardy et al., 2007).

Employees who are highly engaged with their companies have significantly higher productivity, profitability and customer ratings, less turnover and absenteeism (Gallup, 2013). More specifically, as employees' emotional attachment is the indicator of employee dedication, commitment and productivity, it shows that employee attachment to the company is a predictor of customer attachment to the company (Ulrich et al., 1991). As summarised by Schneider and Bowen (1985), *'what happens to employees inside a firm affects what happens to customers outside a firm'* (Schneider & Bowen, 1985). Further, highly attached and engaged employees are usually more satisfied with their job. Engaged employees embody their companies in a more professional demeanour which can lead to productivity enhancement and service quality improvement (Hui et al., 2004). The satisfied service experience can also have a significant impact on customers' repeat purchases and retention. In addition, employees who are emotionally attached to the company tend to share their positive feelings and experiences about the company with customers intentionally and unintentionally (Mangold & Miles, 2007). As a result, customers are most likely respond positively to the company. Finally employee attachment will spread to the customer attachment to the company. Gallup's (2003) report even points out that employees who are 100% psychologically committed to the work are the only people who create new customers (Gallup, 2003). As attracting new customers costs more than retaining existing customers, customer retention and attachment will eventually impact on company profitability (Chi & Gursoy, 2009).

Giving the significant financial impact of losing any talented employees, especially the knowledge that is lost with their leaving, some studies even suggest that high levels of employee satisfaction, vital for keeping the employees staying, are the primary factors in helping companies to achieve financial goals (Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Koys, 2003). While the total cost of an employee's departure can reach as high as his/her two years' pay and benefits, Gallup (2013)'s report indicates that the earnings per share (EPS) of companies with highly engaged employees is 147% higher than its competitors (Gallup, 2013; Ramlall, 2004). Heskett et al. (2003, 1994) confirm this argument by establishing the service-profit chain in their study. The service-profit chain explains the relationship between employee satisfaction, loyalty and productivity with customer loyalty and company profitability (See Figure 2.15: The Service-Profit Chain, 1994).

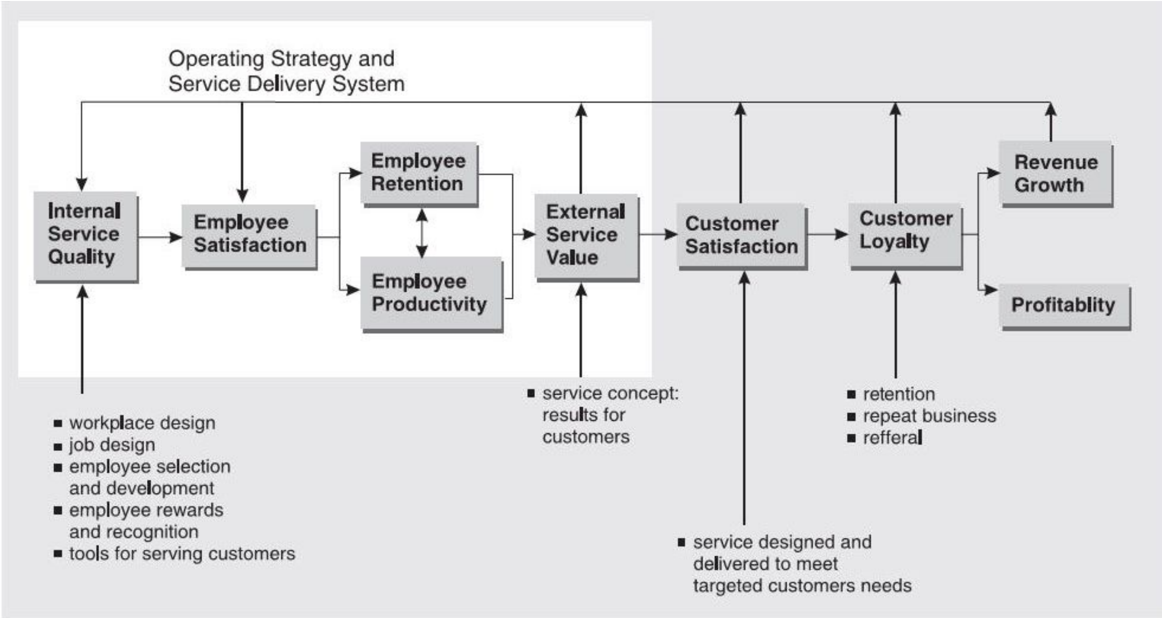

Figure 2.15: Service Profit Chain

Source : Heskett et al., 1994, p.166

Heskett et al. (1994)'s service-profit chain starts with companies improving their internal service quality. Employees are treated as they expect when the internal service quality is high. As a result, employees are most likely to be motivated to work hard and be satisfied with the company. Therefore employer branding plays an important role in the first step of the service-profit chain. In the following development of the service-profit chain, satisfied with working companies drive employees to be loyal to the companies, productivity will be strengthened eventually. From this point the service-profit chain focuses on how employee satisfaction and loyalty can contribute to external customer satisfaction and loyalty which are both driven by the value produced by employees. Finally a loyal customer plays an important role in generating profit for the company (Heskett et al., 1994).

c. Retention equity

Employer branding strategy aims at motivating the hired job applicants and existing employees stay for longer. The benefits of keeping the employees longer is that generally, the longer an employee makes highly valued contributions to the company, the higher retention equity he/she will generate (Cardy et al., 2007). Therefore, employees' retention equity develops based on how long the company and employee perform to maintain the established relationship with each other.

Studies show that companies who work at improving retention equity can benefit from lower employee turnover in the following ways. Financially, employees' low turnover rate can save a significant turnover cost, such as recruitment, selection and training cost. For example, previous research indicates that a low turnover rate (4%) has saved a company $75 million dollars a year (Fishman, 2000). The departure of loyal employees may also lead to the loss of loyal customers. There are cases where customers follow departing employees to another company, especially when the two companies' products or services are similar. Although in some cases a customer may not follow his favourite employees to a new company just for, say, morning tea or coffee, however the possibility that this customer may change to another more conveniently located shop becomes higher due to the loss of a familiar face (Heskett et al., 2002).

Moreover, because attracting new customers costs significantly more than retaining existing customers, also customers' repeat purchasing is more profitable than single transaction customers, so the loss of loyal customers would lead to another financial decrease for the company (Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Gursoy et al., 2007). Also non-financially, studies already state that high levels of employee turnover can lead to lower levels of customer satisfaction (Hurley & Estelami, 2007; Day, 1994). A loyal customer may not be happy about the loss of experienced employees with whom they usually interact, especially in service situations where friendly relations between staff and customers exist. Customers may also be less satisfied when they are served by inexperienced staff. Moreover, the long break-in period for the incoming employees is usually associated with declining quality in service delivery (Hurley & Estelami, 2007).

d. **Exploring the inter relationship between value, brand and retention equity**

Through exploring the inter relationship between value, brand and retention equity, it is found that these three equities are not operating separately.

Firstly, a decrease in employee value equity may lead to lower brand equity. More specifically, low employee value equity usually happens when companies experience a talent shortage. Among the different reasons that can cause a talent shortage problem, poor hiring practices, such as gaining employment through personal relationships or nepotism may decrease the employee productivity. This is because the improperly recruited employees may not fit their role in the company. Furthermore, an unfair recruitment system may also spread negative information in the workplace. Engaged staff members can lose their trust and confidence towards the company and finally leave the job. Hence low employee value equity which is the result of the poor hiring practices will eventually lead to decreasing levels of employee brand equity (Gallup, 2003). On the other hand, however, high employee value equity is helpful for increasing brand equity. For example, recruiting the right managers with the right talents for supporting and empowering their staff will greatly drive increases in employee engagement. Study shows that how employees perceive their primary manager influences about 70% of their engagement (Gallup, 2013). As such employee value equity positively influences the brand equity.

Secondly, companies with high brand equity can attract more potential job seekers to improve the employee value equity. Specifically, companies with high brand equity have more engaged employees. Engaged employees are the company's brand ambassadors. They exhibit more positive experiences and emotions about their jobs and companies not only during working, but also when they are off work (Gallup, 2013). This positive feedback about companies may attract current employees' friends, families, and ex-colleagues and so on. In fact, social influences are one of the most effective recruitment channels to increase company attractiveness (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2007). As such, existing employees are also involved in enhancing value equity through attracting new talents.

Thirdly, engaged employees tend to stay longer in the company so that they contribute to increasing the employee retention equity. Clearly the longer the fully engaged employees stay, the more they will contribute to the company. Therefore the increase in retention equity also boosts brand equity. Figure 2.16 is developed to summarise the above discussion and demonstrate the relationship between each of the three employee equity components (See Figure 2.16: An interpretation of the relationships between three employee equity components).

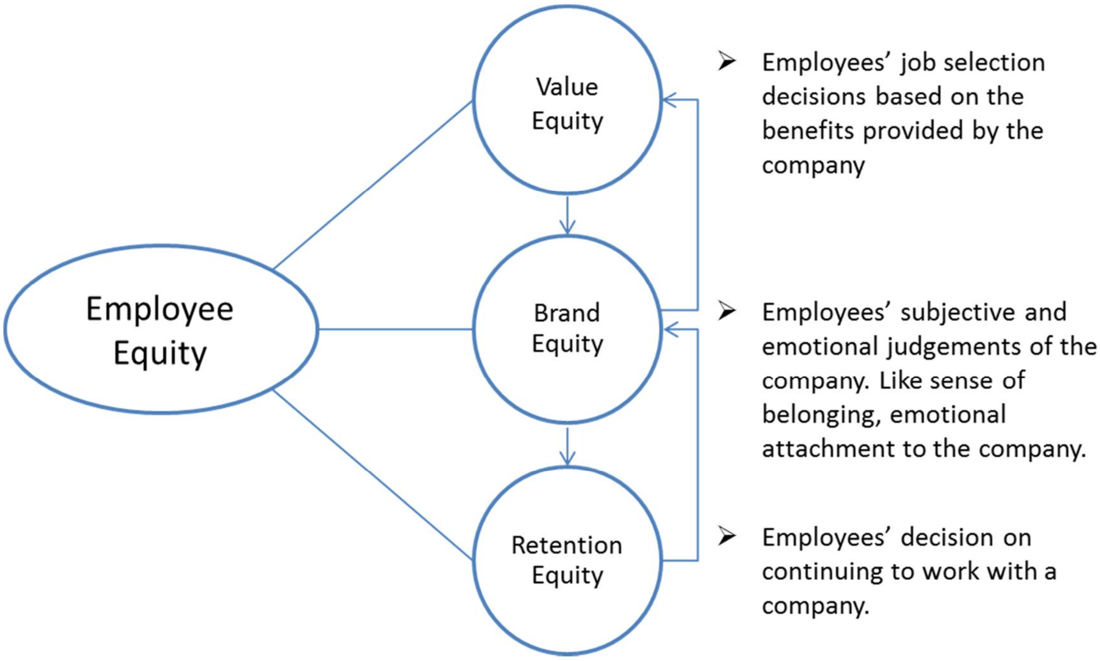

Figure 2.16: An interpretation of the relationships between three employee equity components

In summary, applying employer branding strategy is beneficial for companies gaining employees' life time value through employee equity improvement. Employer branding recognises employees as human capital. It is based on longer-run perspectives that focus on attracting and keeping employees who provide the best long-term value for the company. It helps to enlarge the size of the pool of applicants which provides companies with more choice in the selection stages. Meanwhile the possibilities of recruiting the right employees are higher so that employee value equity is increased. Employer branding also helps organisations to find ways to engage their employees. Engaged employees can contribute to company performance both financially and non-financially. Finally, retaining the engaged employees longer helps to create retention equity. The benefits include saving on direct costs through avoiding expensive recruitment, selection and training costs, as well as saving on indirect costs by reducing disruption of performance, decline in morale and loss of strategic opportunities. The other big loss for companies these days happens when highly-performing or long-tenured employees leave their job and the priceless tacit and intangible job knowledge, processes and procedures, as well as organisational history are difficult, in some cases, impossible to recreate (Cardy et al., 2007). Therefore, employer branding helps to maintain employee-based equity which is hard for the competitors to imitate.

2.5 A Conceptual framework of employer branding

This conceptual framework draws together the discussion results so far (See Figure 2.17: A Conceptual Framework of Employer Branding). It provides an holistic view of the employer branding concept as shown on the following page. It presents the extant literature of employer branding, including the characteristics and theoretical foundation of employer branding. This framework also describes how these characteristics influence employees' behaviour accordingly and highlights the benefits of applying such a strategy within the organisation.

Chapter Summary

This chapter has examined the employer branding literature in detail. Research relating to employer branding has been reviewed including the importance of employees in company marketing activities, the internal marketing concept and implementation of internal marketing and employer branding. The definition and theoretical foundations of employer branding form the basis of data interpretation in Chapter 6 and 7. The benefits of employer branding highlight the need for application of such strategies within the organisation which will be further discussed in Chapter 3.

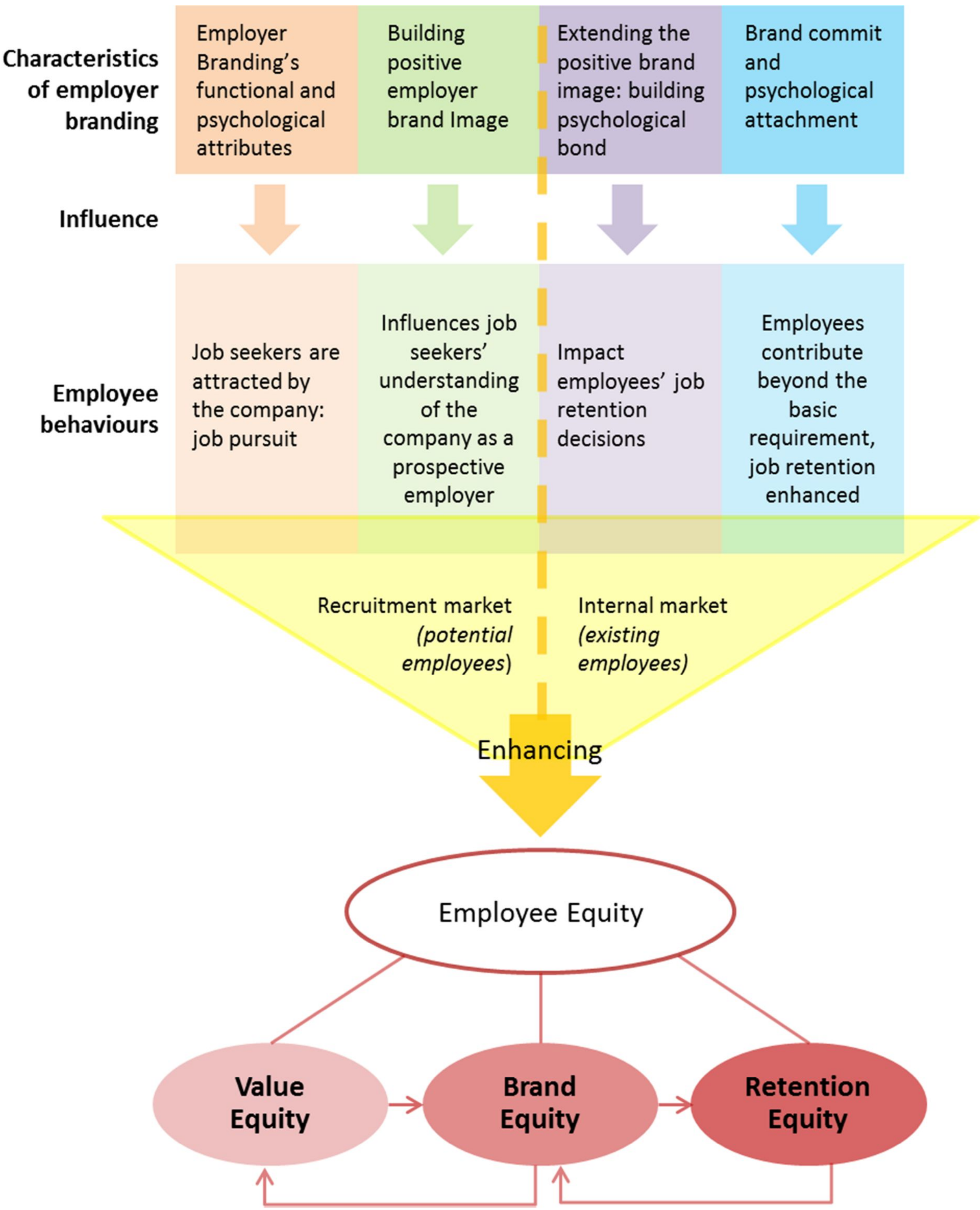

Figure 2.17: A Conceptual Framework of Employer Branding

CHAPTER 3: EMPLOYER BRANDING IMPLEMENTATION: IDENTIFYING RESEARCH GAPS

This chapter further examines the employer branding literature and identifies four research gaps: the need to explore further employer branding's role in employee attraction, the need to explore employer branding's role in employee retention, the need to understand employer branding within the HR paradigm and the need to explore employer branding in emerging markets. These research gaps form the four key focal points of this research.

3.1 Existing studies of employer branding

In light of the significant benefits that employer branding strategy brings to the company, both scholars and practitioners are eager to identify how to apply employer branding effectively to optimise recruitment and retention of talented and skilled staff. Within existing studies that focus on employer branding implementation, many efforts have been made to understand what job seekers perceive as attractive and how to adapt and adjust a company's employer branding strategy accordingly (Lievens, 2007; Berthon et al., 2005).

3.1.i Employer branding's instrumental and symbolic attributes in attracting job seekers

To develop an employer brand that communicates messages to employees about the quality of a company as an employer, research suggests that a distinct and believable image of employer brand is an effective strategy in attracting the target job seekers (Wilden et al., 2010). An employer brand's distinct and believable image shows the brand's attributes and includes both the instrumental and symbolic attributes. The extent of how job seekers perceive the attractiveness of the employer branding's instrumental and symbolic attributes have been tested.

Instrument-symbolic framework was originally developed in the marketing literature (Slaughter et al., 2004). Many studies in the marketing literature have used the instrumental-symbolic framework as a basis for examining consumer behaviour (Lam, Ahearne & Schillewaert 2012; Van Hoye & Saks, 2011; Lievens, 2007; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lancaster, 1966; Katz, 1960). Marketing researchers generally view consumer behaviour based on the achievement of maximization of functional utility and socio-psychological attributes (Lam et al., 2012). A product's product-related functional attributes and non-product-related attributes both contribute towards customer attraction and purchase decision.

In the context of employer branding, Ambler and Barrow's (1996) paper, which is the first paper historically that proposes the concept of employer branding, suggests the three dimensions of employer branding attractiveness are functional, economic and psychological. Whilst economic dimensions, including material or monetary rewards largely reveal the instrumental benefits, functional dimensions, including developmental activities and psychological dimensions, refer to feelings such as belonging, direction and purpose thus representing the symbolic benefits that attract job seekers (Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

Knox and Freeman's (2006) research confirms that a positive employer brand image encourages the intention of the job seekers (Knox & Freeman, 2006). Lievens (2007), Lievens and Highhouse (2003) and Lievens et al. (2005) adopt the instrumental-symbolic framework to further conceptualise the relationship between positive employer brand image and selection intention. Their research results reveal that a brand's instrumental and symbolic attributes are related to organisational identification and attractiveness (Lievens, 2007; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens et al., 2005). In particular, the instrumental dimensions that attract job applicants include provision of good salaries, advancement opportunities, job security, task diversity, the opportunity to work in a structured environment and travel opportunities. The symbolic dimensions that attract job applicants include a friendly organisational culture, prestigious company reputation and an environment where companies care about employees as individuals, for example (Lievens, 2007; Knox & Freeman, 2006).

Wilden et al.'s (2010) findings reveal that instrumental attributes, such as salary, are not mentioned widely among the participants. Symbolic attributes, on the other hand, such as employee career development, building a strong CV, training and mentorship opportunities are evaluated as attractive. Wilden et al. also discovered that job seekers' decisions can be influenced by their own experiences. Job seekers' personal relationships are also another way of gaining knowledge about future employers; other sources, such as current employees' opinions and recruitment agencies are also found to be ambassadors for the company (Wilden et al., 2010).

Berthon et al.'s (2005) findings extend the earlier work by Ambler and Barrow (1996); 'Interest value' and 'Social value' capture the psychological dimensions while 'Development value' and 'Application value' develop the functional dimensions further.

Interest value refers to the working environment and novel work practices while social value is about the company culture and working atmosphere. Development value largely focuses on whether companies recognise the value of the employees and the future development opportunities while the application value is where the company provides a working environment that allows their employees fully to apply their professional knowledge (Berton et al., 2005).

Further studies explain the role of a positive employer brand image in employee attraction using similarity attraction theory and social identity theory (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Similarity attraction theory indicates that employees compare their needs, personalities and values with the brands' attributes. The match between the two encourages the job seekers' decision in the job markets. Social identity theory supports this idea. Social identity theory suggests that individual self-concept derives from feelings of membership within social groups. As such, job seekers' choices can be explained as they gained feelings of membership in joining the company (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

3.1.ii Employer branding in retaining new and existing employees

Research suggests that the post-employment performance of the recruiter is related to employee decisions about staying. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) highlight the role of accuracy in terms of pre-employment information and post-employment performance of employers.

Hired employees stay in the company when the pre-employment information matches with the company's post-employment performance. They evaluate the trustworthiness of the employer while the employers' willingness and ability to deliver what is promised in the job market largely influence how employees perceive the quality of the company as an employer. When the promised benefits are successfully delivered, employees will perceive the company as trustworthy. However, a mismatch between promised benefits and reality can lead to employee dissatisfaction and reduced trust, eventually leading to employees seeking a better employer who offers them a better job (Wilden et al., 2010).

Newly appointed employees' decisions are also influenced by the quality of the post-employment performance; for example, employer investment into employer brand building, such as devoting resources to employee development, organising career fairs, internship opportunities and performance awards are signals that show the company cares about its workers (Wilden et al., 2010).

Maxwell and Knox (2009) show through their research that a company's successes, including their past successes, current standing and expected future successes are factors that employees consider. Interestingly, employees attach considerable importance to how people from outside of the company perceive the company's image and reputation. For example, employees pay attention to the perceptions of the general public and people in their own industry. Other factors they consider are the company's products or services. One of the reasons why employees stay in the company is that they like their company's products and the meanings attached to those products (Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

Backhaus and Tikoo's (2004) also suggest that organisation culture is related to employee commitment. An organisation culture which is supportive and productive, which also enhances employees' work life quality, is positively related to employee brand commitment. Furthermore, a positive organisational identity can also be observed as another contributory factor to levels of employee brand commitment. Employees seek to identify with their company when they perceive the company identity to be attractive, especially when the identity is positive and contributes to employees' self-esteem (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Dutton et al., 1994).

3.2 Gaps in the existing literature of employer branding

Reviewing existing studies of employer branding helps to identify gaps in the literature. This section explains each research gap and how it derives from existing theory.

3.2.i Literature gap one: limited range of employer branding attributes identified in existing studies

Employer branding's attributes give sufficient motivation to job seekers. However, limited branding attributes are identified as employer branding research is relatively scarce and existing studies only situated in Western countries (Van Hoye et al., 2013). The need to identify a broader range of factors that will contribute to the job seekers' likelihood to apply for jobs is highlighted (Lievens et al., 2007). In addition, tailoring the broader range of factors to the recruitment market is argued to improve the efficiency of recruitment practice for companies, therefore research could also be conducted to determine whether each of the factors can be further divided into more specific sub-factors better to understand employer branding attractiveness (Knox & Freeman, 2006).

The limited range of existing employer branding studies primarily relies on explaining employer branding attractiveness by following the instrumental-symbolic framework within the marketing discipline (Lievens et al., 2007). The instrumental-symbolic framework is a marketing based theory which is used largely in explaining how customers evaluate products;

arguably, evaluating jobs is differently from evaluating products, hence ways of explaining job seekers' choices within different theoretical paradigms are needed (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

While the extent of employer branding's attributes can be controlled and tailored by employers according to job seekers' personal demand and the budget available in the company, there are factors that influence job seekers' decisions heavily but are difficult to predict or change (Knox & Freeman, 2006).

Wilden et al. (2010) observe that employees' personal situations and social influences can shape job seekers' perceptions. Personal situations, such as job seekers' past working experiences, influence the value that they place on a potential employer. Social influences, such as the opinions and behaviours of friends, co-workers and even family members are considered by the job seekers. Therefore, beyond the employer branding's instrumental and symbolic attributes which attract job seekers, further research is called for in order to identify how each attribute performs in different conditions and how the perceptions of different groups from outside of the company influence job seekers' decisions. The sources of information such as reference groups and opinion leaders who construct the company image in the job market also need to be identified (Wilden et al., 2010; Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

Therefore, the first identified literature gap is that limited ranges of employer branding attributes are identified in existing study. The ranges of branding attributes relate to employer branding attraction need to be expanded. Factors or influences that shape job seekers' perceptions towards each brand attribute are also under explored.

3.2.ii Literature gap two: employee retention is under-explored in existing employer branding studies

The definition of employer branding indicates that employer branding implementation involves not only promoting the brand strengths externally to attract job applicants, as promoting the brand strengths internally to motivate and retain the hired employees is also essential (Lievens, 2007). However, whilst extensive research has reviewed how to communicate with and attract job seekers to be part of the company, this research centres particularly on developing and validating a scale to assess employer attractiveness. However, limited attention has been paid to its effect on employee retention (Lievens, 2007; Berthon et al., 2005). Maxwell and Knox (2009) also indicate concerns that current conceptualisations of employer branding focusing only on attributes related to recruitment are restrictive.

This presents another gap in employer branding literature. Empirical work to explore the effect of employer branding in the post-recruitment stage is needed. For example, Wilden et al. (2010) propose that *'further research should therefore explore the role of the employer brand in employee retention and its possible implications for customer attraction, satisfaction, and retention'* (p.243).

Therefore, the second identified literature gap is that employer branding's role in employee retention is not clear. The application of employer branding in employee retention need to be reviewed to identify what motivates employees to be loyal, so that companies' strategies can be adapted accordingly. Moreover, factors that may shape employees' perceptions towards brand commitment also need to be investigated.

3.2.iii Literature gap three: employer branding is under-explored within the HR paradigm

- **Employer branding is a cross-discipline strategy**

Companies have already realised that there are limits to what can be achieved by adopting any single techniques alone (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003, 2009). Compared with multiple management functions operating in isolation, a cross-discipline operation around the core business process is preferable. However, the inter-functional coordination between departments is relatively under-researched according to Ahmed and Rafiq, (2003, 1993). Berthon (2005) agrees, indicating that nowadays, *'marketing is seen as being too important to be left only to marketer, so too human resources is seen to be too important to be left solely to the HR function'* (p.46).

Employer branding is a multi-disciplinary, cross-functional approach. Employer branding shares a theoretical foundation with product-based branding so that implementing the employer branding strategy initiates from the marketing department. However, an integrated employer brand architecture requires collaboration between different organisation departments (Simmons, 2009; Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Department collaboration is argued as being beneficial for a better integration of work activities between employees, also strengthening the coordination across the whole company (Varey, 1995).

Arguably, essentially employer branding is an approach to managing company human resources. Managing the human resource requires interfaces between staff and between departments (Varey, 1995). For example, Martin et al. (2004) link human resource management with company marketing activities. They argue that one increasingly important claim for contributing to sustained corporate success is to build bridges with the marketing function and to extend its literature and practice on human resource management.

The role of the HR department is highlighted in building an attractive employer brand. Ahmed et al. (2003) emphasise that *‘implementing any business strategy internally requires the whole range of HRM tools to be added’* (p.1223). Maxwell and Knox (2009) state that managing employer branding should encompass theory from both marketing and organisational studies, especially marketing and HR *‘should be more fully integrated in order to recruit, train and develop people who are accordant with the brand’* (Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Hulberg, 2006, p.895). Burmann and Zeplin (2005) also observe that applying employer branding strategy involves HR-based activities. They argue that only through combining the brand-centred human resources activities can brand communications and brand leadership behaviour generate employee brand commitment behaviour.

- **Employer branding is under-explored within the HR paradigm**

Whereas the fields of marketing and branding have documented extensive empirical work on employer branding, for example, employer branding attractiveness has been explained primarily under the instrumental-symbolic framework within the marketing discipline (Lievens et al., 2007), there is hardly any study linking the fields of organisational psychology, human resource management and employer branding in a single study (Matanda & Ndubisi, 2013). HR literature is still ‘almost silent’ (p.77) in exploring employer branding strategies. Few direct references to the brand-HR relationship can be found in journal articles (Martin et al., 2004).

This gap in the literature can be bridged through bringing HR theories into employer branding studies. The concept of ‘fit’ has been used extensively in both HR and organisational psychology studies to explore employee attraction and retention. In this research, job seekers’ and existing employees’ job decisions, how they evaluate the different level of attributes that employer brand presents, are discussed using the ‘fit’ theory.

Branding theory indicates that customers usually evaluate the brand on the basis of ‘fit’ and customers prefer the brand that can provide economic and symbolic benefits which fit with their functional and emotional needs (Simmons, 2009; King & Grace, 2004). The concept of ‘fit’ is also discussed in both HR and organisational psychology studies. Perceptions of fit are predictors of people’s choice. Employees also structure and use fit perceptions when they looking for jobs and deciding whether to stay or leave (Matanda & Oly Ndubisi, 2013; Cable & DeRue, 2002). For example, after examining the relation of instrumental and symbolic attributes to a company's attractions as an employer, Lievens, Van Hoye and Schreurs (2005), Lievens and Highhouse (2003) suggest that future research to explore the variances between how individual employees perceive each employer branding attributes from the 'fit' perspective.

The 'fit' study has largely focused on employee recruitment, selection and retention. Job seekers choose between organisations on the basis of their perceived fit with the jobs and organisations. Later, whether they are perceived to fit or not in the company affects their turnover decisions (Cable & DeRue, 2002). For instance, employees evaluate the fit between employers and themselves by comparing their goals, values, needs, interests and personalities with organisations' cultures, pay systems, sizes, structures, future development and values (Judge & Cable, 1997).

The 'fit' theory is conceptualised in different ways. Under the big umbrella concept of 'fit', there are three main fit perceptions we need to be concerned with when considering the relationship between company and employees: needs-supplies fit, personal-job fit and personal-organisation fit (See Figure 3.1: An interpretation of employees' 'fit' with the company, Cable & DeRue, 2002).

Figure 3.1: An interpretation of employees' 'fit' with the company

Source: Cable & DeRue, 2002

Needs-supplies fit is the congruence of employees' needs and the rewards received for their contributions to the company, for example, the received payment, benefits and welfare from the company. Personal-job fit refers to whether individual's skills and abilities are compatible with the demands of a specific job (Cable & DeRue, 2002; Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001). Employees' job-related skills include their task habits, task skill and task knowledge which will all influence employees task performances. Personal-organisation fit is *'the compatibility between people and organizations that occurs when at least one entity provides what the other needs, they share similar fundamental characteristics, or both'* (Kristof, 1996, p.4-5). It concerns how an individual's personal values match with organisation's values and culture. In chapter 7 section 7.3, how job seekers and existing employees perceive their employer brand is explained in detail from the perspective of Needs-supplies fit, Personal-job fit and Personal-organisation fit.

3.2.iv Literature gap four: employer branding is under-explored in China, the emerging market

Emerging-market countries are experiencing a rapid growth and development. They have dramatically changed the world's economy over the last decade. China, as one of the emerging-market countries, is now experiencing a 7.2 percentage GDP (Gross Domestic Product) increase in 2013 (World Bank, 2013). However, there are growing pains that come with this fast-paced growth for the emerging-market countries, especially China. Gallup's (2013) annual report highlights the threatening factors that could lower the economic growth: talent shortages and low levels of employee engagement (Gallup, 2013).

- **Employee attraction and engagement insights worldwide**

It has been predicted early this century that competition for the best employees will be as fierce as competition for customers (Berthon et al., 2005). The prediction is proving to be true. There is evidence that in the growing knowledge-based economy where skilled employees are in short supply, many large economies, including China, Japan, and the U.S. are currently experiencing talent shortages. Research findings from a survey by ManpowerGroup (2013) which covers 38,000 employers across 42 countries shows that 35% of the surveyed employers report they have difficulty in filling jobs due to the lack of available talent. This is the highest talent shortage rate since 2007 (See Figure 3.2 Employers are experiencing talent shortage globally).

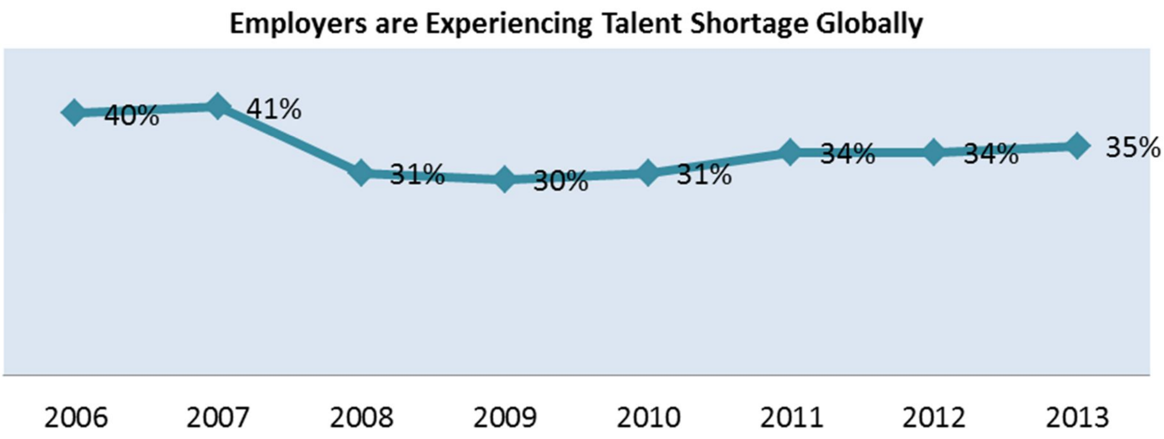

Figure 3.2: Employers are experiencing talent shortage globally

Source: Adapted from ManpowerGroup, 2013, p.4

Despite the fact that companies globally are experiencing talent shortages, the other big challenge companies are facing is low levels of engagement among existing employees which may cause increased employee turnover in the future. Although companies have already realised the importance of maintaining high-productive employees, Gallup's research on employee engagement in 142 countries from 2011 through 2012 still shows that only 13% of employees are engaged in their jobs, while 63% are not engaged and 24% are actively disengaged (Gallup, 2013). The definitions of these three types of employees according to their engagement to the companies are:

Engaged employees: engaged employees work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company. They drive innovation and move the organization forward.

Not engaged employees: not engaged employees are essentially 'checked out'. They're sleepwalking through their workday, putting time — but not energy or passion — into their work.

Actively disengaged employees: actively disengaged employees aren't just unhappy at work; they're busy acting out their unhappiness. Every day, these workers undermine what their engaged co-workers accomplish.

Low employee engagement may lead to high employee turnover. Recent study shows that 74% of employees would consider leaving their jobs today and that 32% of employees are actively looking for new jobs (Hedges, 2014; Hall, 2013).

Clearly the lack of employee engagement is now an increasingly significant problem globally. Consequently, the problem of keeping employees who are emotionally attached to their companies and focusing on creating value may increase the difficulties of boosting companies' marketing performance.

- **Spotlighting China: China faces challenges in attracting and retaining employees**

a. Talent shortage

China, as a fast growing country who plays an important role in the global economy, experiences a huge talent shortage and low levels of employee engagement. The country is reporting an increase in talent shortage currently, with 35% of the surveyed employers indicate they are experiencing talent shortages (See Figure 3.3: China is experiencing talent shortage). Moreover, compared with 2012, the talent shortage in 2013 has increased 12%, which put China as one of the 10 countries who are experiencing the biggest changes in talent shortages (ManpowerGroup, 2013).

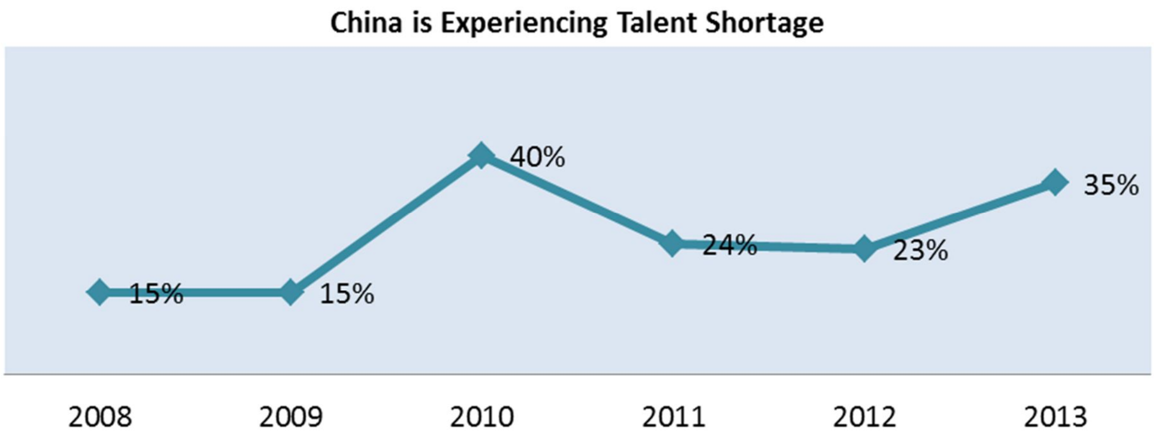

Figure 3.3: China is experiencing talent shortage

Source: Adapted from ManpowerGroup, 2013, p.7

b. Low employee engagement

Gallup (2013)'s survey reveals that compared with developed-market countries, emerging-market countries' employee engagement rate is lower (See Figure 3.4: Employee engagement in emerging-market countries is lower than in developed-market countries). Especially in China, only 6% of the employees are engaged in their work (lowest in the world), 68% of them are not engaged and 26% are actively disengaged with their companies (Gallup, 2013). It also reveals that on average, only 15% of the Chinese employees are very satisfied with their job, 17% of the Chinese employees are not satisfied with their current roles (LinkedIn, 2014). Predictably, employees who are not engaged with the companies and are not satisfied with their roles would leave the company once better job offers are available.

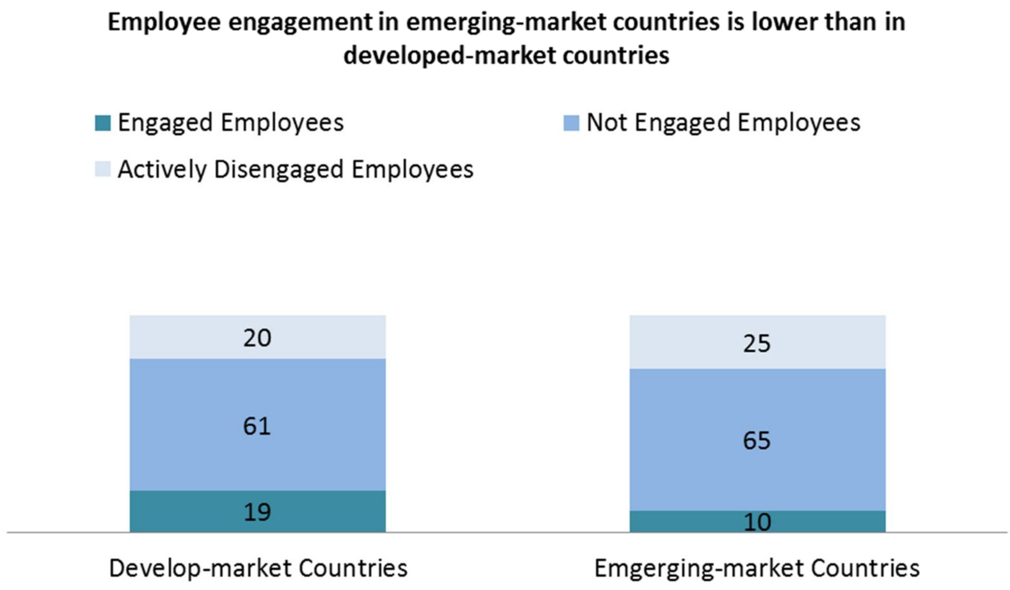

Figure 3.4: Employee engagement in emerging-market countries is lower than in developed-market countries

Source: Adapted from Gallup, 2013, p. 30

c. Employer branding in China

Today organisations have to compete more vigorously in the 'war for talent' as global talent shortages are experienced. This is true, especially in terms of the increasingly expensive knowledge-based workers (Martin et al., 2004). Despite the fact that Chinese employers are facing the challenge of talent shortages and low employee engagement, employer branding is still an under-explored area within Chinese companies (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

There is only one paper by Jiang and Iles (2011) that explores employer branding in the private sector of Zhejiang province, China. This paper develops a framework of employer brand equity based on interview results from three cases studies. The employer branding equity framework presented is a preliminary, theoretical framework which only examines the perceptions of HR executives of employer branding equity. While Jiang and Iles's (2011) research represents a starting point of employer branding study in China, further research is needed to address this gap.

In addition, existing studies have been conducted predominately within the context of Western companies (Wilden et al., 2010; Knox & Freeman, 2006; Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Del Vecchio et al., 2007; Berthon et al., 2005; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens et al., 2003). The specific perceptions of Chinese employees' towards employer branding attributes are not captured yet, primarily due to the unique sociocultural and national environment. Therefore, research is needed to assess what employer branding attributes are perceived as important within the Chinese social and value system. The results are likely to be different from those the West (Jiang & Iles, 2011; Bjorkman & Lu, 1999).

d. The unique socio-cultural and value system in China

Berthon et al. (2005) highlight the need to explore employer branding implementation within different cultures and different countries. They further indicate that the future of employer branding research is country-of-origin focus (Berthon et al., 2005).

People's choices are rooted in their social-cultural norms and values which are difficult to change (Tayeb, 1995; Kirkbride & Tang, 1994). Therefore, it is suggested that sociocultural variables be taken into consideration when implementing employer branding strategy (Shen et al., 2005).

Western culture is individualism dominated. Employees make their job decisions independently. Within the company, employee opinion is perceived as important and companies usually incorporate individualism in their management practice (Tayeb, 1995). Chinese culture is collectivism dominated. Employees make their job decisions while taking into consideration different opinions, including the opinions from parents and friends. Within the company, managers often believe in the will of the group rather than that of the individuals; as a consequence, hiring and promotion practices are based more on paternalism rather than personal achievement and capabilities (Katsioloudes & Hadjidakis, 2007; Tayeb, 1995).

Western societies usually exhibit low levels of power distance. This is characterised as high tolerance for ambiguity, high employee commitment, high levels of interpersonal trust and high tolerance for conflicting ideas and interests (Tayeb, 1995). Chinese culture, on the other hand, is characterised by high levels of power distance with low tolerance for ambiguity, low employee commitment, low interpersonal trust and low tolerance for conflicting ideas and interests (Edwards & Zhang, 2003). The root of the large power distance in China is the long history of centralization of decision making. Chinese companies normally have high organisational pyramids and large proportions of supervisory personnel. They often exhibit autocratic managerial styles and weak perceived work ethics. These characteristics result in employees' fear of sharing the truth with their supervisors (Tayeb, 1995).

Values can also be recognised as the motivation of attitudes and behaviour (Adler, 2002; Bond, 1996). Harmony seems central to Chinese values. Chinese people usually sacrifice individual benefit for the sake of maintaining harmony. The critical role of harmony is explained by the well-known phenomenon of 'face' (Verburg, 1999). The Chinese concept of ‘face’ is relevant to the need for belonging, akin to Western ideas about self-esteem or self-worth (Jackson & Bak, 1998). A study conducted by Redding and Ng (1982) among 102 Chinese employees in Hong Kong illustrates that all respondents saw the preservation of face as important for their work. For example, as a manager criticizes a subordinate in public, both experience loss of face (Verburg, 1999; Redding & Ng, 1982). Second, Chinese workers are more likely to listen and to comply, in order to maintain harmony in the company, rather than initiate change (Zhao, 1994). As stability is a vital symbol of harmony (Hofstede, 1991), changes and innovations are often inhibited. Third, vanity is another motivation in the Chinese value system rather than self-actualization. Chinese employees prefer to experience success and satisfaction through the respect, admiration and adoration of their counterparts (Ralston et al., 1999); hence the evaluation and attitude of others help to motivate Chinese employees’ behaviours.

‘Guanxi’, the connections for success in both ordinary and business life plays an important role in the behaviours of Chinese employees. Currently, job seekers decisions are largely influenced by personal relations and connections (Yeung & Tung, 1996). Besides, Confucian traditions, characterised by hierarchy, reciprocity and personal power also cast their influence to shape behaviour. Following the Confucian traditions, Chinese employees usually predispose for long-term relationships (Ang, 2000). They prefer humility and self-restraint which lead to wrath or distrust of other workers who engage in self-promotion or boasting (Wright, Berrell, & Gloet, 2008).

Therefore there is a gap of employer branding studies in non-Western countries. The needs of developing guidelines for employer branding implementation within emerging country companies are highlighted, for example, China. As Chinese employees’ behaviours are shaped by their unique national social-culture and value systems, the way in which Chinese employees perceive employer branding attraction and loyalty is expected to be different from that in the Western companies.

3.3 Research focal points

Based on the identified literature gaps, the focal points of this study are:

1. Employer branding attraction. This research will identify employer branding's attributes that improve job seekers' likelihood to apply for jobs, later focusing on exploring what factors have shaped job seekers' perceptions towards brand attractiveness.

2. Employer branding commitment. Through exploring the application of employer branding in employee retention, what motivates employees to be loyal to the employer brand will be identified. Companies' employer branding strategies can be adapted accordingly. Moreover, factors that may shape employees' perceptions towards the brand commitment will be explored.

3. Cross-disciplinary study. The third research focus is to understand and explain the concept of employer branding by integrating literature from both marketing and HR. Theories from both human resources and organisational psychology will be explored to pursue a better understanding of employee brand attraction and commitment behaviour.

4. Employer branding in China. While most existing studies still largely focus on employer branding in the context of western companies, the needs for the guidelines of employer branding implementation within Chinese companies are highlighted. As Chinese employees' behaviours are shaped by the unique national sociocultural and value systems, how Chinese employees perceive employer branding attraction and commitment is expected to be different from that in the Western companies. Therefore, the fourth research focus is to explore employer branding implementation in China.

The gaps within the existing literature help the researcher to identify research questions and focuses, which will be presented in detail in the methodology chapter.

Chapter Summary

This Chapter presents the extant employer branding literature and further identifies research gaps. Four areas of research focus are developed accordingly which also structure the research questions in Chapter 4. The data interpretation in Chapters 6, 7 and 8 will centre on the four research gaps and address the research questions accordingly.

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH METHODS

'Nobody ever figures out what life is all about, and it doesn't matter.

Explore the world.

Nearly everything is really interesting if you go into it deeply enough'.

–Richard Feynman

In the preceding section I provided a theoretical foundation for employer branding. In this section a research agenda for understanding employer brand building activities is outlined.

Introduction

As indicate by Attride-Stirling (2001), qualitative researchers need to be clear about what they are doing, why they are doing it and finally, how they are doing their research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, Attride-Stirling, 2001). This chapter will centre around methodological issues rather than focusing on the methodological approach employed to explore the nature of the topic (what) and the philosophical assumptions behind the research (why). Following Morgan (1980)'s three levels of the research concept - which begins with the researchers' general world views (Thompson, 1997; Morgan, 1980) - two different world views (logical positivism and interpretivism) will be explored. With a focus on the employee experience, key issues, including understanding the aims of the research, the nature of the research as well as the role of the researcher will be discussed. This chapter, therefore, will inform and outline the underpinning research philosophy and standpoint which directed the methodological decisions. Detailed accounts of the research method, processes, interpretation and analysis will be presented in the next chapter.

4.1 Starting out

Janesick (1998) describes that choreographers follow their own routines to design dance moves. Similarly, researchers follow a set routine to design their studies:

> *'Just as the dancer begins with a warm-up of the body, follows through with floor exercises and then moves to a cool down period, I like to think of*

> *qualitative design as made up of three stages. First there is the warm-up stage, or design decisions made at the beginning of the study; second is the total workout stage, during which design decisions are made throughout the study and the third is the cool down stage, when design decisions are made at the end of the study. Just as the dancer relies on the spine for the coherence of the dance, so the qualitative researcher relies on the design of the study' (Janesick,1998, p.52).*

As the 'warm-up' stage is essential to shape the detailed research procedure, in this study, two different world views - logical positivism and interpretivism - are reviewed before conducting the field work.

4.1.i An exploration of different world views

This section explores two different research methods: quantitative methods based on logical positivism and qualitative methods based on interpretation.

Through analysing the relationships between variables, quantitative research emphasises experimenting or measuring quantity, amount, intensity or frequency (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). Thompson et. al (1989) explain the positivist world view from four perspectives, as follows: Firstly, from an ontological perspective, a positivist world view is dualistic which means participants are independent from the research, so that the research will be described from a third-person view. Secondly, the explanation of the event is usually separate from its contextual background, so that the social background of the event is neglected. Thirdly, the research results can be predicted from historical theory. Finally, quantitative researchers also seek to understand one whole phenomenon through analysing one part of it. The research also aims to find out the essential part of different phenomena which can contribute to determining theories and principles (Thompson et al., 1989).

On the other hand, qualitative studies with a contextualist world view place emphasis on interpreting personal experience in its social context. From an ontological perspective, the totality of the human-being-in-the-world will be studied (Heidegger, 1962), which means the researcher will understand individuals in their own terms and social settings. Thirdly, rather than predicting the research results, researchers tend to understand emerging results or themes. In the end, instead of understanding the whole phenomenon through only analysing component parts, qualitative researchers link the specific experiences to each other, and then to the whole life-world (Thompson et al., 1989).

Traditional approaches have been widely used in the study of employee experience, drawing heavily on positivistic studies. Grace and King (2010, 2012), Kim et al. (2010), Maxwell and Knox (2009), Lievens (2007) and Berthon et al. (2005) have all done research on employer branding using quantitative methods. These studies have largely focused on testing rather than deeply exploring employee experiences within different social backgrounds. However, it is not the researcher's intention to argue which method is right or discount the value of quantitative methods as quantitative research based on positivism can sit alongside research based on interpretive methods (Crotty, 1998). Rather, the previous quantitative experimental researches on employees' behaviour have their significant value. Also, when the research aim is to investigate a phenomenon by testing a variable, or gathering and analysing a large amount of data from large samples, it would be hard without using quantitative methods and analyses.

4.1.ii The idea of researcher as bricoleur

The idea of researcher as 'Bricoleur' has also influenced the idea of what my research is. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2008), the researcher can be seen as a *bricoleur*, a person who creates and uses a diverse range of materials to resolve the problem. As such, a bricoleur can have multiple roles according to the different needs and contexts. Similarly, a researcher can also be described differently according to his/her different research: social science researchers may call themselves artists, performers, filmmakers, story tellers, field-workers, while a researcher who is researching in hard science views him or herself as a scientist, a lab researcher, doctor and physicist. Moreover, a bricoleur will not be limited to a small range of techniques; they will invent or create new tools or techniques if the current methods are limited to solve the problem. Or he/ she will piece together or add new tools, methods and techniques if needed. In other words, a bricoleur employs multiple strategies and methods to achieve the goal (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Denzin and Lincoln (2008) emphasise that a qualitative researcher can be seen as bricoleur. While quantitative researchers conduct their research based on seeking to establish truth and evidence through experimentally examining or measuring in terms of quantity, amount, intensity or frequency, qualitative study relies on the individual as a window for exploring the inner lives of those people. Due to the complexity of each individual's background, it would be hard to find a single way to grasp all the variations in human experience, so that an interpretive method with understanding, rather than quantifying, as its goal will be used in qualitative research. In addition, again different from quantitative research which focuses on 'one mind-set' and 'aggregate numbers that are one or more steps removed from social reality (p.73)', qualitative methods are crystallising multiple research ways and strategies across different fields of study (Janesick, 2003), as Flick (2002) indicated, 'qualitative research is inherently multimethod in focus' (Flick, 2002, p.226-227). As a result, a qualitative researcher is open to a wider range of methods and *'refuses to be limited'*, he/she is *'always seeking better ways to make more understandable the worlds of experience they have studied'* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p.12), and *'devise our own ways of proceeding that allow us to achieve our purposes'* (Crotty, 1998, p.13). This is consistent with the characteristics of a bricoleur who aims to achieve their goals with the best tools available for the job.

Furthermore, similar to a bricoleur creating or piecing together the tools after he/she realises the current technique (tool) is not adequate to solve the problem, a qualitative researcher's method will not be made in advance, because *'naturalistic studies are virtually impossible to design in any definitive way before the study is actually undertaken'* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p.187). Rather, the choice is largely dependent on the research questions and the context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008; Nelson et al., 1992). Hence, instead of making finite methodological decisions before the data collection begins, the researcher's methodology choice will be shaped by the research aims and context and will evolve as the research evolves.

In summary, exploring different world views and understanding the idea of the researcher as bricoleur has helped me to identify the research method. However, as Nelson et al. (1992) indicate, research questions, research context and outcomes are also essential in choosing the research method (Nelson et al., 1992). Hence, the aims of the research, together with the nature of the research will be further explored.

4.2 Choosing a research methodology

To explore the role of employer branding in attracting and retaining employees, this research seeks to describe, explain and understand the experiences of employees in a social, contextual and personal way. Hence, this study is based on an interpretive approach with understanding rather than quantifying as its goal. The lack of research on employer branding also indicates that the current study is exploratory in nature. As indicated by King and Horrocks (2010), researchers need to understand clearly *'what is it that we want to know'* (the nature of the research) and *'what is the purpose of the research'* (the aims of the research) so that we are able to answer *'how this might be achieved'* (King & Horrocks, 2010, p.15). Hence, the aims of the research, together with the nature of the research will be explained as they all play a key role in choosing the methodology.

4.3 Research questions

Using the dance metaphor (Janesick, 2003), choreographers ask themselves *'what do I want to say in this dance?'* before actually choreographing, qualitative researchers begin their research journey by asking *'what do I want to know in this study* (p.5)*'?* Only after clearly setting the research question, researchers can select the most appropriate method to achieve the research aims (Janesick, 2003). As Crotty (1998) states:

> *'we plan our research in terms of that issue or problem or question…we go on to ask, are the further issues, problems or questions implicit in the one we start with? What, then, is the aim and what are the objectives of our research? What strategy seems likely to provide what we are looking for? What does that strategy direct us to do to achieve our aims and objectives?' (Crotty, 1998, p.11).*

The gaps identified within the existing literature help to structure the research questions. The four research focuses presented in Chapter 3 are:

1. Research focus one: further explore the employer branding's role in employee attraction. This research will identify the employer branding's attributes that improve the job seekers' likelihood to apply for jobs, later focus on exploring what have shaped job seekers' perceptions towards the brand attractiveness.

2. Research focus two: employer branding's role in employee retention. Through exploring the application of employer branding in employee retention, what motivate employees to be loyal to the employer brand will be identified. Companies' employer branding strategies can be adapted accordingly. Moreover, factors that may shape employees' perceptions towards the brand commitment will be explored.

3. Research focus three: understanding employer branding within the HR paradigm. The third research focus is to understand and explain the concept of employer branding by integrating literature from both marketing and HR. Theories from both human resource and organisational psychology will be explored to pursue a better understanding toward employees' brand attraction and commitment behaviour.

4. Research focus four: Employer branding in China, the emerging marketing. However most of the existing researches still largely focus on employer branding in the context of western companies, the needs for the guidelines of employer branding implementation within the Chinese companies are highlighted. As Chinese employees' behaviours are shaped by the unique national social-culture and value system, how Chinese employees perceive employer branding attraction and commitment is expected to be different from that in the Western companies. Therefore, the fourth research focus is to explore employer branding implementation in China.

Three main research questions are developed accordingly:

1. What are employer branding's attributes that improve the likelihood of job seekers applying for jobs?

2. What motivates hired employees to be loyal to the employer brand and stay for a long period of time?

3. What shapes employees' perceptions of employer brand attraction and retention, in the context of Chinese companies?

4.3.i The nature of this research

To answer the research questions, this study will explore the meaning of employees' lived experience in their own terms and social settings. Hence, the nature of the research question indicates an interpretive study which focuses on understanding and insight will be appropriate.

Secondly, the lack of research into employer branding, especially the studies which focus on employees' experiences indicates that the study is exploratory in nature. As Ambler and Barrow (1996) indicate, employer branding has not been widely researched, as they describe the previous research as 'simply to test the water'. Hence, rather than testing an existing model, by adopting an inductive method, the aim of this research is to understand employees' experiences and finally develop a framework for understanding the role employer branding plays in employee attraction and retention and what factors employees perceive as important for job attraction and retention.

4.4 Understanding employees' experience

Previous employer branding research has focused on the employees' behaviour at an institutionalised level rather than focusing on individual employees. However, there is a need for research which focuses on the employees' experiences (Wilden et al., 2010; Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Moroko & Uncles 2008; Lievens, 2007; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2005). Employees are coming from different social backgrounds, as such, are uniquely individual. This research would not ignore the differences between each individual employee. Rather, the researcher is aware of the unique nature of individual employee, as well as the importance of exploring their personal lived experience.

Rather than examining a large quantity of data for testing employees' behaviour which would not be possible or practical to study each employee in great depth, writers in this field have already encouraged future research to focus on employees' experiences. In Maxwell and Knox (2009)'s research on motivating employees to 'live the brand', after conducting their research based on a quantitative method, they have indicated that *'different methods will be needed to study employer brand attractiveness (p.904)'* because different employees perceive branding differently. In addition, they have also state that qualitative methods '*are likely to play an ongoing role in future research*', as a qualitative methods tends to focus on individuals' in-depth personal story (p.904).

Other researchers also call for employer branding studies to focus on employees' different experiences. Vallaster and de Chernatony (2005) indicate that to ensure employees behaviour, companies are required to know the different mindset of their members. Also, because of the diversity of backgrounds among staff, the process of developing a shared brand understanding is complex. These factors demonstrate that it is important that future research focus on employees as individuals.

Lievens (2007) also realises the lack of research which focuses on different employees from different social backgrounds. In his study on how employer branding attracts potential military employees, he has identified the lack of studies on employer branding from different groups of individuals. He indicates that *'to know whether the same factor makes an employer attractive for the three different groups'* (p.54) is of both theoretical and practical necessary. For theoretical contribution, different models based on different individual employees can be built for exploring the employer branding theory. For a practical contribution, research that focuses on multiple groups of employees should provide organisations with rich information on meeting employees' physical and social needs, which may attract and retain the right people (Lievens, 2007).

Moroko and Uncles (2008) also call for learning the experience of different employees by extending the range of research participants to potential and current employees. They indicate that expanding the participants range *'might yield fruitful insights'* (Moroko &

Uncles, 2008). Wilden et al. (2010)'s research on employee recruitment also shows that employees' choice on new jobs is influenced by their previous experiences. For current employees, their career development is also different according to their working experiences: '*more experiences respondents were like to value a specific company's contribution to their career profile and the chances for promotion, whilst less experienced respondents expressed greater utility from short-term phenomena such as income*' (Wilden et al., 2010, p.65). Hence it is worth exploring deeper on how each individual's different previous experiences affect their job decisions.

Therefore, developing a methodological approach which can better capture the personal experiences of employees with rich descriptions is the primary concern of this research. As this research is 'data-driven' rather than 'method-driven', gaining a proper amount of data for deciding the method is also essential. Additionally, to explore different types of methods and the wish to identify a 'perfect' one for this research, I decided to conduct a set of pilot interviews. Janesick (2003) called the pilot practise 'stretching exercises' as dancers need to stretch their bodies before the main performance starts. This pre-exercise allows researchers to practise their skills to 'refine their research instruments' (p.58). Three pilot studies were carried out in the early stage of this PhD journey, with one CEO, one department manager and one front-line staff.

The interview results show that employees perceive their company's employer branding differently. The salience of factors for attracting and retaining individuals are different. This difference may be caused by employees' personal circumstances such as age, position in the organisation and previous experiences. Hence, the necessity to develop a methodological approach which can gain rich descriptions and better capture individual's experiences has been confirmed.

4.5 Understanding the researcher's role

> *'the qualitative researcher is like the choreographer who creates a dance to make a statement…In addition, the researcher is, like the dancer, always a part of the research project…Whether or not the dancer is performing a minuet or an improvisation, like the qualitative researcher, she is involved in interpretation' (Janesick, 2003, p.73).*

4.5.i Researcher's role in this research

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have proposed that the nature of each phenomena, no matter whether the phenomena is '*physical, chemical, biological, social, psychological (p.189)'*, all need to be researched and considered in their own contexts and should be understand in terms of their relationship to the time and context. They explain as '*reality constructions cannot be separated from the world in which they are experienced and that any observations that might be made are inevitably time- and context- dependent' (p.189).* Furthermore, researchers are seen as important within the interpretive paradigm because they are able to use their knowledge and methods to implement the contextual inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, Crotty (1998) states that the researcher is also responsible for developing a unique method as each study is unique. Therefore, in this study, I explored participants' social worlds and then translated them into the format of knowledge for academics, professionals and public through using and developing a unique method which fits the research requirements (Rosalind & Ribbens, 1998).

More specifically, while emphasising the importance of listening to stories of individual employees, the researcher, as the person who is within the story-telling process, is the one who *'came to speak with them… makes choices about what to emphasize and what to hold back'*. He/she also needs to *'pay attention to what we think this person is trying to tell us within the context of this relationship, this research setting, and a particular location in the social world (p.136-137)'*. Additionally, the researcher has to *'theorize our respondents' accounts and lives, and locate them within wider academic and theoretical debates'* and also *'understand the extent to which our own theoretical stances have influenced the theoretical accounts we have given concerning our respondents' lives (p.141)'*. When analysing the interview data, he/she will decide *'which particular issues to focus on…how to interpret their words…[and] categorize their words into overarching themes'*. When writing up their voices and publishing our research, '*we are nonetheless the ones who will be speaking for them…in the privileged position of naming and representing other people's realities…giving our respondents a voice in public arenas and represent (p.139)'* (Rosalind & Doucet, 1998).

Janesick (2003) emphasises that qualitative research requires the researcher to be the research instrument: 'the researcher must have the ability to observe behaviour and must sharpen the skills necessary for observation and face-to-face interview'. Unlike quantitative study, whose data analysis can be finished by hiring professionals, qualitative researcher 'do not hire people to analyse and interpret their data'. Rather, they will stay close to the data and show their presence in the data interpretation, both physically and mentally. Rather than only getting involved into the research, qualitative researcher is even described as the 'backbone of the study' who need to show their passion on 'people, communication and understanding people' (p.57, p.71). Through passionately engaging with the work, the researcher is allowed to have freedom to explore the individual's lived experiences.

4.5.ii Qualitative researchers may face dilemmas

Mauthner and Doucet (1998) state that the centre of a qualitative research process is to recognise researcher's role in keeping respondents' voices and perspectives alive, and how this can shape the research process and results. However, it has also been realised that the contradiction between the impossibility of a researcher to keep neutral and the fact that it is the researcher who will shape the research process.

However, when researchers try to position themselves within the research to understand more on the participants' experiences, they may also face dilemmas. Ribbens and Edwards (1998) have raised the question for an interpretive researcher: who is my research 'for'? Whether this study is for participants to present their personal experiences and stories, or for researcher for her academic ambitious, or for academic audience for theoretical contribution? They also indicate that how to collect, interpret, analyse and theorise participants' personal experiences while simultaneously seeking to serve the public and academic audience has been a concern for many years. One the one hand, there is a risk that researchers may interpret the voice of the participants with only concern for the academic and public. On the other hand, researchers may also only be faithful to the participants without concerning the professional audiences. Hence, how to keep the balance between the researchers' seeking to keep participants' voice alive while recognising the role of themselves in shaping the research into public has been a concern through this research journey.

Facing this challenge, I presented an honest account of the research process rather than neglecting the problem. To balance the voices from the participants, from the researcher herself/himself and the voices from the existing theories, research limitations are identified in the first place. Although the published work is not exactly the version of what the respondents expect or all of the issues they regard as paramount, I have always attempted to listen closely to the voice of participants in detail and hear more of their voices and understand more of their perspective. Also, I critically analysed current methods through self-reflecting on the documented paths at each stage of the research journey, and I am open to alternative approaches at the same time.

In terms of balancing the research with the voice of existing theory, I will be open to explore existing theory and literature but with adjusting the study through balancing her role with the existing theory and the stories from the participants at the same time. Janesick (2003)'s choreography metaphor to describe the qualitative research process has helped me understand the role of 'theory' in this research design. It is described that there are two dance forms: minuet and improvisation. The minuet dancer strictly follows the instructions from the teacher while the improvisation dancer is encouraged to interpret the idea in their own way. Janesick (2003) describes qualitative research beginning as a minuet dancer who follows the extant theories. However, as more information emerges from the interviews, qualitative researcher will be inspired to explore the phenomenon deeper with their personal interpretation rather than limiting themselves within the existing theoretical framework. As a result, further interviews may be required and new theoretical frameworks are needed to be explored.

Therefore, this research intends to promote the research process and exams the study through balancing my role with the existing theory and the stories from the participants. Besides, Janesick also suggests that 'a good way' to achieve this is through the researchers' self-reflexivity in the research journey (Janesick, 2003).

4.5.iii Researcher's self-reflexivity

> *'Just as dance mirrors and adapts to life, qualitative design is adapted, changed, and redesigned as the study proceeds, due to the social realities of doing research among and with the living' (Janesick, 2003,p.73).*

Traditional marketing literatures have claimed that doing an objective and scientific research requires the data collection and analysis process to keep neutral. This has encouraged the researcher, as the person who conducts the research to keep a dispassionate, objective position in relation to their research. As a result, the influences of the researcher's own perspectives on the results of the research are minimised (Bettany & Woodruff-Burton, 2009). However Law (2004) argues that if all the vagueness, slipperiness, contradiction, ambivalences and unpredictability from the engagements of the researcher are cleaned, researchers may also '*forget to practise, to relate and to feel'* so that *'the human passionate element of research'* is also lost (Law, 2004).

Mills (2000) emphasises the importance of researchers' self-reflecting in the research journey. Mills (2000) first indicates that to be an '*intellectual workman*', referring a social researcher, *'[he] must learn to use [his] life experience in [his] intellectual work'*. More specifically, researchers should '*continually examine and interpret*' their experiences and also become '*personally involved in every intellectual product on which you may work*' (p.196). Therefore, researchers' past experiences can shape the present study, and it can also help to define the capacity of the future research.

To achieve this, Mills (2000) suggests that a social researcher should have a 'personal file'. This file is a combination of personal experience and professional activities. On one hand, the researcher's personal experiences, here referring to 'the researcher's voice', will be seen as part of the research which directly relates to work in progress. Furthermore, the continual self-reflecting process will also encourage the capturing of new ideas and new thinking. Mills refers these new ideas as the 'fringe-thoughts' and states that we should not let these new ideas pass, instead, we will formulate them for current and future research. On the other hand, researchers are also suggested to reflect back to existing theories, frameworks or literature in the research area, as referring to 'the voice of others' (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998).

Mills summarises that '*by keeping an adequate file and thus developing self-reflective habits',* the researcher will '*keep your inner world awake'* (Mills, 2000, p.197). It has been realised the importance of keeping my inner world awake and open so that I have personally involved with the subject and have experienced the subject since the study began. Firstly, the nature of the topic already shows that this research will explore the life of human beings, through the voice of the employees, rather than figures, lab experiments or scientific research. Secondly, during this research journey, I am not afraid to use my own experience and relate it to the work. I communicate with participants and we share each other's experiences during the interview. Additionally, reading through each interview transcripts is also helpful for reflecting how the previous interviews can shape the present interview, as well as for adjusting the structure and direction of the future research. As Mills (2000) indicates:

> *'To say that you can 'have experience,' means, for one thing, that your past plays into the affects your present, and that it defines your capacity for future experience (p.196).'*

In the meantime, it has been understood that my own theoretical stances may be influenced by the theoretical accounts within the research as researchers can consciously or unconsciously locate themselves in some particular theoretical and ontological framework. As a result, I may only focus attention on certain issues and ignore others. Mauthner and Doucet (1998) have proposed that the best way to solve this problem is self-reflexivity, to reflect on the way in which the research is carried out and trace back to the original choices and decisions, as well as the original data to help find out what has been lost and what has been gained (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998).

Chapter Summary

In summary, this chapter presents the key issues which have influenced the development of the research methods. Specifically, this research is exploratory in nature, aims to understand employer branding build based on employees' personal experiences. As each individual comes from different social backgrounds, this research will understand their experiences in a social context. Those have all largely affected the choice of methods. Also, the role of the researcher as 'getting involved into the research' has been identified, as well as the importance of self-reflection through the research journey. Meanwhile, the credibility of the data has also been discussed (See Figure 4.1: Key issues which have influenced the developing of research methods). The above analysis has informed and directed the methodological decisions in the following chapters.

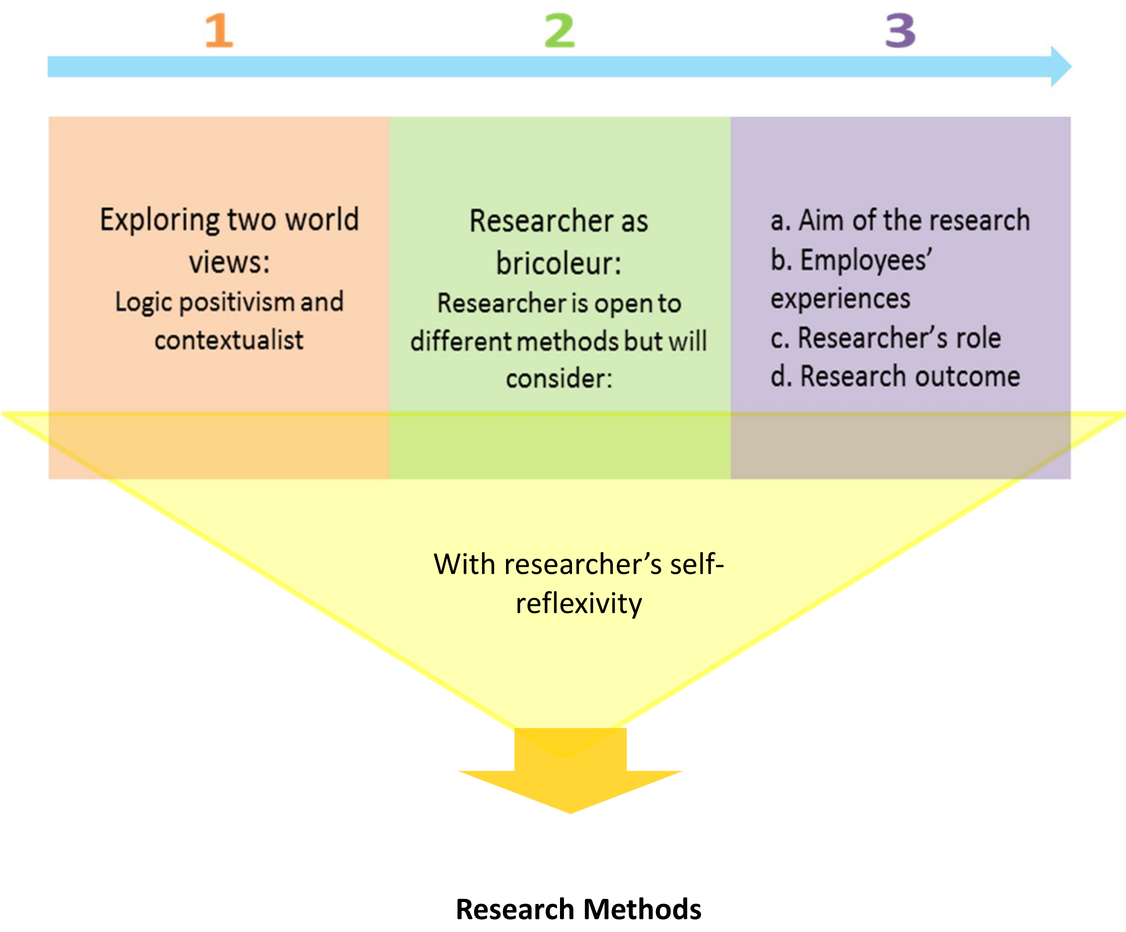

Figure 4.1: Key issues which have influenced the developing of research methods

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH DESIGN AND EXPERIENCES

Chapter 4 centres on methodological issues and explores the nature of the topic and the philosophical assumptions behind the research. This chapter presents the methods decisions and steps taken. It provides a reflexive account of the research experience. Through interjecting my own voice and experiences, my ideas and understandings about the research design is presented in detail.

This chapter is structured to include discussion of the methodological choices and decisions made together with a detailed overview of the approaches employed and the data analysis method.

5.1 Methodological choices and decisions

This research stands at a contexualist position with emphasis on personal experience in its social context. Individuals' experiences will be understood in participants' own terms and social settings. The notion of researcher as 'bricoleur' is also seen as important, incorporating the idea that researchers are not limited to a single way of grasping all the variations in human experience. Therefore, instead of assuming a fixed preference or predefined evaluation of good or bad methodological choices (Silverman, 2011), the choice between different research methods will depend upon what I am trying to find out, in other words, methods will fit my research question and the research context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Brinkmann (2013) indicates that research objectives should be considered before conducting any research. For example, whether the research is exploratory in nature (Brinkmann, 2013). The focus of this research is exploring people's experiences described from a first-person view. It seeks to relate descriptions of employees' specific experiences to each other and to the overall context of their life-world. It is envisaged that the outcome of this research will be a thematic description of their experiences. Therefore the chosen method should fit in this research focus and enable me to answer the research questions.

Qualitative methods are arguably the most naturally used in studying individual lived experiences (Brinkmann, 2013). Qualitative research provides unique insights into how people behave and into why they behave as they do (Belk et al., 2012). Marshall and

Rossman (2006) also suggest that qualitative methods can be applied in the areas of individual lived experiences, languages and communications, society and culture studies (Brinkmann, 2013 cited from Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Therefore a qualitative research method, with its characteristics of capturing individual's experiences is believed appropriate for this study.

To evaluate whether qualitative methods are appropriate, Silverman (2011)'s exercise of 'Should I use qualitative research?' has been consistently considered through my PhD journey. Table 5.1 in the next page introduces these six questions. Answers to these questions can be found in Chapter 4 and each question will be further answered in the following sections. Table 5.1 also provides the sources of each answer.

Table 5.1: Should I use qualitative research? (Silverman, 2011, p.8 adapted from Punch, 1998, p.8-9)	
1. What exactly am I trying to find out? Different questions require different methods to answer them.	Chapter 4, section 4.1, 4.2 and 4.4; Chapter 5, section 5.1 and 5.2
2. What kind of focus on my topic do I want to achieve? Do I want to study this phenomenon or situation in detail? Or am I mainly interested in making standardised and systematic comparisons and in accounting for variance?	Chapter 4, section 4.2,4.3 and 4.4; Chapter 5, section 5.1and 5.2
3. How have other researchers dealt with this topic? To what extent do I wish to align my project with this literature?	Chapter 4, section 4.4; Chapter 5, section 5.2.i
4. What practical considerations should away my choice? For instance, how long might my study take and do I have the resources to study it this way? Can I get access to the single case I want to study in depth? Are quantitative samples and data readily available?	Chapter 4, section 4.4; Chapter 5, section 5.2
5. Will we learn more about this topic using quantitative or qualitative methods? What will be the knowledge pay-off of each method?	Chapter 5, section 5.2.iii
6. What seems to work best for me? Am I committed to a particular research model which implies a particular methodology? Do I have gut feeling about what a good piece of research looks like?	Chapter 5, section 5.2.iii, 5.2.iv and section 5.5

5.2 Methods

This section firstly reviews the main aim of the research which largely shapes the methods choices. Primary research methods are developed accordingly which are believed to be the most appropriate to match the aims of this research. The use of depth interviews as the main data collection method is discussed in detail. The interview style, interview guide, use of protocol, detailed interview process, sample selection and participant recruitment are explained in detail.

5.2.i Understanding lived experiences

The aim of this study shapes the methodological choices. It is highlighted in Chapter 4, section 4.4 that understanding participants' lived experiences is needed in employer branding research (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2010; Wilden et al., 2010; Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Lievens, 2007). In line with this, the aim of this study is to bridge this gap and understand employer branding attraction and retention through exploring employees' lived experiences. Therefore developing a methodological approach which can better capture employees' personal experiences with rich descriptions is the primary concern. Furthermore, as participants are experts in their own experiences and stories, exploring their lived experiences also requires a method which can encourage participants to describe their thoughts and feelings through their own words in much detail (Reid et al., 2005).

5.2.ii The role of the researcher

Reviewing my position within this study also helps to find a proper data collection approach within a qualitative study. Section 4.5 of Chapter 4 presents the role of researcher in this study. To allow the freedom to explore participants' lived experiences, I will passionately engage with the work through listening to each individual participant's story, speaking for them and presenting their voices in my work. In addition, the chosen method should not let participants feel I know more about the topic. A method which encourages rich description of participants' experiences is required rather than me communicating my own assumptions about the topic based on prior knowledge. Therefore the chosen approach also needs to capture this equal relationship between participants and my own role as researcher.

5.2.iii Methods choices and development

Qualitative research requires extensive engagement with participants in their social worlds so that research can be conducted in a manner which is responsive to participants. If the researcher stays close to participants and their social setting, this ensures that rich data are collected, and the researcher has a good understanding of the participants' perspectives (Fossey et al., 2002). Therefore, qualitative data are usually collected through interview, projective techniques, archival sources, ethnography, netnography or observations (Belk et al., 2012; Silverman, 2005).

In deciding a specific data collection approach, the research aim, nature of the research as exploring lived experiences of Chinese job seekers and hired employees, and the role of the researcher in this study dictate that data collection method should:

- Allow deep understanding of participants' experiences. In addition, to achieve the goal of deeply understanding the researched subject, the research design must also remain flexible and adapt to the actual experiences that each individual has had.
- Encourage researcher and participants in the coproduction of knowledge in which participants are involved as the study examines their personal experiences, meanwhile researchers are also involved as they study participants' experiences deeply and researchers aspire to understand their participants (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009).
- Adhere to the philosophical position of the research (Brinkmann, 2013). Silverman (2009, p.121) argues that the choice of the method should reflect an overall research strategy, therefore considering whether the method is consistent with the epistemological stance of the research is necessary (King & Horrocks, 2010; Silverman, 2009).

Among different qualitative data collection methods, interviews can incorporate these requirements in the following ways:

- Interviews have the primacy to learn how individual experiences certain phenomenon. It is argued that the interview can be the most powerful means of attaining an in-depth understanding of another person's experiences (Thompson et al., 1989, p.138). Rather than a superficial excavation of participants' knowledge about a topic, an interview delves more deeply into the subject as the conversation proceeds. It aims to obtain people's interpretations of their own experiences and understanding of the world in which they live and work (Belk et al., 2012).
- Depth interviews are also flexible in nature. Interview questions are not fully designed in advance and interview topics are allowed to emerge during the course of the interview, therefore, interview questions are usually different within participant groups, or from participant to participant and they can also be redesigned according to emergent themes and concepts during the conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).
- Interviews also encourage researchers and participants share their knowledge. As both researcher and participants are people, they interact and mutually influence each other

through developing a rapport and sharing feelings, personality, interests and experiences during their conversation.

- Although the researcher initially establishes the general direction of the interview, participants still set a more specific topic path. Interviewer and respondents are also both in positions of equality (Kvale, 1983). Researchers do not take on the role of a more powerful or knowledgeable character, so participants are able to direct the specific path of the discussion as they are the experts on their own experiences. The interviewer keeps a low-key position with an open-ended approach so that this relationship encourages participants to reveal topics, concerns and meanings that are important in their experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005; Thompson et al., 1989).
- According to Silverman (2011), research which follows the positivist paradigm usually generates data which are valid and reliable and independent from the research settings. The data reflects facts about behaviour and attitudes. Random samples are selected with standardised questions to gain research results which are presented in tabulations. In contrast, researches which follow emotionalism aim to give an authentic insight into people's experiences, as such the main approaches to understand people's experiences are unstructured, open-ended interview (See Table 5.2: Epistemology stance and its methods, Silverman, 2011). Qualitative interviews fit with the epistemological stance of this study, ensuring the researcher engages with participants through understanding their first-person descriptions of experiences, feelings and social worlds (Fossey et al., 2002).

Table 5.2: Epistemology stance and its methods (Silverman, 2011, p.170)

	Status of data	Methods
Positivism	Facts about behaviour and attitudes	Random samples Standardised questions Tabulations
Emotionalism	Authentic experiences	Unstructured, open-ended interview

Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009) 'Twelve Aspects of Qualitative Research Interviews' also conclude that the characteristics of qualitative interviews fit with my research design (See Table 5.3: Twelve Aspects of Qualitative Research Interview, Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.28). These twelve aspects of interviews reflect that the interview seeks to understand participants' experiences through exploring their life world. It is a flexible method which focuses on understanding and describing meanings in normal, everyday language.

Interviewers keep their 'Naiveté' during the conversation and are open to learning about participants' life stories. They are also open to new insights and awareness emerging from the conversation, therefore the subsequent interviews are adjusted accordingly. This method also stands in an interpretivist philosophical position without attempting to quantify the findings.

Table 5.3: Twelve Aspects of Qualitative Research Interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.28)
Life world. The topic of qualitative interviews is the everyday lived world of the interviewee and his or her relation to it.
Meaning. The interview seeks to interpret the meaning of central themes in the life world of the subject. The interviewer registers and interprets the meaning of what is said as well as how it is said.
Qualitative. The interview seeks qualitative knowledge expressed in normal language, it does not aim at quantification.
Descriptive. The interview attempts to obtain open nuanced descriptions of different aspects of the subjects' life worlds.
Specificity. Descriptions of specific situations and action sequences are elicited, not general opinions.
Deliberate Naiveté. The interviewer exhibits openness to new and unexpected phenomena, rather than having readymade categories and schemes of interpretation.
Focused. The interview is focused on particular themes; it is neither strictly structured with standardised questions, nor entirely "nondirective".
Ambiguity. Interviewee statements can sometimes be ambiguous, reflecting contradictions in the world the subject lives in.
Change. The process of being interviewed may produce new insights and awareness, and the subject may in the course of the interview come to change his or her descriptions and meanings about a theme.
Sensitivity. Different interviewers can produce different statements on the same themes, depending on their sensitivity to and knowledge of the interview topic.
Interpersonal Situation. The knowledge obtained is produced though the interpersonal interaction in the interview.
Positive Experience. A well carried out research interview can be a rare and enriching experience for the interviewee, who may obtain new insights into his or her life situation.

5.2.iv Interview

> *'If you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk to them?'*
>
> Kvale, 1996, p.1

As depth interviews are chosen as the main data collection method, this section discusses the interview process in detail.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) present seven steps that are involved in a qualitative depth interview: thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying and reporting (See Table 5.4: Seven Stages of an Interview Inquiry, Kavle & Brinkmann, 2009, p.102).

Table 5.4: Seven Stages of an Interview Inquiry (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.102)
1. *Thematizing*. Formulate the purpose of an investigation and the conception of the theme to be investigated before the interviews start. The why and what of the investigation should be clarified before the question of how-method- is posed. 2. *Designing*. Plan the design of the study, taking into consideration all seven stages of the investigation, before interviewing. Designing the study is undertaken with regard to obtaining the intended knowledge and taking into account the moral implications of the study. 3. *Interviewing*. Conduct the interviews based on an interview guide and with a reflective approach to the knowledge sought and the interpersonal relation of the interview situation. 4. *Transcribing*. Prepare the interview material for analysis, which generally includes a transcription from oral speech to written text. 5. *Analyzing*. Decide, on the basis of the purpose and topic of the investigation and of the nature of the interview material, which modes of analysis aer appropriate for the interviews. 6. *Verifying*. Ascertain the validity, reliability, and generalizability of the interview findings. Reliability refers to how consistent the results are, and validity means whether an interview study investigates what is intended to be investigated. 7. *Reporting*. Communicate the findings of the study and the methods applied in a form that lives up to scientific criteria, takes the ethical aspects of the investigation into consideration, and results in a readable product.

Accordingly, the interviews in this study also proceed in seven steps (See Table 5.5: Seven Stages of Interview in this Study, adapted from 'Seven Stages of an Interview Inquiry' Kvale & Brikmann, 2009, p.102):

Table 5.5: Seven Stages of Interview in this Study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.102)
1. *Thematizing*. Exploring employees' experiences of employer branding attraction and retention. 2. *Designing*. Planning the interviews with 19 employees in a range of different positions in a number of Chinese companies. 3. *Interviewing*. A detailed guide is used for individual interviews, each of which lasted about 90 minutes to 120 minutes and was recorded. 4. *Transcribing*. All 19 interviews were transcribed verbatim and then translated into English. 5. *Analyzing*. The interviews were analysed using thematic analysis method. 6. *Verifying*. Reliability and validity checks were attempted throughout the project. 7. *Reporting*. The analysis results were presented in Chapter 6, 7 and 8.

5.2.v Style of interview

Two types of interviews are adopted in this study: face-to-face interview and online interview.

- **Face-to-face interview**

Face-to-face interviews, it is argued, present the richest source of knowledge as during face-to-face interviews *'people are present not only as conversing minds, but as flesh and bold creatures that may laugh, cry, smile, tremble, and otherwise give away much information in terms of gestures, body languages, and facial expressions'* (Brinkmann, 2013, p.28). Although this research would not record participants' gestures, body languages or facial expressions in much detail, interview quality is improved as observing participants' expressions and reactions helps to better pick up the topics they are passionate about or interested in and therefore guides the interviewer to discuss these areas further, by using probing techniques to elicit underlying information, for example. During this study, one of the participants cried when she talked about having to give up the original job she particularly loved. I showed my empathy and encouraged her to talk more about this experience which is discussed in detail in the data interpretation chapters.

- **Online interviews**

Online interviews are valuable when interviewing geographically distant participants (Langdridge, 2007). Five interviews were conducted over the Internet.

The participants and I were online at the same time and communicating in real time, face-to-face through online chat software. QQ is used as it is the most widely used online chat software in China. QQ is similar with Skype which provides a high quality 'video call' function. All five participants who were interviewed online have experience of using this software for a long period of time. As these five participants are working in different cities away from family, they contact their family members regularly (usually twice a week) using QQ so they are familiar with the software and feel comfortable using it.

The advantages of this chat-software assistant online interview include firstly, it allowed me to approach participants who are geographically distant. Secondly, compared with a telephone interview, online face-to-face interviews can approach a conversational format that resembles face-to-face interviews which enables the trust, confidentiality and contextual richness (Brinkmann, 2013).

5.2.vi Interview guide

Qualitative research textbooks have provided practical guidelines to conduct depth interviews. Although detailed guidelines vary among different resources, in general, the idea that interviews should adhere to a conversational style with the aim of motivating participants to engage in the conversation naturally has been highlighted in nearly every qualitative textbook.

For example, Langdridge (2007) indicates that participants are more open and honest when they naturally engage with the conversation so that data is in greater richness. The interview can also be a relaxed affair for both interviewer and interviewee. Following this principle, a summary of guiding outlines includes:

- Take the time to put the interviewee at ease
- Follow the interviewee's pace, slowing down or speeding up where necessary, allowing time for people to chat
- While there may be a list of topics the interview aims to follow, the conversation does not necessarily have to follow the topic order.
- Avoid interrupting the interviewee
- Ask one question at one time, keep things simple and clear

- Do not be afraid of silence, give participants time to think (Langdridge, 2007)

Belk et al. (2012) also highlight that a depth interview is conversation in nature : *'Like other conversations it involves turn-taking, an interest in what the other person has to say, and a coherent flow of topics'* (Belk et al., 2012, p.35). They also propose guidelines for in-depth interview:

- Funnel questions in a sequence from general to specific
- Do not ask why
- Do not ask yes/no questions
- Use probes judiciously and strategically to elicit elaboration without interrupting the flow of an answer that is going well on its own
- Try to circle back to earlier topics for greater depth and as a lead-in to missing areas of the discussion
- Be willing to explore tangential topics that the interview brings up, but use good judgment about when to guide the interview back on-topic

Thompson et al. (1989) also provide guiding principles of depth interview techniques:

- The course of the dialogue is largely set by the respondent
- Participants do not feel that interviewer knows more about the topic than them
- Interview questions are not going to confirm theoretical hypotheses
- Interview questions are developed from the conversation. Using respondent's own words to phrase the question
- Avoiding asking 'why' questions as answers with rich descriptions of lived experiences are difficult to be generated
- Interview questions are short descriptive questions which provide opening for a respondent's lengthier and detailed descriptions.

These traditional interview guidelines offer me an insight as to how to conduct interviews in detail. However considering each individual participant is different, these interview guides can be adjusted for each individual participants and different interview environments. Section 5.2.viii presents how I applied these interview guidelines with considering the actual situation in detail.

5.2.vii Use of protocol

Thompson et al. (1989) indicate that within depth-interviews, except for an opening question, the interviewer has no a priori questions. The interview is clear not in a 'question-answer' format but the dialogue is circular as the descriptive questions *'flow from the course of the dialogue and not from a predetermined path'* (Thompson et al., 1989, p.138). However this interview style has also been criticised concerning the way in which depth interviews can be difficult to manage as interviews are unstructured in nature. Another concern raised is that, compared with semi-structured interviews, an unstructured interview lacks structure to support the flow of the interview. As a result, interviews can potentially turn into a normal conversation without covering any research topics. For example, Langdridge (2007) criticises that:

> *'Unstructured interviews are, however, tricky things to manage, and especially to manage well. The construction of an interview schedule and the consistent application that is vital with semi-structured interviewing provides a structure to support the researcher and the collection of good-quality data. Without these structures, there is a greater likelihood of failing to achieve the aims of a study' (Langdridge, 2007, p.68).*

Using protocols helps researchers to face this challenge. *'A protocol is a list of topics instead of a list of questions. The interviewer generally memorises the protocol, but has no predetermined specific questions or question ordering'* (Belk et al., 2012, p. 35). Essentially, a protocol is researchers' own agenda concerning the topics they wish to discuss or notes that act as memo (Langdridge, 2007).

Considering the range of topics to be explored is important (Langdridge, 2007). Drawing on employer branding literature, interviews will centre around two main topics: job application and retention. Therefore, I have chosen two broad areas that need to be addressed in the interview: participants' experiences as a job seeker in the job market and participants' experiences as existing employees within a company. I have also tried to keep the balance between following the interview guide to address important issues and providing participants with sufficient opportunities to bring up perspectives that are unanticipated. Additionally, as changing the interview guide is advisable during a qualitative interview to elicit participants' accounts of their experiences; therefore insights I gained in the preceding interviews are used to inform subsequent conversations and interviews (King & Horrocks, 2010).

However Belk et al. (2012) reminds researchers that interview questions can turn into an invisible questionnaire when using the same protocols repeatedly as a routine (Belk et al., 2012). I have considered this risk and adjusted the interview strategy accordingly. Firstly, the protocols designed are broad in nature without attempting to cover any detailed interview topics. Secondly, as Langdridge (2007) suggests: *'there is a list of topics the interview* *should follow, but the* conversation... (may not) *..strictly follow the order of the topic'* (Langdridge, 2007, p.68). Therefore, the extent of following the designed protocols varies between different interviews, especially when conversations were flowing smoothly and naturally, I would follow the participants' interests to structure the conversation rather than strictly follow the protocol outlines. Figure 5.1 in next page demonstrates an example of topics I proposed before conducting interview (See Figure 5.1: Examples of using protocol during interview).

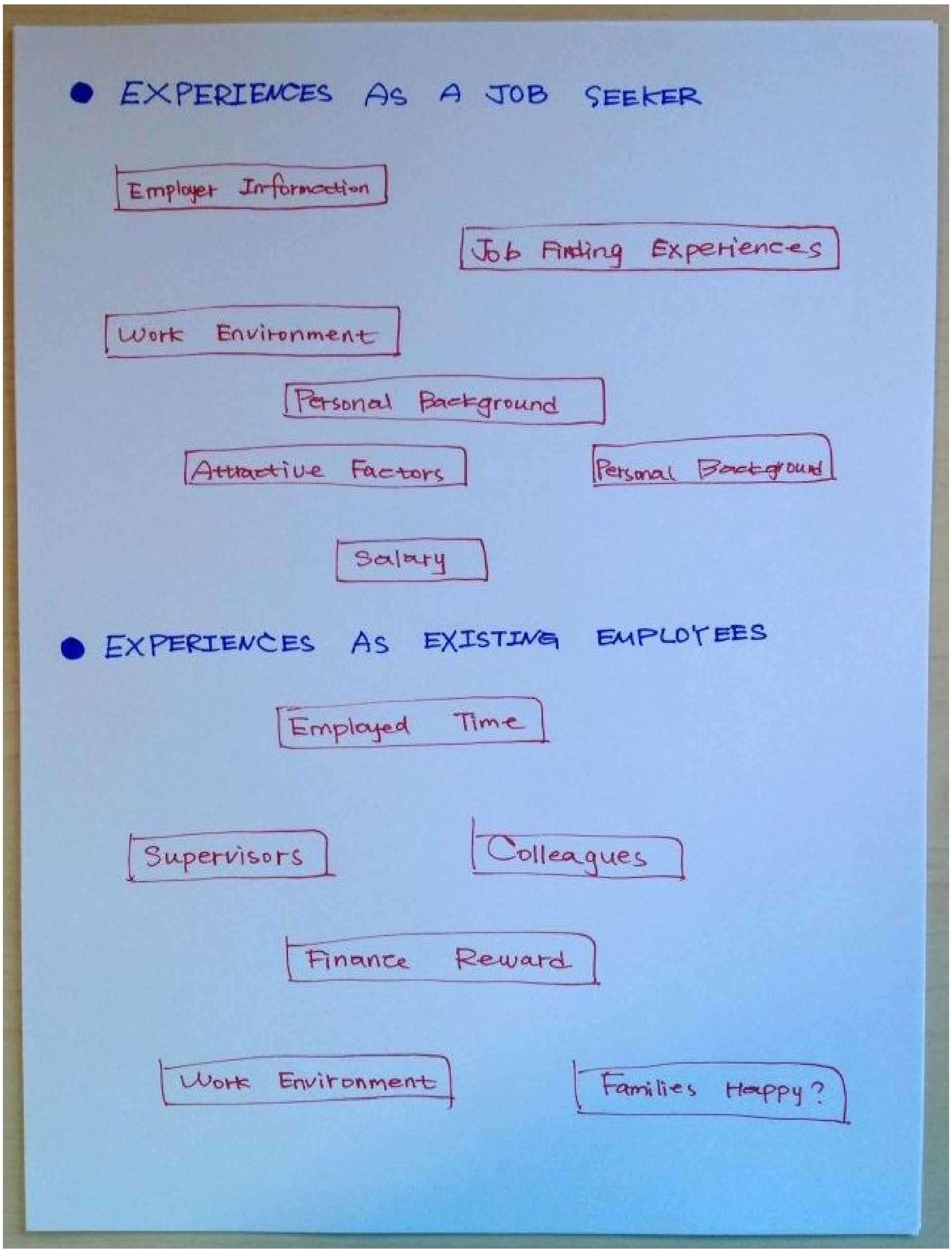

Figure 5.1: Examples of using protocol during interview

5.2.viii Sample selection

'Do less, more thoroughly'

---Brinkmann, 2013 cited from Wolcott, 2009, p.95

- **Sample size**

An appropriate sample size for qualitative research has been discussed in various papers and books. However Fossey et al. (2002) indicate that the richness of data should be the primary concern, rather than the number of interviews. In fact, *'no fixed minimum number of participants is necessary to conduct sound qualitative research, however, sufficient depth of information needs to be gathered to fully describe the phenomena being studied'* (p.72). Kvale and Brinkmann (2008) also suggest qualitative researchers '*interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know*' (p.113). Similar opinions can also be found in Brinkmann's (2013) book in which he indicates that '*fewer interviews that are thoroughly analysed are preferable to many interviews that are only superficially explored*' (p.163). Langdridge (2007) also emphasises that '*it is perfectly possible to carry out a worthwhile research project with just one participant or indeed tens of participants…the most important factor is the quality of the data*' (p.102). It can be concluded that qualitative projects aim to thoroughly analyse in depth rather than generalising the research results. Therefore, information richness, rather than the number of interviews, should be the main concern in qualitative sampling (Fossey et al., 2002).

Deciding a proper sample size is also driven by a combination of theoretical/methodological demands and practical constraints (Langdridge, 2007). For the theoretical/methodological demands, the previous section indicates that this study is exploratory in nature which aims at understanding participants' lived experiences. Therefore the nature of this study requires the interview to be in-depth so that data is rich enough to describe certain experiences. For the practical constraints, considering the time-nature of both interview and data analysis process, for instance, each interview in this study lasts approximately two to two and half hours and transcribing each interview and translating the Chinese transcript to English also requires a considerable time. Concerning both theoretical/methodological demands and the practical constrains, 19 interviews were conducted in total.

- **Sampling technique**

For depth interviews, participants are selected purposively to maximise representation of a range of perspectives relate to the research topics (Fossey et al., 2002). This study looks for maximum variation cases to obtain information about how employees from different positions evaluate employer branding. The adopted sample selection technique is information-oriented selection which aims to *'maximize the utility of information from small samples and single cases'* and participants are selected *'on the basis of expectations about their information content'* (Brinkmann, 2013 cited from Flyvbjerg, 2006, p.56).

I sought to recruit participants who represent a variety of positions within companies, of a kind that are expected to throw light on meaningful differences in experiences. Therefore my 19 participants were from different hierarchical positions within different companies.

5.2.ix Profile of the selected participants and their companies

19 participants were recruited from 9 companies with the aim of creating a sample that represented a variety of positions within companies from different industries. These companies comprised of state-owned, large, small and medium sized private companies, as well as foreign investment companies.

Chinese employees view private companies, foreign investment companies and state-owned companies very differently. State-owned companies are popular as they have a reputation for providing job security for life, along with significant benefits. Jobs in a state-owned company are categorized as the 'iron-rice bowl', highlighting the fact that the possibility of losing the job is low. Although the salary in state-owned companies, on average, is less than for similar jobs in the private sector, the benefits offered, such as health insurance, retirement plans, and the benefits for buying the property are much higher. Workloads in state-owned companies are perceived as being less severe. Additionally, as the companies apply an equalised compensation policy across the workforce, the pressure for promotion is less intense (Turban et al., 2001).

Working for private companies is regarded quite differently. Private companies are acknowledged as providing higher than average salaries but with increased workloads. As the contract between private companies and employees are not usually permanent, jobs in private companies are perceived as being less secure and insurance and other benefits not as great. Foreign investment companies usually provide higher and more flexible compensation packages. However, although in general employees can earn up to three times as much as a similarly qualified employee in state-owned companies, working for foreign investment companies is challenging because of the low job security and strenuous workload (Si, 2001). Therefore, it is anticipated that different groups of participants in this study will have different perceptions in relation to employer branding, attraction, and retention. This explains why participants from different companies have been recruited.

Table 5.6 illustrates the profile of the companies taking part and includes information on the size, nature, location, and age of company. For ethical purposes, company names were not disclosed but each company was identified by a number. Company size is determined by the number of employees.

Table 5.6: Profile of participants' companies

Company Name	Company Size	Nature of the company	Company Location	Company age (year)	Number of participants
Company 1	More than 1000 employees	Private company	Inner Mongolia, North of China	8	2
Company 2	Approximately 300 employees	Private company	Beijing, Capital city of China	5	1
Company 3	Approximately 600 employees	State-owned company	Beijing, Capital city of China	10	1
Company 4	Approximately 2000 employees	Foreign investment company	Beijing, Capital city of China	15	1
Company 5	Approximately 2000 employees	Foreign investment company	Beijing, Capital city of China	16	1
Company 6	Approximately 50 employees	Private company	Hebei Province, North of China	15	1
Company 7	Approximately 150 employees	Private company	Henan Province, South of China	10	5
Company 8	Approximately 100 employees	Private company	Xinjiang Province, Northwest of China	4	6
Company 9	Approximately 200 employees	Private company	Zhejiang Province, Southeast of China	25	1

5.2.x The recruitment of participants

Participants were recruited through personal networks and snowballing and I personally recruited participants via Chinese social media networks Renren and QQ, which are similar to Facebook in China. I also asked those already recruited to recommend friends or acquaintances who could be interested in this project and might, potentially, be recruited. This strategy enabled me to successfully recruit 19 participants in total. Table 5.7 illustrates the profiles of each participant, including their personal information and working background. The 'Snowballing map' in the next page shows how each individual was recruited (See Figure 5.2: Snowballing map of participants):

Table 5.7: Profile of participants

	Name	Gender	Age	Institution	Department	Organisation Role	Employed
1	RY	Male	56	Company 6	Management	Company founder	25 years
2	XJ	Male	45	Company 8	Management	Company founder	5 years
3	SZ	Male	55	Company 7	Management	CEO	1 years
4	ST	Male	35	Company 7	Manufacturing	Senior manager	1 year
5	YB	Male	40	Company 8	Manufacturing	Senior manager	3 years
6	JB	Male	45	Company 9	Sales	Senior manager	9 years
7	DJ	Female	27	Company 1	Quality control	Junior staff	3 years
8	CL	Male	27	Company 1	Manufacturing	Junior staff	2 years
9	CY	Female	29	Company 2	Product design	Junior staff	4 year
10	LW	Female	28	Company 3	Accounting	Junior staff	1 year
11	MN	Female	25	Company 4	Human resource	Junior staff	1 year
12	YQ	Female	25	Company 5	Audit	Junior staff	Due to start
13	ZM	Male	35	Company 8	Manufacturing	Junior staff	3 years
14	LJ	Female	34	Company 8	Manufacturing	Junior staff	2 years
15	MST	Male	25	Company 7	Manufacturing	Junior staff	1 year
16	HC	Male	35	Company 7	Manufacturing	Senior staff	10 years
17	WQ	Male	40	Company 8	Manufacturing	Senior staff	5 years
18	WH	Male	42	Company 8	Accounting	Senior staff	4 years
19	KF	Male	40	Company 7	Manufacturing	Senior staff	8 years

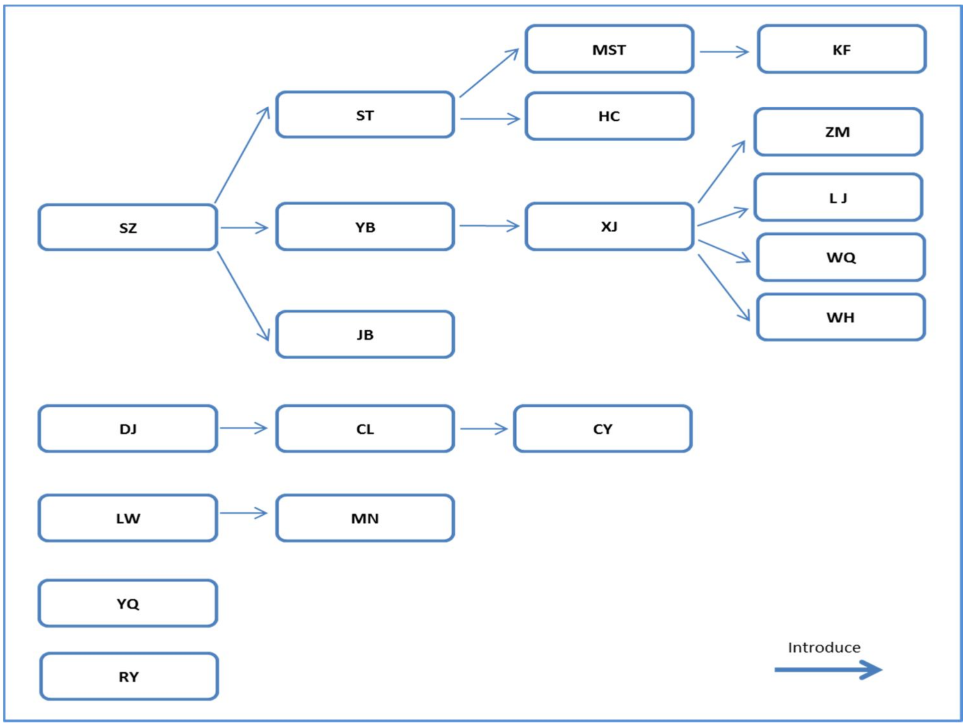

Figure 5.2: Snowballing map of participants

5.2.xi Interview process

- **Before the interview:**

a. Open mind does not mean empty head

Belk et al. (2012) indicate that a high quality depth interview requires interviewer an open mind to the shared information and presumption is not recommended. However they further highlight that *'an open mind need not mean an empty head'* (Belk et al., 2012, p.32) which means that having an open mind to the emerging new topics does not necessarily mean the researcher should not know anything about the research topic. Instead, before conducting the interview, researchers are encouraged to familiarise themselves with relevant literature and the research topic. Therefore, I usually read through the thesis content before each interview and familiarised myself with the developed protocol for each participant.

b. Practising

Langdridge (2007) suggests practising before conducting the actual interview because interviewing is a skill that requires practice, which Landridge avers there is no substitute for (Langdrige, 2007). It is suggested that practising with friends and colleagues helps to improve interview skills so that any uncomfortable situations can be avoided in the real interview. Especially practising with skilled friends or colleagues will help to reveal the researchers' interview skill weaknesses; overcoming these weaknesses can help the researcher to better communicate with participants in the real interview (Langdridge, 2007).

Practice sessions were carried out with a fellow academic. These practice sessions not only helped me become familiar with depth-interview skills, but more importantly, helped me develop the confidence of conducting a high quality interview.

c. The right equipment

Choosing the right equipment is also considered before conducting the interview. The chosen online software has a recording function so these five online interviews were recorded automatically. The advantage of recording in this way is that participants will be more relaxed during interview as they would not be distracted by the recorder, especially those who are sensitive to recording equipment. Secondly, using this online software to record will not disturb the conversation as recording equipment may break down in the middle of an interview.

For the face-to-face interview, different types of recording equipment are considered including the recording pen, video recorder, tape recorder and iPhone. Langdridge (2007) suggests that recording equipment should record interviews with a good level of sound quality and the recorder also can enable easy data transcribing (Langdridge, 2007). I used the voice memo feature on my iPhone. Firstly, the quality of the recording was tested during the three practice interviews which all turned out to be good quality. Secondly, an iPhone-recorded document can be transferred to my own computer directly and then will be automatically uploaded to iCloud (password protected) so the risk of losing the data is low. Thirdly, as having a phone lying on a table is normal in contemporary society, using an iPhone as a recorder will not distract participants who are sensitive to recorders. The iPhone battery is checked before each interview (fresh battery allows recording continuously for more than 5 hours) and a spare recorder are also prepared.

d. De-formalising the environment

The interview environment has been considered before conducting each interview. I tried to make the interview environment as comfortable as possible for my participants. For example, interviews usually are arranged at the convenience of my participants. Online interviews were conducted after participants' work time as they required. Face-to-face interviews were conducted at participants' place of work or in some cases, a nearby café or restaurant that they find easy to travel to. As participants who have never participated in any qualitative interviews may associate the interview with a formal interview, such as job interview, I have tried to arrange a conversation environment that encourages informality. However considering that privacy for interview setting is vital and also in the pursuit of high recording quality, places that are noisy and can potentially disturb the interviews will be avoided. Phones were also silent during the whole interview although participants were informed that my iPhone was used as a recorder before starting the conversation. In each case, beverages are provided as interviews can last up to two and half hours.

f. Self-presentation

The interviewee's self-presentation can have an influence on the relationship with the participants and the quality of interview (King & Horrocks, 2010), therefore I have consciously considered dressing appropriately for each interview. The use of non-verbal communication and the language and tone I use during the interview are also considered. Belk et al. (2012) suggests interviewing in a language which is comfortable for the two parties (Belk et al., 2012), therefore when two participants spoke to me with a Mongolian accent, I simply followed it (I am from Mongolia) and they were encouraged to engage with the conversation more and felt more relaxed.

- **During the interview**

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) indicate that *'the first few minutes of an interview are decisive'* (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.128). Most interviewees and interviewers meet for the first time in the interview; therefore how to encourage the interviewee to talk freely and expose their experiences and feelings to a stranger is important. As such, I usually started the interview by briefly introducing myself and asking my participants: how is your day today? This easy answer and ice breaker question helped participants who seemed nervous in the beginning feel more relaxed.

I also recognise that each participant has a distinct set of experiences so that the opening interview topic is adjusted to individual participants' situation. For example, one of the interviewees was a classmate of mine during Masters studies in the UK; we start the conversation with checking each other's current life. The other participant was introduced by a friend so in the beginning of the interview we chatted about their relationship. This 'open-up' chatting helps both the participants and me to get involved in the conversation easily so that the following interview can flow smoothly.

Secondly, I usually ask a question to frame the discussion and to focus attention on the topic of interest. This question usually is: can you tell me something about your company and your job? From then on, the conversation flowed around and the stories were recounted by the interviewee.

Thirdly, interviews are 'interviewee guided' and there is no set list of questions. Participants' answers direct the interview to a greater extent in sharing their first-hand experiences, rather than me taking lead of the conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Therefore the follow-up questions are centred on the topics raised in participants' answers and further detail or clarification is discussed during the course of the conversation. In addition, Langdridge (2007) indicates that previous interviews can serve as a springboard for follow-up interviews (Langdridge, 2007). Therefore, themes emerging in the previous interview can also guide the current interview so that certain questions are asked.

To be able to pick up on responses to form the following conversation requires me to be sensitive to new points emerging from the dialogue (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Knowledge of the topics being discussed helps to better pick up on new points during the interview (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). My prior knowledge and self-experience also allows me to focus attention on picking up on responses that are either highly relevant to the research topic, or are emerged as new themes.

The role of researcher in the interview is described as similar to that of the role of player in a chess game (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). During the chess game, players consider multiple implications of other players' moves before making the next decision. In addition, chess game experts usually do not explicitly follow conventional rules but follow their intuitive skills. Similarly, during the interview I tried to adjust the research rhythm to the concrete situation by being sensitive and attentive to the cues that would potentially bring out fruitful answers. Therefore, rather than occasionally checking the interview guide and protocol, which can potentially distract and disturb the flow of conversation, I consistently engaged with the conversation and paid attention to those new themes which appeared to be worth further exploration.

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) also suggested that a good rapport is established between interviewee and interviewer when the interviewer listens attentively, showing their interest, understanding and respect for the participants' stories. Therefore during the interview I usually offer empathy and encouragement by saying 'I know what you mean, sometimes I feel the same'.

To close the interview, I did not want to say goodbyes and leave immediately right after participants sharing their personal experiences with me. I asked the participants if there was anything they wanted to add and I also invited them to ask questions about the research. I also leave my iPhone to record till the end of interview. In one case, after the main interview, participants mentioned something interesting and we continued the conversation for nearly an hour.

- **After the interview – Transcribing the interview**

Brinkmann (2013) highly recommends that researchers transcribe conversations themselves. Furthermore, he also suggests transcribing each interview soon after the conversations are over to better note and recall the nonverbal signs and gestures that occurred, the atmosphere and other non-transcribed features of the interaction. Therefore, conversations were transcribed verbatim immediately after finishing each interview. As the interview records were stored in my own iPhone, listening to the recordings multiple times also allows me to recollect each interview's features.

5.3 Data interpretation – Thematic analysis

5.3.i Inductive analysis strategy

Induction is the most widely used approach in qualitative data analysis. It is the *'systematic examination of similarities within and across cases to develop concepts, ideas, or theories'* (Brinkmann, 2013 cited from Pascale, 2011, p.62). Inductive analysis strategy involves inductively coding data to identify patterns and further explain these patterns in detail.

Data-driven coding is applied in this research whereby researchers start analysing without codes. Codes are developed upon reading the interview transcription. However although Gibbs (2007) suggests that particular acts, events, activities, strategies, states, meanings, norms, symbols, level of participation, relationships, conditions or constraints, consequences and settings are examples of codes, what can be coded and what are worth being coded is still not clearly addressed in inductive analysis literature, as Brinkmann (2013) indicates: '*in principle, anything can be coded depending on the research interest*' (Brinkmann, 2013, p.62; Gibbs, 2007). Therefore, as inductive analysis is considered as a broad data analysis strategy, thematic analysis is adopted instead as it provides me with clearer guidelines for analysing interview data in detail.

5.3.ii The choice of thematic analysis

As a flexible qualitative analytic method, thematic analysis is independent from epistemology and it can be applied across different theoretical approaches within the bigger qualitative research paradigm. In addition, rather than committing to one or two specific theoretical frameworks which may potentially limit the richness of data, thematic analysis is also theoretically free. It allows the researcher to provide a rich and detailed account of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore in this study, a flexible natured approach which is not theoretically bounded thematic analysis allows me to maximally open up to the emerging themes and therefore capture topics that are related to the research questions.

5.3.iii What counts as a theme?

Thematic analysis allows the researcher to determine themes within the transcribed data. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), a theme *'captured something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set'* (p.57).

To decide what counts as a theme can be difficult because the researcher cannot define a theme dependent on quantifiable measures. Several thematic analysis studies have helped to recognise what counts as a theme. The following guidelines help to decide what counts as a theme in this study:

- A theme should capture something important about the data; ‘important’ means themes are recurrent and distinctive features of participants’ accounts
- A theme should always relate to research questions
- Researchers needs to make sure that they are consistent in how to deciding the themes within any particular analysis
- Deciding what counts as a theme should be considered and discussed before data analysis begins
- The contents of the themes can be amended within the on-going data collection and analysis process (King & Horrocks, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2006)

5.3.iv Conducting the analysis

In order to analyse the data in a systematic way, data analysis followed the procedure suggested by King and Horrocks (King& Horrocks, 2010), Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Langdridge (Langdridge, 2004). Figure 5.3 summarises the procedure of thematic analysis suggested by these authors:

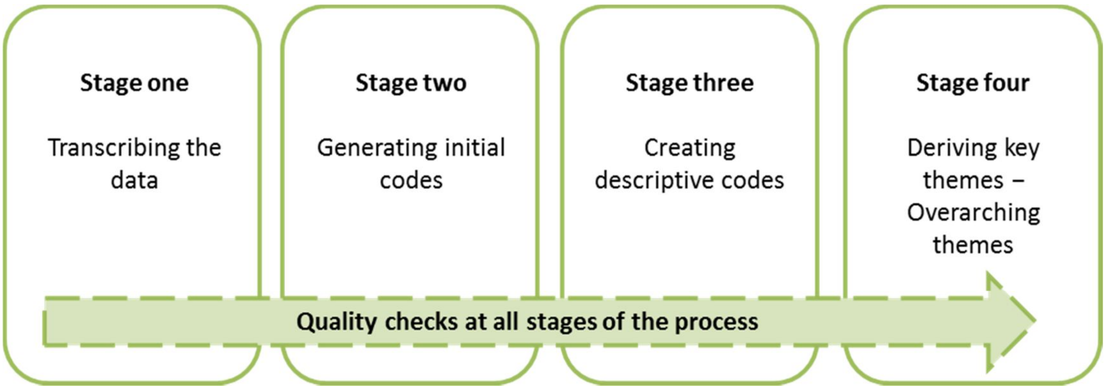

Figure 5.3: Procedure of thematic analysis

Source: King& Horrocks, 2010; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Langdridge, 2004

The detailed process of data analysis is:

Stage 1: Transcribing the data - Immerse myself into the data

Thematic analysis asks researchers to transcribe interview data into written form (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Various transcribing methods are developed for different forms of analysis and purposes. Some suggest transcribing the interview in great detail while others recommend only transcribing data which are relevant to the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006;

Poland, 2002; Edwards, 1993). Based upon the needs of this study, interview data are transcribed verbatim (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Poland, 2002; Edwards, 1993). However as introduced previously, some of the participants are my friends so that parts of the conversation which are purely personal and barely relevant to the study are excluded from the transcription.

Interviews are transcribed immediately after finishing each interview. I am aware that there is software available, for example, 'Dragon' to help ease this time-consuming, frustrating and at times boring process. However, as indicated in the literature, transcribing interview data is a good way to start familiarising with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It helps to understand data in an holistic way and to have some prior knowledge about the data. Also, some initial analytic interests and thoughts can arise during transcribing. In fact, after I finished transcribing each interview, I felt very excited to reveal my participants' life story from their own voice. New ideas, insights and thoughts also continuously emerged during this process (there is quiet corner in the library which I called the 'transcribing corner').

Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that it is important to be completely immersed in the data through repeatedly reading the transcribed data. Meanwhile, the researcher needs to be sensible to themes, meanings and patterns. They suggest that *'it is ideal to read through the entire data set at least once before you begin your coding'* (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87). Therefore, I read the whole transcribed data thoroughly at least once before starting the next step. In addition, as the interview records are stored in my own iPhone, listening to the records multiple times also allows me to recollect each interview's features.

Table 5.8 is an example of the transcripts both in Chinese and English:

Table 5.8: An example of transcripts	
Researcher: 你能再解释以下前面提到的‘中国式管理’吗？ **JB:** 我感觉中外做生意的角度不一样，我们现在能占领市场，主要是因为可以赊销。外国工厂主要是以产订销，他们压力小。比如今年的产量是一千吨，达到了我就不做了。再有订单我也不做了。需要额外加班，工人可以选择不加班。另外国外的法制比较健全，在保护员工利益方面。但是我们国内的工厂不一样。只要有需求，都可以满足。工人可以 24。	**Researcher:** What do you mean by 'traditional Chinese company'? Can you explain more about it? **JB:** I think we are definitely a tradition Chinese company. I think Chinese and foreign manager are different when they manage the company. In foreign companies managers would not force their employees to work overtime. Employee can choose not to work for extra time if they don't want to. Besides, they have a perfect labour protection system. Our company is different. We can produce as much as the customers want because employees can work 24 hours a day, they are happy to work overtime for a higher overtime payment.

Table 5.8: An example of transcripts (continued)	
小时加班倒班。并且通过增加加班费来鼓励员工加班。但是外国公司的员工可能该休息的时候就会休息，就会休假。另外体制也不一样，外国员工失业了有社会保障，我们没有。所以员工特别害怕失业，就会一直干。	But employees in a foreign company would say 'no' to those overtime pay, they need their holidays. The overall labour system is different. Employees in foreign companies have insurance when lost the job. We don't. So most employees are afraid they will lose their job, so they usually try to do whatever their managers ask them to do.
中国的话如果在国企工作，可能上下级关系特别重要，可能 70%在稿人际关系，30%在真正的工作。但是在私企，你必须对老板负责。只要我认为对公司，对老板有利的事情，我不怕得罪任何人，我会坚持原则。可能在私企，30%在搞关系，70%在工作。可能在外国公司，100%可以投入工作。其实我感觉在外企可能会比较累吧。外资企业可能以工作能力和效率来决定你的工作业绩。但在国企，不论你干的好坏，有关系就可以。	Especially in the state-own company, 'guan xi' is much more important. Maybe 70% of your time is wasted in building 'guan xi' with others. But in a private company, you are responsible for your own performance. As long as it's beneficial for the company, I don't mind to offend anyone; I have my working principles. Maybe people spend 30% of their time for building 'guan xi' in private companies. But in a foreign company, you can put 100% of your time into work. Actually it can be more tiring working in the foreign company because your performance and income are related to your working efficiency and ability, not your 'guanxi' with supervisors. But in a state-own company, nothing matter but 'guan xi'. If you have a good personal 'guan xi' with your boss, you are very lucky; you can be promoted very quickly.

Stage 2: Generating initial codes

The second stage starts with reading through the whole transcripts without attempting to code. Rather, I focused on maximally familiarising with the data. Reading through the whole transcripts helps me to pursue a holistic view of the entire conversation and build links between different dialogues.

To generate initial codes, I give full and equal attention to each data item but highlight the transcripts which explain participants' views and perceptions. These highlighted transcripts are also related to the research questions. Each highlighted transcripts are defined with descriptive codes. These generated initial codes are *'the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon'* (Boyatzis, 1998, p.63). Hence, these initial codes are closed to the transcripts and are described based on participants' accounts. Also, the initial codes also covered the potential themes/patterns as many as possible.

Before moving to the next step, the whole transcripts and the initial codes have been read through again. During this process, some codes have been added, moved, merged, redefined or deleted if they are overlapped.

Table 5.9 is an example of the generated initial codes:

Table 5.9: An example of the generate initial codes

Transcripts	**Initial codes**
YB: They are…..I mean, yes, the HR people sometimes do some surveys, or do some face to face interviews, but, to be honest, these won't work, how to say…we won't tell them our true feelings. We prefer to talk directly to the top managers when they willing to spend some time to talking with us. If you just stand in your position and never talk with us, we won't let them know our true feelings only through that piece of paper.	Company communicates with employees through surveys and interview which are conducted by HR department
Researcher: People like to talk do we?	
YB: I personally prefer to talk with them directly, but I barely have the opportunity. I rather talk with people who work with me. Everybody wants this to be honest. My colleagues, employees work in manufacturing sector; I myself all wish they can talk with us, or even a chat. We are human beings, management is between person and person, sometime policies and regulations don't work, and management is done by people.	YB prefers to talk with managers face-to-face Communication needs to be strengthened between employees and company
Researcher: They tried some surveys?	
YB: they did, yes, but the way they do it is kind of …..have problem. Our boss spends most of his time abroad, what actually happened, sometimes, he didn't know. He just simply hired a manager and let him to manage the whole operation, but how to say, this guy is not working for us. He is good at pleasing the boss. But we don't like this at all.	The company founder seldom visits the company The founder leaves the company to the CEO YB does not agree with CEO's management style The founder does not know his employees' feelings about the CEO

Stage 3: Creating descriptive codes

With all data being initially coded, collated and listed, instead of describing the views in participants' account, this stage focuses on interpreting the meaning of initial codes based on researcher's understanding. In this step I grouped together the initial codes according to their common meaning and created a descriptive code that captures the meaning, along with reviewing the initial codes and transcripts. The common meanings of each descriptive code are considered to form overarching themes for next stages.

Grouping of initial codes is guided by research questions but without my attempting to apply any specific theoretical assumptions. As indicated by King and Horrocks (2010), if linking the grouped codes to theory at this stage, analysis may become *'rather blinkered, picking up only on those aspects of the data that fit neatly with your theoretical framework'* (King & Horrocks, 2010).

Table 5.10 is an example of the descriptive codes:

Table 5.10: An example of the descriptive codes		
Transcripts	**Initial codes**	**Descriptive codes**
YB: They are…..I mean, yes, the HR people sometimes do some surveys, or do some face to face interviews, but, to be honest, these won't work, how to say…we won't tell them our true feelings. We prefer to talk directly to the top managers when they willing to spend some time to talking with us. If you just stand in your position and never talk with us, we won't let them know our true feelings only through that piece of paper. **Researcher:** People like to talk do we? **YB:** I personally prefer to talk with them directly, but I barely have the opportunity. I rather talk with people who work with me. Everybody wants this to be honest. My colleagues, employees work in manufacturing sector; I myself all wish they can talk with us, or even a chat. We are human beings,	Company communicates with employees through surveys and interview which are conducted by HR department YB prefers to talk with managers face-to-face Communication needs to be strengthened between employees and company	Inefficient communication between company and employees

Table 5.10: An example of the descriptive codes (continued)		
management is between person and person, sometime policies and regulations don't work, and management is done by people. **Researcher:** They tried some surveys? **YB:** they did, yes, but the way they do it is kind of …..Have problem. Our boss spends most of his time abroad, what actually happened, sometimes, he didn't know. He just simply hired a manager and let him to manage the whole operation, but how to say, this guy is not working for us. He is good at pleasing the boss. But we don't like this at all.	The company founder seldom visits the company The founder leaves the company to the CEO YB does not agree with CEO's management style The founder does not know his employees' feelings about the CEO	Leadership style: empowerment

Stage 4: Deriving key themes - Overarching themes

Overarching themes were built upon the interpretative codes and captured the key concepts of each interpretative code. In this stage I derived overarching themes through reviewing the coded data extracts and the entire data set. I named the overarching themes which can reflect the theoretical ideas that underlie the study.

Importantly, Braun and Clark (2006) state that coding is an ongoing process with the need to re-code being an expected part of that process. Therefore, some of the overarching themes were rephrased in order to better reflect the meanings of data. Some of the codes were relocated into different overarching theme groups. However, I paid particular attention to the view that, similar to *'rearranging the hundreds and thousands on an already nicely decorated cake',* refining codes without adding any substantial contributions is unnecessary (Braun & Clark, 2006, p.92).

Figure 5.4 in the next page provides an example of all three coding levels in this study:

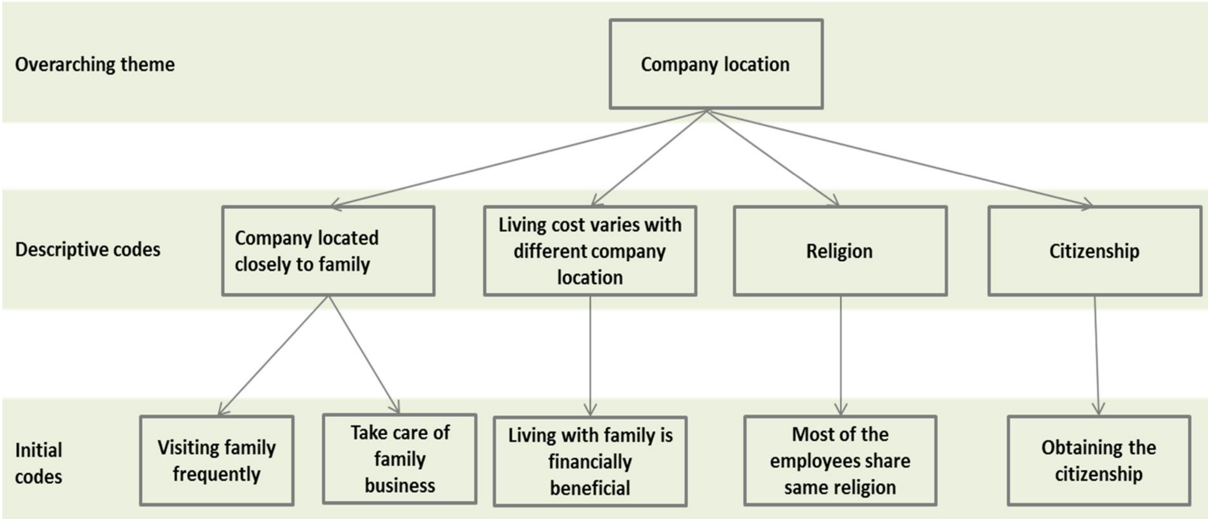

Figure 5.4: Diagram shows all three coding levels

5.4 Presenting the research findings

The research findings are presented and discussed in Chapter 6, 7 and 8.

Chapter 6 presents a general discussion and interpretation of findings. Data are presented based on participants' own accounts of their experiences. Findings are described with the intention of presenting stories of participants and their understanding of employer branding attraction and commitment. The first stage model is developed.

Chapter 7 discusses the findings in relation to the objectives of this study. It brings in the researcher's voice to explain and interpret individual participants' employer branding choices within the context of existing theoretical frameworks. The second stage model is developed.

By analysing the same data source but from the perspective of 'influence', Chapter 8 presents the results of what influences employees' perceptions of employer branding attraction and retention and the third stage model is presented.

5.5 The use of computer software in this study

The use of computer software has long been established as critical to quantitative research. Computer software has also been used in qualitative data analysis. The advantages and disadvantages of using computer software in assisting data analysis have been considered for the purposes of this research. The main benefits when using computer software in data analysis, according to Flick (2014), Silverman (2013) and Harding (2013) include:

- Speed: using computer software improves the speed of handling, managing, searching and displaying large volumes of data.
- Rigour: using computer software improves the rigour of data analysis results. It facilitates more complex forms of analysis and presents the researcher with a clear picture of the results, especially for research which involves number and frequency counting.

Among various available qualitative software programs, the most well-known is NVivo (Silverman, 2013; Gibbs, 2007). The benefits identified above are applicable to NVivo. Using NVivo enables the researcher to view and access each part of the dataset quickly, rather than having to manually hunt through each dataset. Consequently, the risk of missing code or themes is minimised. NVivo also has functions which show how codes are developing, and the relationship between each code.

During my PhD studies I gained practical skills in using NVivo through a series or NVivo training sessions put on by Northumbria University. However, in the end, NVivo was not used as I deemed a manual approach as more appropriate for this study. I concluded that the efficiency provided by NVivo may, in fact, lead to inappropriate forms of analysis in the context of this study. Fragmentation of material is encouraged in NVivo as similar codes or sections of transcript can be grouped together. However, this fragmentation may also cause the problem of viewing data separately from the original context, which is contrary to the aim of this research. Codes in NVivo are analysed in a hierarchical manner while themes in this study are not necessarily arranged in such a way. Therefore, using NVivo, in my opinion, would have limited the flexibility of data analysis. Keeping closely to the data provided the benefit of a better interpretation of participants' experiences and eliminates the distancing from the data created by the use of NVivo. Chapter 4 explains how participants' real-life experiences will be presented in this study through the researcher's interpretation, rather than through the use of the computer software. By using paper-based analysis, I believe that I have a truer picture of the views of the participants in this study.

5.6 Evaluation of the research

Various guidelines have been developed to assess the quality of qualitative research. Yardley's (2000) guidelines for judging the validity of qualitative research are used to evaluate this thesis. Yardley suggests that the extent to which different studies fulfil these criteria varies widely. The suggested guidelines are valuable and relevant in the context of evaluating this study because these guidelines are flexible in nature without giving rules or prescriptions to follow, which has highlighted the importance of being flexible and reflective in research design. According to Yardley (2010), four essential characteristics of good qualitative research are:

Sensitivity to context

Researchers are aware of the relevant literature and previous related empirical work. However as theory can profoundly influence data interpretation, to present a reflexive account of research findings, it is important that data analysis is manifestly sensitive to the data so that unexpected findings which may conflict with previous understandings are not neglected.

The socio-cultural setting of the study is an important consideration. Researchers are closely involved in the research without attempting to remain 'neutral' in the research. Moreover, participant involvement requires careful consideration in terms of research design, analysis and reporting. Researchers are open to the perspectives of participants and the power relations between participants and the researcher are balanced.

Commitment and rigour

Commitment relates to the time engaged with the research topic. Researchers are engaged with the topic and develop their skills in the chosen methods and immerse themselves in the collected data.

Rigour relates to the completeness of a set of data. The collected data are rich and are able to support a comprehensive analysis. Data are analysed thoroughly and systematically which can address the variation and complexity observed.

Transparency and coherence

Transparency and coherence relate to whether the findings are presented and interpreted with clarity, cogency and high persuasiveness. The research findings are presentable to, and can communicate with a variety of audiences, including people who are knowledgeable about the topic and other researchers from a variety of backgrounds.

Impact and importance

Impact and importance refers to the usefulness of the research, which can be assessed by the objectives of the analysis, research applications and if the research has practical import to certain community (Langdridge, 2007; Yardley, 2000).

The quality of this thesis, together with the extent to which these four essential criteria are successfully met, will be evaluated in the conclusion chapter (Chapter 9, section 9.2.vi) in detail.

5.7 Limitation of the research methodology

5.7.i Maximum variation and snowballing sampling

Maximum variation sampling was used in this research since the purpose was to find participants who held a variety of positions within different companies, hence giving a representative sample. There was a conscious effort to create a sample that contained a variety of working backgrounds, positions in the company and occupations. Due to the difficulties in recruiting participants, no volunteers were refused if they met the criteria. This applied particularly to those who were recruited through personal networks and previous participants' recommendations. However, this constitutes a potential limitation, given that the sample could be biased.

In addition, further limitations of snowballing sampling are that participants may share their interview experiences with those they have introduced. This, in turn, may lead to new participants structuring their answer, resulting in the experiences they share during the interview being biased and formulated in a way that they find comfortable.

5.7.ii Limitation of the collected data: retrospective data and participants' personal information

In the interview participants are required to disclose their personal information about their recruitment and working experiences. Only information provided by participants was analysed, how much each individual participant chose to disclose varied. The way in which this limitation, and the ways used to encourage participants to be more open, were explained in detail section 5.2.xi (Interview process). Specific techniques were implemented throughout all three interview stages: before, during, and after the interview.

Participants' experiences, when they applied for their current jobs, were discussed. This data came from retrospective descriptions based on individuals' memories of events. The advantage of using existing employees was that the experiences they recalled about their applications were more specific and focused. The disadvantage was that participants memories of what happened may, or may not have been, objective accounts of what transpired. This again highlights the potential for bias with the data. However, as this research is aimed at understanding employees' own perceptions of their job selection experiences, whether their recollections of their experiences in the job market are totally true or not, their own perceptions are the focus of this study.

5.7.iii The role of the researcher in data analysis

Interview data was collected in Chinese and consequently, when these transcriptions were translated into English the findings may have been subject to interpretative bias. Such bias was minimised by making the data collection and analysis explicit. In order to avoid losing the original meanings and ensure translated transcripts were closest to the original meanings as possible, an academic colleague, with a degree in translating Chinese into English, was consulted.

The process of interpreting and analysing the transcribed data, itself, has the potential for bias. While I followed the procedure suggested by King and Horrocks (King& Horrocks, 2010), Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and Langdridge (Langdridge, 2004) in interpreting the data, my own knowledge and understanding of the data and the research topic, still had the potential to influence the results and thus bias the interpretation. However, this limitation, too, has been minimised by clearly identifying the role of the researcher and by adopting a reflective method, as explained in Chapter 4 (section 4.5) and Chapter 5 (section 5.3).

5.8 Ethical considerations

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) indicate that ethical issues go through the entire process of interview investigation. Therefore ethical issues are taken into consideration from the very start of the study. Reflecting back to the 'Seven Stages of an Interview Inquiry' proposes in section 5.2.iv, the ethical issues involve in these seven stages are (See Table 5.11: Ethical Issues at Seven Research Stages, Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p.63):

Table 5.11: Ethical Issues at Seven Research Stages (Kvale & Brikmann, 2009, p.63)
1. *Thematizing*. The purpose of an interview study should, beyond the scientific value of the knowledge sought, also be considered with regard to improvement of the human situation investigated.
2. *Designing*. Ethical issues of design involve obtaining the subjects' informed consent to participate in the study, securing confidentiality, and considering the possible consequences of the study for the subjects.
3. *Interviewing*. The personal consequences of the interview interaction for the subjects

Table 5.11: Ethical Issues at Seven Research Stages (continued)
need to be taken into account, such as stress during the interview and changes in self-understanding.
4. *Transcribing*. The confidentiality of the interviewees needs to be protected and there is also the question of whether a transcribed text is loyal to the interviewee's oral statements.
5. *Analyzing*. Ethical issues in analysis involve the question of how penetratingly the interviews can be analysed and of whether the subjects should have a say in how their statements are interpreted.
6. *Verifying*. It is the researcher's ethical responsibility to report knowledge that is as secured and verified as possible. This involves the issue of how critically an interview maybe questioned.
7. *Reporting*. There is again the issue of confidentiality when reporting private interviews in public, and of the consequences of the published report for the interviews and for the groups they belong to.

Considering ethical issues that may rise during these seven stages, relevant ethical criteria are addressed and acknowledged.

I have complied fully with the Northumbria University Ethics policy. Ethical approval for this research was formally granted in October 2012 by the University Ethics Committee at Northumbria University.

5.8.i Informed Consent

Prior to the interview I explained the privacy, confidentiality and other ethical issues to my participants. The Participants' Consent Form (in Chinese) were then signed and collected. Examples are included in appendix of the thesis (See Appendix A: Participants' Consent Form). Permission to record the interview was obtained before starting recording the conversation. I also informed my participants that they have the option to withdraw from the interview at any time. Participants were made aware that interview recordings will be transcribed and they will be given the opportunity to review and check the transcripts and results for amendments, additions or deletions.

5.8.ii Confidentiality

I did not give participants pseudonyms, instead, using participants' initials as their appeared name helps me to pick up participants' characteristics and life stories during data interpretation. As a result, the presented data can better reflect participants' experiences.

However I was also aware that using initials has the risk of identifying participants or people mentioned in the interview. Therefore anonymity is ensured by using the coded initials. I inverted the participants' initials, for example, a participant whose initials are TS are coded as ST in the thesis, another participant whose initials are STM are coded as MST so that all the participants are completely anonymised.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presents a detailed reflexive account of the research approach. The chosen research methods are justified as appropriate to address the research questions. Each step of the in-depth interview stages and the thematic analysis are described in detail with examples demonstrated. Ethical considerations have also been addressed.

CHAPTER 6: EMPLOYER BRANDING ATTRACTIVENESS AND COMMITMENT – THE VOICES OF THE PARTICIPANTS

This chapter presents a general discussion and interpretation of the findings. The data will be presented based on participants' own accounts of their experiences. Data is organised in light of how employer branding's attributes influence employees' behaviour in Chapter 2. Identified findings include employer branding's tangible and intangible attributes in improving job seekers' intention to choose to apply to a particular company. Also presented are employer branding's attributes which motivate employees to commit to the employer brand. The findings aim to elaborate and develop the framework in the first stage and answer the first and second research questions.

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the experience and views of the interview participants, with an emphasis on allowing participants to speak for themselves. Findings are presented with the intention of presenting the stories of the participant and understanding the employer branding attraction and commitment.

Customers would be attracted by brands' product-related attributes but also their non-product-related symbolic meanings. In particular, when the product-related differences are not significant between brands, the non-product-related symbolic meanings will play a more important role in the purchasing process. Consequently, the motivation of purchase is the meanings and self-expressive value of the brand (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

Similarly, the employer brand's attributes which are attractive to job seekers fall into two categories: the tangible instrumental factors and intangible symbolic factors. The tangible instrumental factors can be further divided into five sub-categories, including the offered salary, company's location, job workload, company current performance and the people working in the prospective company.

Although these instrumental traits play an important role in attracting talents in the job market, branding literature also indicates the importance of the symbolic functions when functional differences between different brands are limited (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Symbolic attributes of employer brand are defined into the following sub-categories:

organisation identity, corporate brand and corporate reputation, organisational culture, company positive future development and the opportunities for personal career development.

Compared to short-term attributes, findings of this study show that employer branding's attributes which motivate the hired employees' stay are characterised as effective on a long-term basis. For instance, the identified attributes, such as company management practice, employees' career development and employees' relationships with the company are perceived to be important influences in employees' decision to stay or leave.

Based on an extensive literature review and an in-depth interview with participants, in Figure 6.1 I demonstrate the evaluated employer branding's attributes from the perspective of job seekers. Figure 6.2 summarises the employer branding's attributes which are considered by existing employees when they make their retention decision.

Figure 6.1: Evaluated employer branding's attributes, from the perspective of job seekers

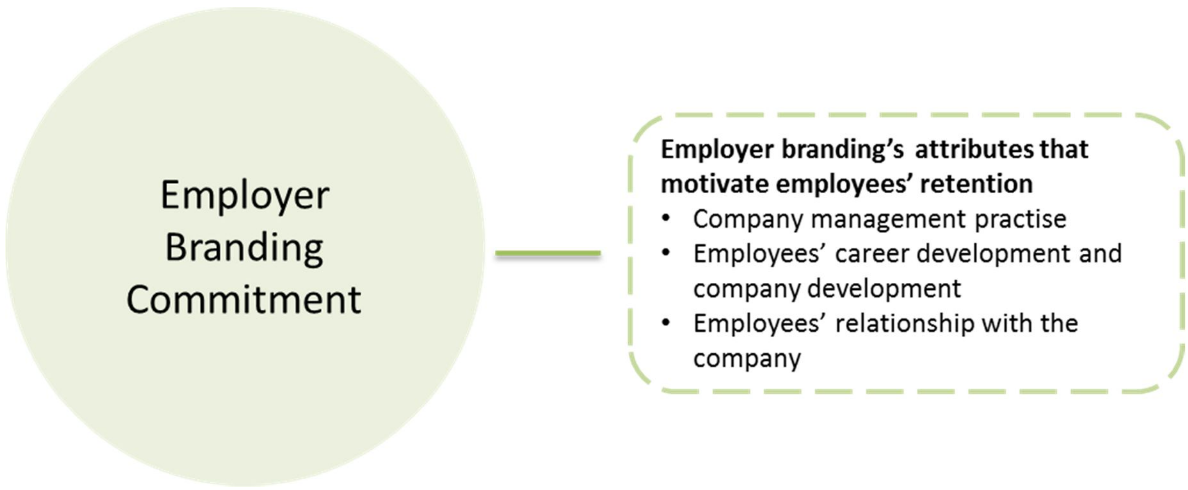

Figure 6.2: Evaluated employer branding's attributes, from the perspective of hired employees

6.1 Employer branding attraction: identifying employer branding's attributes that improve job seekers' intention to apply for jobs

6.1.1 Tangible attributes that improve job seekers' intention to apply for jobs

i. Salary

Salary is suggested as one of the major job attraction factors and determinants of employee satisfaction (Lings, 2004). A key emerged theme that captures the employer branding's tangible attribute is the salary offered by the employer. For example, SZ (55, CEO) states that he left the previous job because of the high salary offered by his current employer:

> *'The founder of the company found me directly. He knows I'm good and capable for the position. At that moment I was actually struggled with the work, it's just too much and I feel quite tired everyday after work. The reason why I didn't quit is because the salary they offer me is very good. Among other companies in my industry my salary was definitely on the top. I told him (the founder) that I won't move easily. But you know what he said? He said I can have more in his company. I mean I am not young anymore; it will be difficult to find a job with such a good payment. I was thinking about retirement to be honest. Maybe in 4 or 5 years' time. I need to plan my retired life and think about myself and family. To an old man who is retiring soon, what is better than more money? Of course we discussed about the job responsibility in detail, but I was very happy about the money at that moment and to*

be honest the salary is very good. I won't find others who would offer me more. So I took the job.'

The financial attributes of the employer branding are also attractive to new graduates, especially to students who are struggling with their financial situation. DJ (27, Department staff) and CL (27, Department staff) both graduate from the same university in 2009. The payment from their company is higher than other companies in the same industry, which attracts them to the job. DJ indicates:

'The company offers better salary. We all know it before graduating. I mean all my classmates know it. So it's kind of a dream company to us. I think for new graduates, money is very important. Especially some of my classmates who are poor, they need the money immediately to pay the student loan. So I remember nearly everyone applied for the company, for the good payment.'

Employer branding's financial attributes are perceived as important factors which motivate CL to make his initial job decision. CL's satisfaction about the payment later extends to his job satisfaction, especially after comparing his salary with classmates who graduated at the same time:

'I think my payment is better than the rest of the class. I think my job is better than theirs. I didn't expect that the company can give me this much. I mean I just graduated, this is my first job. Who will expect that the first job comes with high payment? I guess I am just very lucky to work here.'

Similarly, MST (25, Manufactory staff) and HC (35, Manufactory staff) indicate that payment contributes the most to their job decisions:

'I choose the company who pays me the most. I do whatever they ask me to do.'

MST and HC's jobs are part-time jobs which require limited skills and a lot of devoted time. Both of their companies recruit employees in a particular period when the demand of the product is high and urgent. As MST and HC are local farmers who own family businesses, they would only work for the company when the payment reaches their requirements:

'There are more than 10 companies in my village. We know that usually after September those companies are stressed with the orders. We just wait to see who gives us the most money. If I am busy with my own business, I won't be bothered to work for the company unless they pay me much more.'

Employer branding's financial attributes appear to motivate job seekers to make their decision. Although each participant comes from a diverse range of backgrounds, high salary is recognised as an important attribute in common which motivates their applications. High payment can even contribute to employees' satisfaction.

ii. Company location

It is found that company location is considered as another employer branding's tangible attribute. Sub-categories of company location include: company located closely to family, living cost varies with different company location, religion, citizenship and job opportunities.

a. Company located close to family

DJ (27, Department staff) applied for her current job before graduating. DJ only applies for jobs located near her hometown and family. *'I only look for companies which are near to my home, let's say maximum 3 hours by driving'.* DJ explains that her family has priority, so she evaluates companies based on their distance from her family:

> *'Every school I went to are close to my home, I chose a university which is in my hometown. So does my sister. I miss my parents and my mom prefers me to work in a company that is easily for me to travel back home. So two years ago when I searched for the jobs, my company comes up. It's in my area and in my hometown. About two to three hours by driving. I think it's quite important to stay close with the family isn't it?'*

Similarly, CL (27, Department staff) also evaluates the potential employer largely based on their distance from his parents. That he is the only son in the family and takes responsibility for the care of parents motivates him to choose his current company:

> *'I am the only son in my family. I'd like to live with my parents and take care of them. I don't want to work in a company that is far away from them. My sister works in Beijing (the capital city). She couldn't come back and visit often, so I usually visit parents once a week or once in two weeks' time. I'm very happy about my current work, it's about 2 hours driving. I had the opportunity to follow my sister and work in Beijing, but I didn't take it, I can't leave my parents by themselves. They are both over 60. I don't have a car at the moment but next year maybe I will buy one so I can go back home more often.'*

MST (25, Manufacturing staff) and HC (35, Manufacturing staff) who have their own business in the local farm only apply for jobs which allow a great flexibility of working time so as to meet the needs of helping family business. As such, choosing a company which is near to the farm is also required:

'We only work for couples of months for the company, definitely less than half a year. Also I can only work when my families are fine with the workload in our local farm. I mean I work just for some extra money, that's it. Of course it doesn't make sense if I travel to other places and leaving the farm to my family. I won't work outside of the city. My farm has priorities. I need to go back immediately if they need me. Like last month out farm is quite busy. I usually work in the company from 8 till 12, go back to farm work directly. I event won't stay in the company in the afternoon. How can I work in other places?'

b. Cost of living varies with different company location

MN (25, Department staff) lives with her parents in Beijing, the capital city of China. She prefers to work in the hometown:

'I prefer to work in Beijing. Beijing is my hometown. I was born here and know every detail about it. I don't mean the city is perfect to live or work. It's just I feel everything is easy and under control if I work in Beijing.

MN also explains that living with family in Beijing is financially beneficial. In comparison with working in other places, her monthly savings are higher:

'The other reason is that Beijing has much more working opportunities than any other places in north China. Why should I find a job in other cities? I think most of my friends are looking for jobs in Beijing even they are from other places. It's like when you are live in London; you won't travel to other places to work isn't it? Also think about how much it cost to rent and settle down in a different city, I don't need to pay for rent now so I can save some money each month. Look at my friends who are renting house in Beijing, they can't have savings, 50% of the salary is for the rent.'

c. Religion

HC (35, manufacturing staff) also only applies for jobs in his local area because of his religious requirement. HC was born in a Muslim family and he is only interested in companies in which majority of the employees are Muslim. Therefore HC's job application is limited in the local area as most of the employees in the local companies are Muslim:

'I was born as a Muslim and most of the families, friends in my village are Muslims. It will be very difficult for me to work in a place far from my hometown. We have several companies near the village so most of us choose to work there. Working in a place near to home is easy for me. I can go back home every day also most of my colleagues are Muslims so there won't be any problems of sharing foods. The company also understand that we need to pray during work, also they give us holidays for most of the Muslim festivals, actually the owner of the company is a Muslim as well...So yes I want to work near home as majority are Muslims.'

d. Citizenship

Participants also share that companies' locations could be helpful for gaining potential benefits, such as obtaining the citizenship. LW (28, Department staff) applied for the Beijing citizenship after graduating. To become a citizen in Beijing requires a working period of five consecutive years, therefore LW only considers working for the company in Beijing:

'Working in Beijing for more than 5 years is the only way that I can get the Beijing ID. I did my degree in Beijing and stayed here for 3 years before leaving for UK (one year postgraduate study). I'd like to stay in Beijing. So having a Beijing ID is urgent. You know that this ID is so important to me. Without it I couldn't buy the apartment or car licence. Nightmare! So companies in Beijing are my interest. I have to work here for 5 years. No other choices.'

CY (29, Department staff) experienced a similar set of circumstances as she also needed to stay in Beijing for a certain period of time to apply for citizenship:

'I did my degree in Beijing and at that moment so many of my friends stayed and found a job here. They told me that we need a certain period of time to get a Beijing ID. I have no idea why I need the ID at that moment but I know I may get benefits from it. So I tried to stay and find a job here. Can't believe it's already 5 years since then.'

e. Job opportunities

YQ (25, Department stuff) just finished her Masters degree in UK. YQ considers working in Beijing because it offers her more potential choices, which is beneficial for the development of her future career:

'I want to work and live in big cities. I mean Inner Mongolia is less developed than big cities, such as Beijing or Shanghai. Finding jobs in these cities are much easier. I did my degree in Finance, I think it will be good that I can work in some big companies to get some experiences and to learn. Clearly I can't find any of these popular companies in Mongolia. I can't stay, for my future. I need to work in big cities.'

DJ (27, Department staff), however, expresses that she finds working in the big cities such as Beijing less attractive. Her reason being that she prefers a peaceful and quiet lifestyle, and that the environment of a large city may not allow her to have this:

'Oh I don't like living in the big cities. It's just not my thing. It's too noisy and too expensive to live. My friends in Beijing take more than 1 hour metro for traveling every day. I just need 5 mints. Plus I don't like the lifestyle there. I mean after work I prefer to stay quiet, take a walk and enjoy some fresh air. In Beijing after work I need another 1 hour to travel. The air pollution is so serious these days. I serious prefer a quieter place to live and work. Big city is not my cup of tea.'

iii. Workload

Literature shows that job attributes can significantly influence potential applicants' decisions when pursuing jobs. In some cases, job attributes are suggested to be the main factor in attracting job applicants (Kim et al., 2010; Cable & Turban, 2003; Rynes, 1991).

Another emerged theme that captures the employer branding's tangible attribute is the workload. For example, the amount of the work is evaluated by JB (45, Department manager) when he applies the current job. He firstly complains about his previous job during the interview and indicates that the over-workload in the previous company motivates him to quit the job. Meanwhile the flexible working time and less stressful workload in the new company attracts him to a job:

'It was just too much. I mean yes at that time I was younger (early 30's), the work is still too much. I don't know what is weekend because I never has weekend. I couldn't go back to visit family for the whole year. Can you imagine that? So after 2 years I was thinking about leaving and looking for new job opportunities. Yes the payment is nice but I feel like a slave. People told me that once I got promoted I don't need to work day and night, but I just can't wait for being promoted. Actually the new job is a manager position. The working time is much more flexible. I mean I need a life. I am getting old and couldn't work as much as before. I think my current job is much

better in terms of working load. I definitely have more free time that I can manage to go holiday and give more time to family.'

However in some cases heavier workload is not unattractive to potential applicants. Working in a demanding company can be attractive to job seekers who view achievement at work as a personal achievement. In addition, people also take the responsibility of heavy workload to build a strong resume for their next employer (DelVecchio, 2007; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). ST (35, Senior department manager) is aware that the workload in the company he currently works for can be heavy as a challenging than in the company he previously worked for. However, ST believes firstly that he is physically capable for the workload and mentions *'I am still young'*. Secondly, he is confident about the company's future and is positive about the potential development of the company. His satisfaction with the job is enhanced, particularly after the company's performance has been improved:

'I know I need to work very hard in the new company. Because you know, the company is facing bankrupt at that moment. I know how much I need to put into the new job if I want to help the company to get out of this mess. But I think it's good. I mean I feel like they need me and they value me. To be honest I won't work in a company that doesn't needs too many efforts. I feel it's kind of waste my life. I was very confident that the company will get better and better. I was very confident about it. Now you can see that the company's performance is much better. Yes I did nearly give all myself to the company. I live in the company; I work nearly 24/7 every day. But it's all worth it. After all the hard working I am so pleased that my efforts actually worked. So yes, sometimes doing a bit more is not a bad thing.'

iv. Company current performance (organisational success)

Company performance in the market is identified as a key prerequisite of strong employer branding. It is evaluated as an important tangible attribute. A company's current performances are evaluated and predicted by both financial and non-financial performances. Financial performance includes company accounting profitability, while non-financial performances reflect company market position and quality of the product.

a. Profitability: financial performance

Financial dimension is arguably the best predictor of company performance (DelVecchio et al., 2007). Companies which are financially successful can attract more potential employees as these companies are perceived as being highly reputable (Cable & Graham, 2000). Participants in this study also find financially successful companies attractive as these companies usually offer high payment. Furthermore, a company's financial success can be viewed as a sign of their bright organisational future.

CL (27, Department staff) shares that his company is a financially successful company. He predicts a positive development of his company and indicates that companies with outstanding financial performances would offer a high payment for their employees. CL was surprised that I, who was born in the same area as him had not heard of the company before:

> *'you don't know my company ? are you kidding me? Everyone in my hometown knows it! I think the company is being here for…more than 20 years? I know it since I was little. Before applying for the job I know it's a company with good financial performances. My neighbours who work in the company all have a good payment. I guess the company's profit is increasing every year. I was thinking that if I can work in a company like this, the payment can't be bad. The company should have a good future. I mean the company is making profits every day.'*

CY (29, Department staff) also perceives the company's financial success as attractive:

> *'Yes I heard of our company before applying it. My company is one of the sub-companies. The head office is a very reputable company. The revenue is huge and it is growing every year. The branches are expanding so the profits are growing even faster. So I think why not give it a go? There should be some reason behind of the fast growing.'*

DJ (27, Department staff) claims that the financial performance of a company would motivate her to change her job. However, as her potential employer's location fails to meet her expectations (she only applies jobs that are close to her hometown as discussed in the previous sector), she decides to stay in the current company:

> *'This year the revenue we made is about RMB 50 billion, I mean it's growing every year. It's growing a lot since I came here. Oh maybe long before I came here. The company is a rich company. You know what? At the moment actually the branch companies are making more money than the head office. The company is expanding so much. I am actually thinking about to apply to move to one of the new company in XinJiang province. The revenue there is huge. But it's just a bit far from hometown, otherwise I would have moved already.'*

In contrast, ST (35, Senior department manager) indicates that the potential growth of a company attracts him to apply for a job regardless of whether the company is experiencing a temporary financial problem:

> *'oh my company is far from getting profits before I came here. It's nearly bankrupt. It's dying at that moment. If I am looking for making money here, probably I made the wrong decision. What attract me to work here is I can see the huge potential, I mean the potential of making the profits. Imagine a company who is the top company in the industry with a huge profit, the potential growth is so small. I was very confident that I can turn the situation around, I can bring profit to my company. Look how did we do? We save the company, we are making profit now. Not too much because we just start but I can see the future of it.'*

b. The company's position in the market

Participants in this study also value the company's position in the market as an attractive attribute of employer branding. For example, YB (40, Senior department manager) indicates that his company is the top company in the market:

> *'My company at that moment is the best in the industry. Everyone in my industry knows about it. It's kind of dreamy company for people like me. It takes a long time to get into the job interview. I mean there must be loads of people apply for the job. It's also the biggest company in the industry. It's huge I mean. The company is the only company that can produce such a large amount of products every day. I mean the equipment and technology are both the best'.*

JB (45, Department manager) also believes that companies who produce the top products are worth applying to:

> *'Our products are the best in the industry. I know this before I join the company. Actually leather industry is a very small industry; we know each other very well. So I thought why not work in the best company in the industry? There must be something that this company good at. Otherwise how can it be in the top?'*

v. Existing company members

Social identity theory indicates that people tend to attach themselves with others who share similarities with them (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This type of bond is another tangible attribute of employer branding which contributes to employee attraction. Maxwell and Knox (2009) indicate that existing company members may have a great impact on job seekers' perceived attractiveness of the company; especially members who share similar opinions or ideas with the job seekers (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). ST (35, Senior department manager), for example, quits his previous job and follows his line manager to the current company:

> *'I followed my previous line manager to come here. This is the biggest reason. What I mean 'biggest' is if he didn't come here, maybe I won't. Our relationship is beyond the relationship between a line manager and an employee. I actually followed him when I move to the previous company, now I followed him again. Who knows if we move again together in the future? It's just the feeling of you know, he knows me and I know him. We know each other since…my first job. He was the department manager. I like him already that time. Basically we share the same philosophy in terms of how to finish the job, how to get along with co-workers. I feel very comfortable to work with him. I learned so much from him, not only techniques but also how be to a good manager. He is like a career mentor. When he told me that he is leaving to another company, I was thinking: where should I go? I need to follow him! Actually he left 3 months before me and called me one night, he said that his company needs a manager like me. Can you think about one thing that is better than this? I visited him directly that weekend and applied the job. You know what? I got the job and we start to work together again. How lovely is that!'*

6.1.2 Intangible attributes that improve job seekers' intention to apply for jobs

The criteria employees use to evaluate a company also includes the employer branding's intangible attributes, such as organisation identity, corporate brand and reputation, organisational culture, company future development and employees' personal career development opportunities.

i. Organisation identity

Organisation identity influences the strength of employees' identification with the employer brand (Dukerich et al., 2002). It is the attitudinal contributor to employer brand attractiveness. Organisation identity is the cognitive image held by employees about the organisation. It focuses on the beliefs of each individual and influences employees' assessment of how attractive the company is (Backhaus & Tikko, 2004; Dutton et al., 1994).

Employees incorporate the company's characteristics into their sense of self. They perceive the company as attractive when the organisation identity matches with their personal identity. For example, an employee with an ambitious personal career development plan may not associate themselves with firms that do not value this as important. An individual who believes in the value of working hard may lead him/her to choose a more challenging job over a less challenging one (Slaughter et al., 2004; Cable & Graham, 2000).

YB (40, Senior department manager) perceives the company he currently works in as *'young and innovative'* while he categorises himself as *'someone with passion, ready for new challenges'*. The match between the company's organisation identity and his self-identity motivated him to leave his previous job and move to the new company:

> *'Oh I am so happy to work here. I had a very long talk with the founder of my current company. I feel like, right, this is the company that I'm looking for for a long time. This is a young company with a huge passion on developing new products and experiencing new ways of management. This is so different from my old company, its huge and old, nobody care about what we think, oh no, its too big, the managers even couldn't know what we want. But here its different, I was recruited as the CEO of the company, they trust me and understand me. They agree with my management philosophy. They tell me to do whatever I think is good for the company. I feel like, finally this day comes, someone understand me and agree with me.'*

MN (25, Department staff), similarly, finds her self-concept (i.e., how she defines herself) has many of the same characteristics with the organisation identity she perceives in the company. The similarity between these two identities strengthens the attractiveness of the company:

> *'My company is one of the four most famous companies in the industry. But my company is different from the others. Others are quite arrogant. I mean the company itself and the people who work in the company. I can tell from the way the recruiter speaks. You know what, my friends used to be very nice but after working there for 3 months they become very arrogant! I am not that kind of person, I don't like to work in an arrogant company. That doesn't suit me. My company is opposite, everyone is friendly, the company is friendly, especially to the new employees. I'm a friendly person. I guess friendly person should work in a friendly company.'*

Literature explains that job seekers find a company with similar identity attractive because they would believe that the information which reflects the corporate culture and value can be easily understood (Dutton et al., 1994). Participants in this study explain that because they share a similar value with the company, the two parties are expected to understand one another more easily. Consequently, they predict that working in the company and delivering their working philosophy should be smoother.

YB (40, Senior department manager) for example, strengthens the self-associations with company even before he becomes the company member. He is very positive about his future life in the new company:

'I feel very comfortable to work with someone who shares the similar views about how to management the company, how should the company looks like in the future. The conversation between me and the manager just goes on and on. I explain to him how I'm going to manage the company and develop new products, he completely understand and agree with me. I feel like there's finally someone supports me in the company. So I predict after working in the company it should be much easier than working in the company who doesn't understand you.'

Job seekers apply for jobs when they identify that a company is helpful in maintaining their sense of self; they may feel distinct from others and grow in self-esteem (Dukerich et al., 2002). LW (28, Department staff) for example, identifies that her company is helpful in distinguishing herself from others and enhancing her self-esteem:

'You know how Chinese people think about working in the state-owned companies. When I worked in my previous company (a foreign-invested bank), I couldn't understand why young people apply to work in a state-owned company. I mean at that time I thought working in state-own companies are kind of wasting time. Their salary is less than half of mine, they have nothing to do every day but just waste their time on paper work. Yes they have more free time and more holidays, but I didn't like the way they spend their times. But after I came back from UK (she did her postgraduate study in UK) and my health condition is not as good as before, I told myself working in the bank will not help me to get better. Also at that time I was already 28 year's old. My family want me to get married before turning to 30. I also want to have a boyfriend, you know what I mean? I live by myself in Beijing. But who would date a girl working 24/7 with absolutely no holidays and have no time to cooking?'

'Also you know how Chinese people like working in the state-owned companies. You know I have a friend, she works in a state-owned company. When she starts to look for boyfriend it is so easy. People like her job no matter what she does or how much she makes. So I thought why not apply to work in a state-owned companies? So maybe find a boyfriend can be easier?'

Some Chinese job seekers have identified that state-owned companies provide lifetime job security and benefits. Jobs in a state-owned company are labelled as the 'iron-rice bowl', which means that the possibility of losing a job is low. At the same time, the offered benefits, such as health insurance, retirement plans, and the benefits for buying the property are much higher. Workloads in state-owned companies are relatively non-strenuous. Additionally, as the companies apply an equalised compensation across employees, employees' pressure to get promoted is lower (Turban et al., 2001).

Although averagely the salary in state-owned companies is less than other jobs, the characteristics of the state-own company, such as short working hours, non-strenuous and high security jobs are identified attractive to LW:

> *'I check the job online, it is such a simple job compared to my previous job. It's just so easy. During the interview I was surprised that I can take all the public holidays off and only need to work a bit longer before the end of year. Most of the time I can easily get home around 6. You know before I never finish work before 8 or 9 and work in the weekend is so normal. Also you know working in a state-own company means your work is pretty much secured. They won't fire you unless you make some huge mistakes. You won't be promoted very soon but nobody will take your place as well. So I was thinking why not give it a go. This is what I want isn't it?'*

ii. Corporate reputation

Corporate reputation is identified as another intangible employer branding attribute that job seekers value.

Corporate reputation is defined as a prospective job applicant's perceptual representation of a firm's overall appeal compared with other firms (Kim et al., 2010). It is *'a rare, valuable, inimitable, and non-substitutable resource that provides a competitive advantage'* (Turban & Cable, 2003, p.746). Harris and de Chernatony (2001) point out that corporate reputation is different from company image, which reflects current and short term perceptions. Instead, corporate reputation reflects multiple images in a stable and long term form. A firm's financial performance – including accounting profitability, market value and dividend yield – and non-financial attributes – including media visibility, firm size, institutional ownership and demonstrations of social concern – reflect the corporate reputation (Turban & Cable, 2003; Cable & Graham, 2000).

Marketing literature indicates that strong corporate reputation initiates customers' purchase decisions; it also improves the marketing program efficiency by shortening the purchase time. As a result, the profit margin of a reputable product is bigger (Cable & Turban, 2003).

Applying in the recruiting literature, job seekers' initial attraction to the company is influenced by their perceptions of organisational reputation (Cable & Graham, 2000). Job seekers' early impression of the company serves as a strong predictor of the applicants' attraction, and it may lead to their acceptance decisions (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). The positive effect created by corporate reputation may impact upon a job applicant's decisions and pursuits in employment (Kim et al., 2010).

More specifically, a company's reputation influences applicants' decisions because people usually consider their own image to be enhanced when they are associated with a successful other (Dukerich et al., 2002). Job seekers, for example, usually identify with a company closely when they believe outside groups identify that company as reputable.

Signalling theory also helps to understand how a company's reputation influences applicants' decisions (Wilden et al., 2010). Customers make their purchase decisions based on the company's brand and reputation even when they have limited information for judging the products (Kim et al., 2010). Similarly, job applicants have less information about the job itself in the early recruitment stages. Due to this unavoidable information deficit, the corporate reputation, as the signal in the early recruitment stage plays a significant role (Kim et al., 2010; Turban & Cable, 2003).

Job seekers make inferences about an unknown job by evaluating the overall reputation of the firm it belongs to (Collins, 2007). For example, DJ (27, Department staff) and CL (27, Department staff) only have rudimentary knowledge before applying the job; however they identify the company as attractive because of its overall reputation:

> *'I don't know too much about the job at that moment. I only know the job should be in my area. I mean chemistry related otherwise they won't let me to do it right? I don't mind to start from a very low position. It's the company itself attracts me the most. I mean it's been there for more than 20 years or so? Payment is great. Even if they give me an easy work, I don't mind. But the most important thing is that I can get into the company first. Working in a good company I believe can guarantee a good future. I mean I will be happy and my parents will be happy too. So why not?'*

> *'During the interview I didn't ask too much about the job. I will know what I should do after starting the work. I mean passing the interview and being a member of the company have priorities. I think they will locate the job to each staff every well. Why should I worry about it? As I said it is not easy for us to get into this company. I mean there must be over 100 students applied but they only recruited the best 10.*

> *What can I ask more from them? I am blessed to pass the interview and work for my company.'*

Some of DJ and CL's female colleagues were attracted by their company's reputation; even though the offered jobs did not match with their original job plans:

> *'Some of my university friends, especially some girls, they are now working in the manufactory department. It's very difficult for girls I think. Think about you need to work in the day time today, night time tomorrow; you need to be physically strong. I mean even some boys can't do it. I've been through it before and it's so tired. But the girls still applied the job and now quite happy. Sometimes I can't understand it but they told me that the company is good, they are happy and their parents are happy.'*

It is common that customers pay more for products with big names despite the fact these products may share the same utility characteristics as lower price products. Job seekers may also accept a lower wage from a company which could increase their value and self-esteem. It shows that job seekers can accept approximately 7% less salary for a job in a reputable company compared with a company with negative reputation (Cable & Turban, 2003).

In LW's (28, Department staff) case, similarly, the job itself is not the most attractive factor: '*Oh I don't care what kind of job they are offering'*. Although the payment in the new company is less than the previous company, LW still finds the new company attractive because jobs in a state-owned company offer higher security:

> *'I don't care what kind of job they are offering. I mean any works related to finance are all fine. No matter what kind of job I do, the payment won't be as good as the previous job. You know in my company all the work is easy, I think. Maybe it's just my personal opinion. I mean everyone goes to work at the same time and off home at the same time. I know that if I want a high payment and gaining experiences, I won't be here. The reason that I choose to work here is my family like me to work here. Have a job in the state-owned companies means basically my job and life are secured. My families are tired of seeing me travelling all over the planet and I can't go back to see them even just once a year. They worried that I will never settle down and get married. Now they are happy. They don't care what kind of job I do in this company, the company is more important. I do agree with them to be honest. Life in a state-owned company is much more relaxing than before.'*

Job seekers' familiarity with their employer is positively related to their beliefs about company reputation (Cable & Grahman, 2000; Gatewood et al., 1993). Firm familiarity is similar with the concept of brand awareness in the marketing discipline where customers value brand awareness as a signal of the brand quality (Turban, 2001; Aaker, 1991). Employees also link the brand awareness, in the recruitment literature, as the firm familiarity with the quality of the future employer. Because of the uncertainty associated with the unfamiliar companies, job seekers describe familiar companies as less risky to work for (Turban et al., 2001). Therefore, the more the job seeker is familiar with the company, the higher they perceive the company's security to be and are more likely to choose to work for the company.

For example, CL (27, Department staff) has known his company for more than 20 years. He trusts the company and applied for the job before graduating:

> *'You don't know my company? Are you kidding me? Everyone in my hometown knows it! I think the company is being here for…more than 20 years? I know it since I was little. Before applying for the job I know it's a company with good financial performances. My neighbours who work in the company all have a good pay. I guess the company's profit is increasing every year…The company should have a good future. I mean the company is making profits every day.'*

YB (40, Senior department manager) was attracted to the company as he described it as '*the best in the industry. Everyone in the same industry knows about it'.* JB also claims that '*Our products are the best in the industry. I know this before I join the company.'*

Customers value brand reputation in the market. By associating themselves with a well-known brand, customers assume it is helpful to improve their social identity. Recruiting literature suggests that as employers are important in building people's self-concept and social identity, job seekers would also hope to improve their self-esteem by associating with highly reputable organisations. In some cases, job seekers feel proud after joining well-known organisations (Cable &Turban, 2003).

MN (25, Department staff) shares that people's self-esteem is usually associated with the reputation of the company they work for:

> *'I mean these 'big four' companies are the most reputable in this industry. If I can work with one of them, people will look me differently. I mean people judge all the time, especially working with a foreign company. At least they will assume that your English is perfect. Or think about when you heard someone graduate from Oxford or Cambridge, you will assume that they are better than people graduate from, I don't know, a university that nobody knows right?'*

YQ (25, Department staff) also explains that she feels proud to work in a well-known company:

> *'I was very proud to tell people that I get the offer from this company. Interview was very difficult I remembered but after hearing back from them that I get the job, I was so pleased. I am quite happy to work in one of the best companies. I called my parents and they were so proud of me too. They told everyone about it. I told some of my friends and they all admired it. I mean it's one of the best places we all dream to work in. They are happy for me. I guess my parents must call everyone that day about the good news.'*

iii. Organisation culture

Organisation culture is considered as a collective programming of mind which distinguishes one organisation from another. It is a set of values, beliefs, symbols, meanings and understandings than can shape the behaviours and views of members in the company (Dowling et al., 2008; Hofstede, 1998). The core values and beliefs within an organisational culture arguably impact upon employees' behaviour. They motivate staff to have certain attitudes and in turn accelerate the development of certain organisational culture (McKenzie et al., 2010; Bowen & Ostroff, 2004).

Organizational culture is stressed in the employee recruitment and selection. Job seekers prefer companies who they share the similar values with. New employees who appreciate their company's culture are also argued to socialise with companies' values and beliefs easily (Martin, 2004). After job seekers join the company, organizational culture also influences employee's productivity, efficiency, and work attitudes such as job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Glisson & James, 2002).

Organisation culture can mould certain values and beliefs held by staff members (Smircich, 1983). Employees with a strong belief and acceptance in organisations' culture usually act on behalf of the organisation and tend to maintain their memberships in the companies (Guzley, 1992). Organizational culture is also an important tool for maintaining control and coordination. Cultural control through organizational culture is considered as an important mechanism (Selmer & De Leon, 2002).

RY (56, Founder of the company) indicates that building a healthy and friendly company culture serves as an important factor in attracting potential employees. During employee recruitment he pays particular attention to job seekers who understand and appreciate the company's culture:

'I think company culture is something that can really attract the people the company need. No one will win in the salary competition. There will be someone who always offers more money than you. What I found can actually attract the people you want is you need a healthy and friendly culture that people feel comfortable to work in. It's like the environment we are living in. I guess no one wants to live in a place that is polluted and unfriendly. I need to build an environment that my employees like to choose and stay. Company culture is like the personality of the company. People who share the same personality can work together well, similarly, employees and companies that share the similar personality would work together well. So sometimes if I attend the recruitment interview, I prefer those who have the similar personality with me, or with the company. I think a bunch of people who understand and appreciate the same value should work together well.'

MN (25, Department staff) labels her company as 'friendly' which attracts her to apply for the job:

'I am not that kind of person, I don't like to work in an arrogant company. That doesn't suit me. My company is opposite, everyone is friendly, the company is friendly, especially to the new employees. I'm a friendly person. I guess friendly person should work in a friendly company. The company has a culture of friendliness. I don't think a company's culture can change in a short time. So I believe my company has been like this for a long time and will keep its friendliness for a long time. I like to work in a company like this. I'm not afraid to ask questions, you know there will always be someone that likes to offer a help.'

CY (29, Department staff) also comments that as a newly developed organisation, her company is an innovation leading company. Therefore the organisation's culture is friendly and inspiring:

'In the interview I can feel that the company actually like new graduates who have the passion to try new technology and new method in the work. I mean we (the company and herself) are both young. So I feel the company is an innovation driven company which is quite attractive. Yes I am a new graduate without any experiences but the company seems fine with it. They didn't ask me too much about my background but are very interested in what I think the future of the company could be and how am I going to contribute. Actually I applied the job in the lab which mainly focuses on developing new products. They told me the company will invest heavily to encourage new products development. I mean I can feel that the company

want to see some new faces and willing to invest in new technologies. It's the culture of the company, the openness to innovation impress me the most in the interview. You know sometimes companies don't like students without any experiences'.

iv. Positive future company development

Another intangible attribute of employer branding which job seekers evaluate is a company's future development. Participants share that apart from the organisational success in the current stage, they also make inferences about a company's long-term development in the job market. When potential employers are perceived to have a positive future, the employer branding is more attractive and the intention to choose a company is heightened.

The notion of organisational future success is found to be highly attractive in ST (35, Senior department manager)'s case. Although ST defines the performance of his present company as being in the '*facing bankrupt*' stage but ST still holds high expectations about the company's development:

'I know I need to work very hard in the new company. Because you know, the company is facing bankrupt at that moment. I know how much I need to put into the new job if I want to help the company to get out of this mess. But I think it's good ... I was very confident that the company will get better and better. I was very confident about it. Now you can see that the company's performance is much better. Yes I did nearly give all myself to the company. I live in the company, I work like 24/7 every day. But it's all worth it. After all the hard working I am so pleased that my efforts actually worked.'

v. Opportunities for personal career development

The provision of future employment opportunities is another employer branding attribute which is evaluated by the job seekers. For example, participants in this study make inferences about the target company based on whether working in the company is helpful for developing new skills, gaining promotion opportunities and working experiences in order to build a strong personal CV.

a. Developing new skills

MN (25, Department staff) shares that as a new graduate, she pays particular attention to the job opportunities which allows her to practice what she has learnt in university:

> *'When I came back from UK and looked for jobs, I realised that actually what you've learnt in the university is limited. When I sit down and want to put something into the CV, there's basically nothing. Yes I have a degree and some professional certificate, that's basically all I have. So I think I need to practise what I've learnt in the text books. I need to know how to work and have some practical working skills. You know companies want you to make profit for them right after you start working. I don't think new graduates are able to do that to be honest. So working is also a learning experience for me at the same time.'*

YQ (25, Department staff), who has a similar background in education to MN, also faces the challenge of limited working experiences. She highlights that *'to learn how to work'* is what she expected to gain from the company:

> *'I think to the company they won't expect us to contribute a lot. We are just new graduates. In the interview they said the training program will be helpful for us. Actually the training program in my company is quite famous in the industry. This is what I like about the company. I mean the knowledge from the training course cannot be found in the university lecture. It will be a good learning experience I think. No matter whether I choose to stay or leave in the future, it will be a good experience to me.'*

b. Gaining employment experience to build a strong personal CV

Personal development is another intangible attribute which job seekers evaluate, especially inexperienced job seekers and new graduates who are keen to gain work experience and develop their CV. They may even consider the current company as a temporary place to work.

ST (35, Senior department manager) changes jobs frequently to gain work experience in different companies. He considers the current company as a temporary place to work:

> *'This is the 5th company I work for. Maximally 3 years in each company I stay. Also I won't stay for so long in this company as well. When I get what I want and learn what I need, I will leave. The companies I've worked for are all different types of companies. I like to learn new things. I think working in the company is the best way to learn their techniques and how they manage the company.'*

ST believes the employers' list on his CV will be helpful for his future employment:

> *'The five companies I have worked for covers everything I need to be a good manager. I think no matter who checks my CV in the future, this list will show them my ability of working as different roles in different companies. So I'm thinking about applying a higher position, maybe in about 2 years' time. I am still young and I don't mind to work for more companies and learn more things. I think it will all be helpful for my own career. I mean why not? Sometimes I feel sorry to the company I worked for. I mean I got what I want and left. But I think this is how people gains experiences and plan their career isn't it?'*

The experience of working with reputable companies serves as a CV builder. Such experience also shows the desirability of a job-seekers when they pursue better job opportunities (DelVecchio et al., 2007). Therefore, it is argued that working at the best brands is the best place to start careers, especially for inexperienced job seekers (D'Alessandro, 2001). YQ (25, Department staff)'s company is *'one of the best in the industry'*; she prefers to work in a company with strong brand as a start to her career path:

> *'I think the future employer will be pleased to find that I've worked in my current company. I think this is mainly the reason why so many of my friends apply here. Actually the workload here is quite high, but it's also a good thing isn't it? We can learn a lot. I think it's a bit like students who graduate from a well-known university are more popular than others. People assume they are good and have learnt a lot. Same here. Working here is like a springboard, I will leave one day but in a better place. This definitely helps!'*

Whilst inexperienced employees, such as job seekers who are relatively young or just finishing study, make job decisions considering their future career plans, experienced employees also evaluate the working opportunity based on their future plans. SZ (55, CEO) plans to retire in about 5 years, so his personal plan is focused on his retirement. Jobs that have the potential to improve his life quality after retirement will be considered attractive:

> *'I was thinking about retirement to be honest. Maybe in 4 or 5 years' time. I need to plan my retired life and think about myself and family…So basically I didn't think about my next job, there won't be any next job. Next job will be cooking for my wife at home. The reason of taking this job is the money, this money offer can give me a comfortable retirement life. So I took it and my retirement plan is still there.'*

6.2 Employer branding commitment: identifying employer branding's attributes that motivate job retention among existing employees

6.2.1 Management practice

Participants agree that employer branding's attributes that motivate them to stay in the company are long term attributes, as opposed to short term attributes. Management practice, for example, emerges as one of the attributes that existing employees consider. Sub-categories of management practice include company compensation packages, employees' well-being management, company leadership, empowerment and the level of bureaucracy, organisational communication.

i. Compensation package and employee well-being

Participants share that their job retention decisions are largely influenced by how the company takes care of them. Compensation packages have long since been the foundation for companies to take care of their employees (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). Companies employ compensation systems and employee well-being management to motivate employees to become an internal part of the company (Miles & Mangold, 2007). When the strategy integrates compensation and employees' career development together, companies are more likely to retain their employees for longer (Turban, 2001).

Compensation packages which influence employees' decisions include a financial reward, employees' overall life and well-being management, and the welfare and fringe benefits:

a. Financial reward: Salary and bonus

Companies' reward systems influence their employees' behaviour. It influences employees' cooperative behaviours (Dukerich et al., 2002). Participants in this study point out that an effective payment system helps motivate each individual employee to enhance their working efficiency. As the payment contains the set salary which is distributed according to job position, employees are motivated to stay longer and get promotion. Secondly, within the same organisational level, bonuses vary according to working efficiency; employees would also be encouraged to enhance their working quality to pursue a better payment.

DJ (27, Department staff) and CL (27, Department staff) work in the same company, both of them indicate that the *'flexible'* payment system motivates them to pursue a higher position in the company and stay longer. DJ shares that her payment has increased since she started her job in the company:

'My payment is different from what I started. Everyone's salary is paid according to their position in the company. Like my manager's set salary is higher than mine. Then we have bonus, monthly bonus and annual bonus…I think people work in the night shift earns more than us which is reasonable…So if you want a higher salary, work hard to get promoted or get more bonus. It's fair to everyone. Like some of my friends, they are from a poor family, they prefer to work in night to get more money. Actually there are two friends who started the same time with me, they got promoted so they earn more than me at the moment'.

DJ also shares that employees are encouraged to buy company shares, which would potentially increase the income and motivate the employees to stay:

'Oh I'm going to buy some company share this year. I'm very excited about it! First and second year employees can't buy it unfortunately. I will start my third year soon so I'm definitely going to buy some. Also I heard that we can buy more if we stay long enough. Like my managers, I think he has worked here for more than 10 years; the share he has is different from us. The benefits from the share are much higher.'

CL works night shifts, so his payment is higher than DJ. He explains that working in the night shift provides him with more money but is also physically tiring. He is inspired to be promoted in the future:

'Yes my bonus is high, I am kind of thinking that I deserve it because it's a hard work for everyone…At the moment I want some savings so I still work in the manufacturing department. I think if I continue work hard, I will get promoted one day… By that time the payment should be higher. But I am happy about the job now, I have the same set salary with people who do the same job, but the bonus is different. I work longer than them so I got more money.'

Employees in MN (25, Department staff)'s company are encouraged to stay as the payment is increased annually. Employees are motivated to stay longer than three years as the payment increase rate is higher than the first two years:

'My salary is increased by 20% since last year. I am quite happy about it. Yes the first year was pretty hard, I work day and night. But you know what? Next year I will have 20% salary increase and by the end of the 3rd year the increase is higher. Yes we work so hard in the first year, but think about after 3 years, you know how to do it and maybe find your work quite easy. You get on well with people in work. Of course with a good payment, I think it's (working hard in the first year) just worth it.

Most people in my company stay at least for 3 years. Who doesn't want a better payment? Also we have someone that we usually admire in the company, like the head of the department. I guess she kept working hard for 3, 5 or even 10 years to reach her position now. Look at her, she is enjoying her life. She likes her job, enjoying the money and the life.'

b. Employees' overall life and well-being

Research shows that investing in programs which aim to improve employees' overall well-being, such as improving their health and living conditions is helpful for retaining the employees (Gallup, 2013). DJ (27, Department staff) indicates that the company's efforts to improve the employees' living conditions largely encourage her to stay:

'My company built several properties last year right next to the company and decided to develop it into a proper village for us to live in. I bought a 2-bedroom apartment last year and hopefully I can move in sometimes late this year. It's just so handy to go to work every day. You know our company is located in a town not in the city, so actually there are not many properties nearby. We either live in the accommodation or travel every day. It's a bit hard for people who have families. They need to get up very early, send kids to school and then drive about half an hour here. Also for me I'm sick of living in any accommodation. So I decided to buy one apartment. I was actually a bit worried about the property because in the beginning it's just some individual buildings. But look at it now, they have expanded the whole area into a proper living area, we have supermarket, shopping mall is building, nursery and schools are building. Also the companies offer us discount to buy the property so the house price is much cheaper than those in the city centre. Especially to some of my colleagues whose hometown is not in this area, they desperately need something like this. I think the company did a very good job in keeping the employees. People wouldn't move easily if they have properties here isn't it?'

On the contrary, failure to consider employees' well-being can lead to employee's turnover. CL (27, Department staff) indicates that his female colleagues could leave the job as the company fails to consider the female employee's health and conditions:

'I mean working in the night is fine for me, or fine for most of the boys. But for girls, I don't think working in the night time and sleep in the day time is any good for them. They usually need to take care of the family. Their physical conditions are not allowed. Even me sometimes I find it very hard to adjust. So I think the company need to consider this. To be honest I disagree that the company recruits girls to our

department. We have thousands of computers, equipment in the lab, who knows if they have some side effect to the girls. I mean they want to be moms. So I won't be supervised that those girls quit their jobs after a while, especially if they want to have babies.'

c. Welfare and fringe benefits (vacation, providing house loans, insurance)

It is shown in the data that a well-developed welfare system is perceived as company's desire to take good care of the employees. For instance, DJ (27, Department staff) and CL (27, Department staff) both highlight that the insurances they would receive from their company are higher than others. Therefore they would stay in the company because by switching to a new company they would lose this benefit:

'Usually the companies only cover three types of insurances and the rest two needs to be paid by yourself. My friends paid them and it cost her a lot. I am the lucky one, I know the company would help us but never thought they would pay them all for us. It's really good, I mean in the beginning the company only cover part of it but the longer you stay, the more they would pay for you. I'm not quite sure but I heard in some point, the company will cover all of them.'

'Before I joining the company I am not quit understand the welfare system, especially the insurance. I mean I don't know what kind of insurances should I go with and how much I need to pay. I think we have a department sorts out everything. I actually did nothing but they help me to do it. Also I know I need to pay some part of it but seems the company would help us. I think the longer you stay, the less you need to pay.'

Similarly, LW (28, Department Staff) also indicates that not only most of the insurance payment is covered by the company, but also that the insurance benefits are increased when she stays in the company for longer:

'State-own companies are popular for its well-developed welfare system. Usually private companies only cover 3 types of insurances but we have 5. Also there's a department helps us to finish all the paper work and pay the money to the banks. So basically I did nothing, I just check my payment slip. I don't think I can get such benefits from other companies so I am quite happy to enjoy it.'

Aside from the traditional welfare offered by the company, other forms of welfares, such as holiday program would also contribute to the employees' satisfaction. JB (45, Department

Staff) shares that his company organises an annual holiday trip which is helpful for future work, both physically and mentally:

'I went to Europe last year for the whole week. It was a great experience. It was all organised and paid by the company. I don't need to worry about any Visa, transport or accommodation problems, the company organised everything very well. We travelled in a small group and I think everyone in the group enjoyed the trip. After we came back we have another week holiday to rest. We are just very happy to go back to work. I heard next year we are going to Thailand for holiday, I am very looking forward to it to be honest. I hope maybe next time my families can go with me as well. During the trip actually we discussed our work, some good ideas pop out and it was a great fun to relax. I think it's a good idea. I like it!'

ii. Leadership, empowerment and the level of bureaucracy

Employees' empowerment allows and encourages employees to have a voice at work. To have a voice at work, or have power at work helps employees to better coordinate their activities within or across different functions. In doing so, employees' daily activities are more effective; their engagement can be enhanced especially when their coordination with others positively contributes to the work result. Therefore it is argued that to effectively enhance employees' engagement requires an organisation culture which encourages employee empowerment (King & Grace, 2006).

Whether employees have a voice at work is suggested to be a factor that employees consider when making job decisions. For example, ST (35, Senior department manager) believes that he is fully empowered by the company's daily operation and that this is a sign of trust from his line manager. He highlights that such empowerment helps to smooth conflicts between different departments and further improves the management efficiency:

'My line manager (the company CEO) trusts me very much. He allows me to manage the company in my way. Of course when comes to big strategic decisions I can't make by myself. But in term of daily management, he is happy with my work and it just feels great that you can actually do something without asking the permission thousands of times. It just saves loads of times and with these times I can do so much. I like the way how he manages the relationship between him and his employees. I do the same, I trust my department directors, and I appreciate their management style. When you find someone is good, simply trust them and empower them, the results can't be bad, management becomes much simple and smooth.

Managing a company doesn't mean you need to check everything in every detail, as a manager, I think it's important to trust others.'

However, the findings also suggest that controlling, as the opposite of empowering, is also needed to ensure the empowerment will not create management chaos. Yet, it is also suggested firstly that it is difficult to establish a clear boundary for empowerment, and secondly that employees' preference on empowerment differs – some may feel pressure when they work under control whilst others may prefer their managers providing the guideline for their activities (King & Grace, 2006). For example, YB (40, Senior department manager) suggests that his company lacks a clear management guideline. He explains that the founder of the company *'completely leaves the whole company to the CEO'*, however *'the CEO knows nothing about how to manage the company'*:

'The founder completely leaves the whole company to the CEO. I understand that he has big business to take care of but come on, if you give the entire company to only one person to manage, choose a smart one. The CEO knows nothing about how to manage the company. The company is fine now only because we have a good reputation, customers still trust us. But if this situation continues, I don't think the company would develop further. The CEO knows how to talk with the founder, he (the founder) just trust him (the company CEO) too much. He knows nothing about what is actually happening in the company.'

iii. Organisational communication

Communication within the company is a two-way communication between employees and the company (de Bussy et al., 2003). The two-way communication contains top-down communication (company transmits information and messages to employees) and bottom-up communication (employees' feedbacks towards the transmitted information and messages) (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2005).

A healthy and effective organisational communication helps to improve the accuracy of employees' perceptions of the company. It can also facilitate employees' acceptance of the organisational directives and behaviour change (Lings, 2004). On an organisational level, communication helps companies to transmit clear information and messages to their employees. For example, when companies publish a new policy which is conducive to working conditions, good communication between a company and its employees will help disseminate the policy to all the employees. When employees receive the message sufficiently, they will be encouraged by the policy, benefit from it and behave in a supporting manner (Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2010; Harris & de Chenatony, 2001).

Usually the more employees are aware of what is happening in the daily business, the better they can manage the situation and respond to that situation (King & Grace, 2006). DJ (27, Department Staff) claims that weekly group meetings and monthly department meetings help employees to better understand the company's policy and decisions:

'We have group meeting every Friday morning, it's just a small meeting with other 5 people in our group. The meeting usually starts with summarising what happened in the week, what we have achieved, maybe the problems emerged. The group leader then usually tell us what is happening in the company, any good news for us, like rising the salary or any other new policies from the company. Then we start to gossip. It's just a very relaxed way to discuss work. Maybe because the group leader is a nice person, he tries to make the meeting as fun as he can, but at the same time we still discuss our work a lot.'

'Oh the meeting with the whole department is quite different. It's much more formal. Because each group leader attends the meeting so mainly we discuss job related issue. Usually they tell us what is happening in the company, any changes need to be made in the future work. Or new company management policies. Following by the feedbacks from each group and employees. Usually they take the feedbacks nicely. We finish the meeting with open discussion, this actually is my favourite part of the meeting. We are encouraged to discuss different work issues, any suggestions are warmly welcomed. It's good, I feel like the company actually try to know our feelings.'

Similarly, when employees need to transmit information to the company, such as complaining about poor working conditions, good communication between the company and its employees will ensure that the managers receive the message. Later, after the problem has been solved, employees can confirm that their complaints and suggestions have been considered. This would encourage employees to engage with company's operations and so their engagement with the company is enhanced. For example, MN (25, Department staff) indicates that her company is a *'democratic'* company. She is encouraged to *'complain about the company'*:

'If you are not happy about the company or anyone in the company, you can complain about it by either talking with the HR people or complaining online through the system. Of course you should responsible for your own words so basically we complain for the company's good. Last year I was not happy about something, I don't like to speak it out so I wrote something online. Very surprisingly

they get back to me the other day and I am quite happy about the follower up emails. They find out the problem and give me a very good answer. I actually don't know who did all the work at the back of the stage. I heard that they are asked to get back to us within 3 days. So actually I feel like the company cares about what we think. They do some investigation and will give us an answer. I think it's quite good to feel that someone cares about what you think. Even by that time I am nobody, I just started my job.'

On the other hand, many organisational problems can be attributed to inadequate communication between the company and its employees. In an interview it is shown that constraints of communication include lack of clarity about the information, a company's unwillingness to communicate, the poor performance of managers, an inefficient communication channel and the hierarchical control of the company. Inadequate communication may decrease employees' engagement as they are not informed or do not feel they are informed by the company. When their opinions are continuously neglected by the company, employees may even leave the company (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Harris & de chernatony, 2001).

YB (40, Senior department manager) firstly indicates that his company fail to understand what their employees really want:

'...I mean it's hard to try to figure out what the young people really want. So it won't work if the top managers analysing the problem in their own way. Sometimes the strategies or policies can't match with what the employees really want...'

YB explains that the founder and CEO of his company spend limited time in the company, which he perceives as a sign of unwillingness to communicate:

'Oh they don't have the time to talk with us, I mean look, he (the founder of the company) usually visits the company twice a year. I seldom see the CEO, maybe once in 3 months?'

Managers play an important role in the organisation of the communication system. Their failure to deliver messages leads to inadequate communication between employees and companies. YB further highlights the role of the managers in the inadequate communication:

'I do have some good idea about our company, I actually talked with my line manager before, he said he will consider it and report to someone else. But nothing happens after that, I am disappointed, I feel like I have nobody to talk to. Maybe

> *talking with colleagues in the office, that will be much easier. I mean I have the feeling that everyone is following the way how the founder and the CEO treat the employees, they are definitely not good models.'*

In the interview he also indicates that the inefficient communication channel also contributes to the poor communications between company and its employees:

> *'I mean, yes, the HR people sometimes do some surveys, or do some face to face interviews, but, to be honest, these won't work, how to say…we won't tell them our true feelings…we won't let them know our true feelings only through that piece of paper. Also after collecting the questionnaire, nothing happened, that's it'.*

Employees will not be motivated to participate in subsequent surveys if feedbacks are not given (Ahmed & Rafiq, 1995). YB's company clearly fails to communicate with its employees as no feedbacks or follow-up actions are occurred after the survey. YB further points out that 'talking with the manager face to face' is a preferred way to communicate as feedback can be given immediately:

> *'We prefer to talk directly to the top managers when they willing to spend some time with us. Everybody wants this to be honest. My colleagues, employees work in manufacturing sector; I myself all wish they can talk with us, or even a chat. We are human beings, management is between person and person, sometime policies and regulations don't work, and management is done by people. If you just stand in your position and never talk with us, we won't let them know our true feelings only through that piece of paper'.*

Similarly, JB (45, Department manager) also complains that information is not delivered successfully back to the company because there are no feedbacks or follow-up actions. Manager's poor performances are highlighted that lead to the inadequate communication between employees and company:

> *'I can tell the company sometimes doesn't care about us. They don't care what we think about the company. I am the head of the group so I was usually invited to the head office in Beijing. People in the lower level who actually do the work won't be invited. And to be honest I was sitting at the back of the room without the chance to speak to any big person in the company. So I just finish the meeting, go back to hotel, that's it. They send the manager to visit us maybe twice a year? One week each time? I understand the company wants him to bring back our views about the company but when he comes over, he doesn't have the time to talk with each*

employee. He just read our finance report and annual review. That's about it. Of course he need to pretend that the company cares, he asks us how's work and life here…we have so many to say in the limited time, especially we found no matter what we say, they don't care, we just won't be bothered to tell them. I mean the company is fine now, business is running well. But look at the big picture, if you don't show your love to us, we won't show ours. People will leave eventually.'

Other factors that may influence the organisation communication are identified as the hierarchical control of the company and the communication climate. De Bussy et al. (2003) indicate that a healthy 'communication climate' inside a company can mediate employees' communication willingness. The 'communication climate' of an organisation describes the culture of two-way communication within the company. In a company with a friendly 'communication climate', employees feel comfortable in expressing their feelings to the company whilst companies are willing to listen. As a result, the post-conversation practices can be appropriate and will be in the interests of achieving mutual benefits (de Bussy et al., 2003).

ST (35, Senior department manager) labels his company as 'flat structure without bureaucracy' with a 'good communication climate'; he claims these two factors contribute to the efficient communication between him and the company:

'I find very easy to talk with the top managers of the company. The company is structured very flat so if I need to talk with someone big, I can. I know some companies encourage their employees to talk or complain firstly to your line managers instead of directly to the top manager. But I don't find any trouble to talk with them directly. I mean I don't have too many lines managers but I also encourage my people to talk with me directly. You know I like to talk with employees in the manufacturing department, especially during lunch or tea time. It's a good way to know what they think about the company. I talk with them like a friend although I am not their line managers. Maybe because the CEO does the same, he sometimes dresses like a manufacturing staff, walks around the department and canteen, talk with others just like friends. It's maybe a nice organisation culture. We feel comfortable to talk with each other; no matter what position are you in. It's a good feeling.'

On the other hand, YB (40, Senior department manager) complains about his company being a hierarchical structured company. It retains restrictive, controlling management structures:

'My company is the biggest in the industry. We have so many employees. It's a hierarchical structured company. We have CEO, department managers, vice-department managers, general managers, line managers, group managers, department directors… So think about if you have some complaints or some good ideas, you suppose to tell your line manager and expect he would talk with his line manager and the next manager…To be honest I don't know where I can find the top managers. I met them once a year in the annual meeting, in a huge hall. I can't even see them. So no one would say anything eventually, no feedbacks at all. We are just not bothered.'

6.2.2 Employee career management and company development

i. Employee career management

Whether company can successfully manage employees' career influences employees' job retention decisions. Participants define 'successfully managing individual's career' as a company's ability to help fulfil employees' career needs with organisational opportunities. Themes that emerge which are related to career management include promotion opportunities, experiences gaining, skill development and CV development.

Firstly, participants indicate that not only promotion, but also the promotion opportunities are a strong motivator to continue working for the company. Internal opportunities for promotion and advancement positively relate to job satisfaction so that employees' turnover intentions can be decreased. Promotion opportunities are also argued as the most important role in keeping employees' psychological contract with the company (DelVecchio et al., 2007; Lester & Kickul, 2001; Brets & Boudreau, 1994). MN (25, Department staff) explains that the promotion system in their companies encourages employees to work hard and stay for longer:

'When you see someone is being promoted to a better position, of course it encourages you to work harder. The good thing in my company is that everyone has the equal opportunity to get promoted. The promotion system is well developed. To get promoted we need to stay in the company for a certain period of time. Your performances must reach certain levels or better than others I guess. I've not been promoted yet because I just started to work three months ago. But I will be promoted after the first anniversary, also my payment will be more. Look at the head of the department, she started her career like me, years later she becomes the head of department. I think after 3 years I can work in a much better position. I am very positive about it.'

However, YB (40, Senior department manager) complains that there are less promotion opportunities in his company. He indicates that employees would not be inspired to contribute more, especially younger employees who would work hard and be eager to be promoted:

> *'I've worked here for three years and just being promoted once. It's unfair to someone like us who were young and when we first joined the company we thought we would have a great career path here. This is different from what they promised in the job interview. The company is like an old machine, it moves too slowly. The company is too big, I feel like even a small step to move forward would take a long time. Everyone just work in a slow pace, there is no excited news, I saw the same people every day in the past three years. It's just unfair to us, we were so passionate to help the company. But if the company doesn't appreciate our passion, we need to find someone else who values it.'*

Secondly, participants also indicate that they are motivated to stay when working in the company helps them gain in experience and develop their skills. Working skills refers to participants' professional skills related to the jobs. As employees' professional skills are related to individuals' marketability and capacity in the job market, participants value skill development when deciding if it is worth to stay. As ST (35, Senior department manager) indicates:

> *'I change my job frequently. Whenever I found I have nothing new to learn, I leave to another company. Learning new skills is very important to me at his stage.'*

YQ (25, Department staff) also explains that learning new skills and gaining experiences motivate her to stay in the company:

> *'I just finished my master so I have so much to learn. Yes I may know some theories but I don't think that will be enough. Everyone in my area knows that working in one of these 'big four' companies is the best way to practise what we've learned from the text books and develop our skills. I feel very good after just the initial 3 months' training; I've learned so much new stuff which I've never heard in my life. So I assume I can learn more in the future journey. I really hope so. It's good for me.'*

Thirdly, participants also point out that staying with current job is appealing because of its power to build up their CV. Whilst frequently changing jobs can be a negative indicator of working capability and team spirit, MN believes that staying in a company is a positive sign which shows her capability and desire to contribute to the company for a stable period of time:

> *'I think when the next employer reviews my CV, if they find I've worked in a list of reputable companies with a reasonable working time for each company; I believe my CV would stand out!'*

ii. Employees' career development fit with company development

Participants also considered their future development with the companies when they evaluated the potential employer brand. They predicted that companies with a foreseeable positive future would benefit their personal career development.

Employees will be motivated to stay when companies and individual employees both play a role in career management, especially when companies and employees share each other's development opportunities and further link them together to pursue mutual benefits (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Baruch & Peiperal, 2000). Participants in this study share that when their own career plans match with the future development of the company, or the company's development would benefit individuals' career plans; they are inspired to stay for longer. For example, DJ (27, Department staff) predicts that her company's ranking will rise in the 'Top 500 Enterprises of China' list which will potentially benefit her own career plans:

> *'My company is ranked around 260 in the 'Top 500 Enterprises of China'. The ranking will definitely go up next year because we are performed much better than last year, new subsidiary are opened in other provinces. We need more talents in the coming year which inspired us young people very much. Our company values us I think. They like young people with great passion. So I believe there will be a huge potential opportunities for our young staffs to pursue a better career. I think it's fantastic that the company is in the right direction, developing very quickly!'*

In contrast, as YB (40, Senior department manager) is not confident about his company's future and is concerning that the problem cannot be fixed quickly, he considers leaving the company as staying is not beneficial for his own career management:

> *'We have some problems and the people in the management level haven't realised about it, maybe this is the problem. I'm not sure about the company's future. People in my age would not stay here forever, we need somewhere with a great future and*

also allows us to do what we want. I don't know, people in my office always discuss about better places to go, maybe they already have some plans to leave?'

6.2.3 Employees' relationship with their company

i. Relationship with colleagues

Usually employees find it easier to communicate with their colleagues who share common values or similar characteristics. In particular, when employees join the organisation at the same time, are of a similar age group or have similar experiences, are more likely to share common experiences and similar job values. Participants in this study explain that working with colleagues who share similar values and perception contributes to their job decisions. For example, MN (25, Department staff) and CY (29, Department staff) indicate that they are happy to work with their current colleagues who are of a similar age and share a similar background in education:

'Did you see the picture I posted? Oh we are such a fun group. It was a birthday party for a boy in my office. We are colleagues in the office but definitely friends after work. Most of us are single and have overseas study experiences. We all missed the time when we were still students so we talked about that a lot after work. It's just fun. We had weekly dinner and drinking, usually on Friday. You know when you are working with a bunch of people who are in the same age, speak the same language and from similar background, everything is just so smooth. We have our own online chat group and we complain everything about the company, about our manager, all the gossip. If, I mean if one day I leave the company, these people are definitely the one that I will miss the most.'

'I worked with some people I really like. Most of them are from northern China so when we go out for food, there's no one fussy about food. We are in similar age group. I think it's quite important to work with people you like and can get on well. You are not working by yourself but working with people. Think about if there is someone in the office that you hate, you may not want to stay in the room anymore. So I'm very lucky to have all my lovely colleagues in the office.'

ii. Management-workforce relationship: the role of the manager

Management-workforce relationship is another factor which employees consider for their job retention decisions. Management-workforce relationship is about managers' attitude towards employees and how the employees' react to the management. For example, the level of trust and respect between employees and managers influences the management-workforce relationship (Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

Management is considered important in guiding employees' behaviour in which managers play a key role in supporting, positioning, empowering and engaging their staff (King & Grace, 2006). A supervisor's behaviour fosters the employees' identification with their company as supervisors are employees' primary link with the company (Lings, 2004). Besides this, the leader is the main character that fosters the organisation culture through daily management. Therefore it shows that employees' perceptions of their managers influences around 70% of their engagement (Gallup, 2013).

RY is the founder of his own company. He emphasises the supervisor's role in influencing employees' behaviour and the management-workforce relationship. RY indicates that the most effective way to build a relationship with his employees is to 'encourage them to trust, respect and follow [him]'. He believes that his own behaviour largely influences his employees. Therefore he states that he tries to work hard and offer high quality performances consistently:

> *'It is the people, the employees who are important. People are the most value asset for me. Managing the company is actually managing the people, so we need to manage the relationship between the company and the employees well. I start to manage the company from managing myself. Since the first day I set up this company, I know I am the role model of my employees. I asked myself to be the best. My people will follow me, the good and the bad. I remember I was the first one arrived the company also the last one who left the company, I worked very hard. I just want to show my employees that they are following the right people. A leader in the company sometimes is not only a leader, he is a role model. You can't ask your employees to move forward when you are moving backward. My wife once found me working in the office at 4 a.m., she said that I was crazy. But the result is my people start to really believe in me and follow me.'*

CY (29, Department staff) feels comfortable working with her line manager. She explains that her line manager is an 'excellent manager' with professional management skills and style. The healthy management-workforce relationship contributes to her decision to stay in the company:

> *'I like him very much, of course as a manager. I think maybe because his daughter is in the similar age as us so he knows what we want and what we like. Like our group meeting is short but efficient, he knows young people don't like long meetings. He*

organises dinner and drinking before holiday and he knows how to keep us motivated. He is very talented; I heard he is one of the best in our area and worked in the best company before. It's just he is more focusing on family now so he choose to work here, not as stressful as his previous work. He teaches us everything and he knows everything, we've learnt so much from him. He always speaks for us, sometimes when you know, something happens between my department and others, he will stand out for us. It's just like, you know, father protects his kids. I like the feeling and I quite enjoy myself working with him. I will be so sad if he retires one day.'

Meanwhile LW (28, Department staff) indicates the poor relationship with her line manager could potentially lead to her decision to leave:

'I am not happy about my line manager at the moment. I don't think we can like each other. He is the laziest in our group; he steels others' finished work. When I first started the job he asked me to do his work, I was new and I don't want to be fired so I did it for him. Then I found out later this is typically him. Everyone has been worked for him, especially the fresh employees. I mean the work supposed to be finished by him. It's just disgusting, it is. I feel he doesn't respect me, or my work. He's been here for a long time so he knows how to survive in a huge state-own company. He doesn't want us to be promoted to a higher position because that will be a threat to him. I always know there are some managers like him but I never think one day I will have a manager like this. Nobody dares to complain about him. Maybe this only happens in the state-own company? I don't know. He is definitely not a good leader. Maybe one day when I get enough of him, I will quit, I am not happy to work with him.'

According to the social identity theory, it is suggested that people align themselves with others who are in some way similar, for example, ethnicity, religion or more deeply, opinions or viewings. Therefore, employees are also predicted to align themselves with the company members they share similarities with (Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

When managers and employees share similar opinions or ideas, their relationship becomes closer. As a result, they may tend to align themselves with each other so that their job decisions may be largely influenced. For example, ST (35, senior department manager) explains that he had a close personal relationship with his line manager and he followed his manager to the current company. ST aligns himself with the company through his manager as he fully trusts his manager, respects his profession in the work, his leadership style and his experiences. ST also indicates that he may leave the company if his line manager were to change jobs:

'Who knows if we move again together in the future? It's just the feeling of you know, he knows me and I know him. We know each other since…my first job. He was the department manager. I like him already that time. Basically we share the same philosophy in terms of how to finish the job, how to get along with co-workers. I feel very comfortable to work with him. I learned so much from him, not only techniques but also how be to a good manager. He is like a career mentor... He sometimes says something like having our own company or something. Maybe one day we will leave the company together and have our own company. I think it can happen. I just enjoy working with him at the moment.'

iii. Organisation culture

Organisation culture can mould certain values and beliefs held by staff members (Smircich, 1983). Employees with a strong belief in and acceptance of organisations' culture usually act on behalf of the organisation and tend to maintain their memberships in the companies (Guzley, 1992). Accordingly, a preferred organisational culture arguably strengthens employees' commitment with the company, especially when the culture supports the quality of the working experience. On the other hand, employees who are unable to fit the organisational culture may find uncomfortable to stay in the company (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Gifford et al., 2002; Goodman et al., 2001; Deal & Kennedy, 1982; Peters & Waterman, 1982).

The previous chapter observes that organisational culture, as one of the employer branding's intangible attributes, is evaluated by the job seekers. It is argued that after joining the company, organisational culture also influences employee's productivity, efficiency and work attitudes, such as job satisfaction and organisational commitment (Glisson & James, 2002). Therefore this section extends the previous understanding and explores the role of organisational culture in employee retention. It shows that organisational culture is also considered important when existing employees make their job decisions.

After RY (56, Company founder) emphasises that building a healthy and friendly company culture serves as an important factor in attracting potential employees, he continues to indicate that to keep the right people, this healthy and friendly company culture is pivotal:

'I hope my employees feel comfortable to work for me. When they believe they are part of the company, part of the big family, they won't leave easily. So I always try to

build a friendly and comfortable working environment and culture in my company. It's not the money that keeps them, it's the company culture. Like my CEO, he's working with me over 20 years, of course the payment is very good, but I think the reason why he still works with me is he feels this is his family, the people, the environment and the company culture that keeps him.'

MN (25, Department staff) labels her company's culture as 'friendly':

> *'I am not that kind of person, I don't like to work in an arrogant company. That doesn't suit me. My company is opposite; everyone is friendly, the company is friendly, especially to the new employees. I'm a friendly person. I guess friendly person should work in a friendly company. The company has a culture of friendliness. I don't think a company's culture can change in a short time. So I believe my company has been like this for a long time and will keep its friendliness for a long time. I like to work in a company like this. I'm not afraid to ask questions, you know there will always be someone gives you a hand when you need it.'*

A company's culture is difficult to change as it usually takes a long time to shape and can be influenced by multiple factors. As asserted by Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon, *'One of the things you find in companies is that once a culture is formed it takes nuclear weaponry to change it'* (Mosley, 2007; Smith & Wheeler; 2002). Therefore, employees may leave the company when they fail to fit in the organisation culture, especially when they find that the organisational culture is difficult to change in a short period of time. For example, when YB (40, Senior department manager) indicates that *'[he] prefer[s] the company with a flexible and supportive culture. If necessary, I can talk with the big boss directly without passing the problem to my line manager, or to somebody else*.' However he observes that the senior level managers '*never have any open communication with any of us, they never spend any time by walking around, say 'hi' to us and check if we are happy to work or not. The only time I can meet the CEO is in the meeting. Can you imagine there are nearly hundreds of people in the hall? How can I talk with him, or how can he talk with us in that huge hall?*' Clearly YB is disappointed with the company culture, especially when he observes that *'nothing has changed, nothing improved since I worked here'*. At the end of the interview YB shares that he is considering a job offer in a new company: *'when you are tired of expecting that something good would happen, you are looking for new places to work'*.

IV. Organisation identity

A strong organisation identity can also be seen as value congruence between job seekers and companies. Working in a company which shares similar values provides opportunities for employees to exhibit more of themselves (Dutton et al., 1994). Moreover, when an individual identifies strongly with a company, they consider their behaviour which benefits the company to also benefit themselves. Individual employees would later tie their personal achievements with the company's achievement, so that they would engage more with the company and stay for longer (Dukerich et al., 2002; Dutton et al., 1994). Therefore, the strength of organisational identity will not only attract job seekers, but also motivate the hired employees' engagement and company citizenship behaviours. Accordingly, this section extends the previous discussion of how organisation identity attracts job seekers and explores the role of organisation identity in employee retention.

For example, MN (25, Department staff) indicates that *'the company is as friendly as I expected'*. After working in the company for almost one year, she identifies strongly with the company as the similarity between the self-concept and the perceived organisation identity allows her to exhibit more of herself:

> *'The company is as friendly as I expected… everyone is friendly, the company is friendly, especially to the new employees. I'm a friendly person. I guess friendly person should work in a friendly company. The company has a culture of friendliness. I don't think a company's culture can change in a short time. So I believe my company has been like this for a long time and will keep its friendliness for a long time. I like to work in a company like this. I'm not afraid to ask questions, you know there will always be someone gives you a hand when you need it.'*

Employees prefer to stay in a company which can be identified similarly to how they define themselves. For example, SZ (55, CEO) explains that working in a company with similar characteristics to himself is easier:

> *'It's easier to work in a company who understand you or similar with you. The company has the culture of empowerment and trust. Like me, I'm the CEO of the company and I'm empowered to manage the company in my way. Also in turn I trust my employees and prefer them working happily without considering too much about supervision relationship. It's just saving so many time of reporting and waiting for the permits.'*

Identifying with a company is beneficial in maintaining a sense of self, being distinct from others and enhancing self-esteem and is also found helpful in retaining employees. For example, LW (28, Department staff) explains the benefits of distinguishing herself from others and enhancing her self-esteem which motivates her to choose and stay in the company:

'Something very interested happened this year. You know I've been working for nearly 5 years and this is the first time someone I mean not the company gives me some incentives before the Chinese New Year. I wouldn't say it's a bribe but I've never received anything like this before. Maybe my job is important? This makes me feel so. I don't know, but I won't say I feel bad about it. Also you know when I pop into banks or hospitals or any dinner out with friends, I can tell they quite admire my job, I don't want to lie but I feel good about it. I mean it's not fair to others but this is the fact in China. People like you working in state-own companies. My auntie is so happy about my job, she is so confident that my job would help me to find a boyfriend. It's funny but I will be more than happy if this is true. Now I can understand why people are desperately applying jobs in state-own companies no matter how much they get. I would take the advantages of this and stay, who wouldn't?'

6.3 The Model- First stage

From this discussion of the interpretation of the findings, the first stage of the model – 'Employer branding attributes: attract and retain employees' is elaborated as:

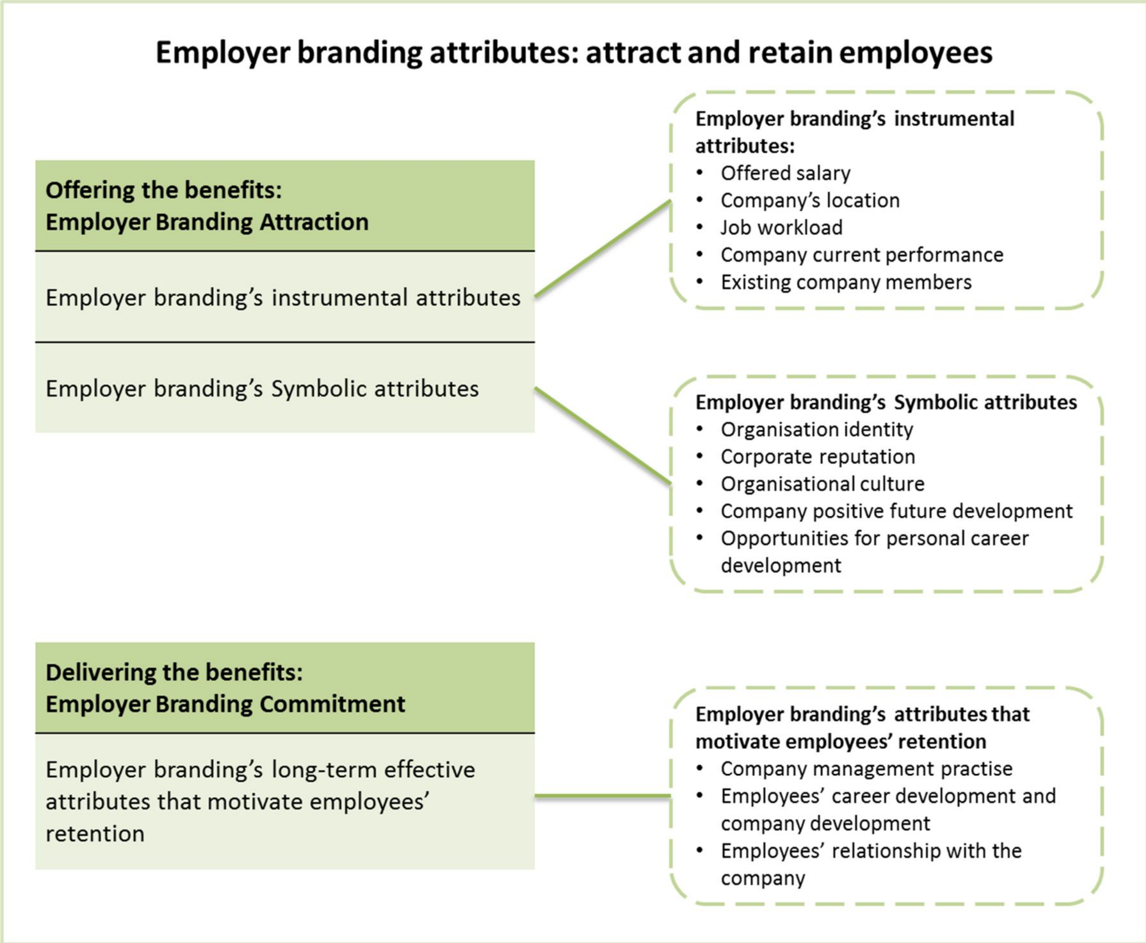

Figure 6.3: A Model of Employer Branding Attraction and Retention – First Stage

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, a general discussion and interpretation of the findings has been presented, based on participants' own accounts of their job experiences. Employer branding's tangible and intangible attributes that improve job seekers' intention to apply for jobs and employer branding's attributes that motivate employees to commit to the employer brand are both presented. The first stage model is also presented as shown above (Figure 6.3: A Model of Employer Branding Attraction and Retention – First Stage).

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

Chapter 6 shows the way in which employer branding attributes contribute to employees' attraction and retention, and describes this process in detail through the voices of the participants. Chapter 7 discusses these findings in relation to the objectives of this study and the current literature. Where Chapter 6 emphasizes the voices of the participants, this Chapter brings in the researcher's voice to explain individual participants' employer branding choices within the existing theoretical framework.

Introduction

In Chapter 6 findings are presented and structured by following the conceptual framework developed in Chapter 2, in which job seekers are argued to be attracted by employer branding attributes and hired employees are retained and committed when a company consistently delivers the promised benefits.

This chapter explains the findings in Chapter 6. It firstly discusses employee attraction and retention within the employer branding framework developed in Chapter 2. The 'needs theory' from a psychology perspective is also brought in to explore job seekers' choices in the job market. Secondly, the 'fit' theory is used to further explain the findings from an HR perspective.

As a result, findings in Chapter 6 can be explained as: job seekers make their choices by evaluating the match between their needs with employer branding attributes. They also consider the fit between their needs and the rewards offered by the employers. Existing employees make their retention decisions by reviewing how their employers deliver on its branding promises in the longer term. Existing employees also consider the fit between their job skills and abilities with the demands of the job and the fit between their own value and the company's value and culture.

This Chapter therefore further addresses the first and second research questions:

1. What are employer branding's attributes that improve job seekers' likelihood of applying for the jobs?

2. What motivates hired employees to be loyal to the employer brand and stay for a long period of time?

Additionally, through integrating literature from both marketing and HR, the call for a cross-disciplinary employer branding study is addressed so that the third research gap is well bridged. The third research focal point:

'understand and explain the concept of employer branding by integrating literature from both marketing and HR in order to pursue a better understanding toward employees' brand attraction and loyalty behaviour.'

Interview transcripts have been discussed extensively in Chapter 6, therefore the purpose of this chapter is not to re-examine each employer branding attributes already established and discussed in previous chapter. Rather, further presentation and interpretation of interview materials is provided with the intention of providing a deeper picture of employer branding attraction and retention. Repetition of interview transcripts may occur occasionally, however repetition is limited to instances where using the transcripts can help better explain participants' behaviours.

7.1 Employer branding attributes meet with employees' needs

In line with the theoretical foundations examined in the branding literature, employer branding's attributes, including the tangible instrumental and intangible symbolic attributes, help companies to successfully attract job seekers and retain them (Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Lievens et al., 2007). Identified instrumental attributes and symbolic attributes contribute to job seekers' likelihood to apply for jobs. Employer branding attributes are effective on a long-term basis in retaining employees, if the employer's commitments are delivered in practice.

Further analysis of the interviews reveals that successful employer branding communicates attributes which meet with each of the individuals' requirements and expectations.

7.2 Explaining employee attraction and retention within the marketing discipline

Reflecting back to the previous discussion in chapter two, section 2.4.iii 'Employer branding as a reinforcing counterpart to traditional product-based branding', the theoretical foundation of employer branding is that during recruitment, employers promote their branding attributes to build a healthy brand image which is helpful to attract more applicants. Once hired, the relationship between the employer and the employees can be extended when the promised brand attributes in the first stage are perceived to be true; especially when the promised benefits are delivered consistently, employees are motivated to be loyal, attached and commit to the employer brand.

Findings in Chapter 6 elaborate the above process. Further analysis of the findings indicates that only when the employer branding attributes, including both functional and symbolic attributes, match with job seekers' hierarchical needs, will job applicants be attracted to apply for the job. Existing employees would also be motivated to stay when the employer branding benefits can be delivered consistently. Consistently delivering the benefits in a long term will encourage employees be loyal, attached and committed to the employer brand. The following sections explain this process in detail.

7.2. i Building positive employer brand image: fulfilling job seekers' needs to attract potential employees

Job seekers evaluate employer branding by comparing their pre-employment expectations with the employer branding attributes. Employers use instrumental and symbolic attributes to convey positive information in the job market. To build an attractive employer brand image, the tangible instrumental attributes, including salary, company location, prospective workload, company performances and the people who work in the company are discovered playing an important role. Intangible symbolic attributes of employer branding are also helpful in enhancing the attractiveness of employer branding in the job market. The symbolic attributes are shown to include an organisation's identity, company reputation, organisational culture, its future development and the opportunities it provides for personal development.

More importantly, further analysis of these findings indicates that participants' job application is driven by the match between their needs and the benefits employer branding offers. The following section explains how particular employer branding attributes match with participants' needs.

- **The discovered tangible attributes:**

a. Salary

The financial attributes of employer branding (salary) are evaluated as attractive in the job market. Further analysis of this finding indicates that only when job seekers have the need for a high salary will they value the financial attributes high.

For example, SZ (55, CEO)'s plan of retiring in five years requires him to search for jobs with high financial rewards. When his current employer offered him a high salary job which SZ is '*very happy about'*, he left his previous job and joined the current company. Other examples include new graduates under pressure to pay back their student loans so that jobs with a high payment are attractive as '*money is very important*' to them. Especially to students who are facing financially problem, '*they need the money immediately to pay the student loan... nearly everyone applied for the company, for the good payment'.* MST (25, Manufacturing staff) and HC (35, Manufacturing staff) choose jobs with high payment. Especially when the performances of their family business are poor, the need to apply for jobs with a good salary is higher: *'There are more than 10 companies in my village...We just wait to see who gives us the most money... I need the salary higher than what I can get from working in my own farm. Especially in some years when we couldn't get enough money from the farm, I particularly choose to work in the company who gives me more money, my family need money.'*

b. Company location

Company location is evaluated by job seekers when they apply for jobs. It is found that companies with a good location are characterised by some of the following qualities: they are located close to family, or in an area with a low living cost, or where people share the same religion, or where there are few barriers to obtaining citizenship and further job opportunities.

Further analysing the data indicates that job seekers are attracted to companies if the benefits of location match with their individual needs. For example, DJ (27, Department staff) and CL (27, Department staff)'s need to work in companies which are close to their parents are fulfilled as their current company is within driving distance of their parents' homes. Similarly, taking care of the family business requires MST (25, Manufacturing staff) and HC (35, Manufacturing staff)'s companies to be close to their hometown: '*Of course it doesn't make sense if I travel to other places and leaving the farm to my family. I won't work outside of the city. My farm has priorities. I need to go back immediately if they need me.'* Therefore companies which locate near their hometown are attractive because this attribute matches with their needs. Additionally, MST's needs of working in areas where people share the same religion are fulfilled as most of his colleagues share the same religion with him.

LW (28, Department staff) finds the current job attractive as the benefit of working in the current company meets her need to gain Beijing citizenship, which she desires. The potential working opportunities in Beijing encourage YQ (25, Department staff) to apply for jobs in the area, and this matches her need to discover more potential working opportunities and pursue a better career. In contrast, although only limited job opportunities can be found in small cities, DJ (27, Department staff) still applied to her current company (located in a small town) as her need to work in a quiet place with less traffic and pollution are fulfilled: '*I serious prefer a quieter place to live and work. Big city is not my cup of tea'.*

JB (45, Department manager) and ST (35, Senior department manager) have opposite perceptions about workload. JB's need for more holidays and more time for family are fulfilled as the current job requires limited working time. ST views achievement at work as a personal achievement, his needs of maximising personal achievement is fulfilled as his job's attributes include heavy workload and long working hours.

c. Company current performance (organisational success)

Participants in this study are also attracted by the company's current performances, including both the company's profitability and its position in the industry.

Financially successful companies usually offer high payment which attracts job seekers who have a need for high income. CL (27, Department staff), CY (29, Department staff) and DJ (27, Department staff) all indicate that their incomes are higher because of the outstanding company financial performances. Therefore their needs for high payment are fulfilled. In contrast, ST applied to his current job when the company's financial performances were poor. It can be explained that the potential development of the company met ST's needs of self-achievement.

A company's high position in the market is viewed as a positive sign of the company's performance. Therefore participants predict that companies' high performance will last for a long time and payment will be better. YB (40, Senior department manager) and JB (45, Department manager) are attracted to their company as their need for high payment and a stable job are fulfilled. As JB indicates:

> *'There must be something that this company is good at. Otherwise how can it be in the top? This company gives me more money and I predict that the company can stay in this position for a long time, definitely it won't go down before I retiring. These are exactly what I am looking for.'*

- **The discovered intangible attributes:**

It is also identified that employer brand strength also relies on the power of symbolic attributes. Compared with employer branding's instrumental attributes which mostly fulfill participants' lower level needs, symbolic attributes of employer branding aim at fulfilling their higher level needs.

Participants of this study are attracted to companies in which the organisation's identity and culture matches how they identify themselves. Moreover, job seekers also evaluate a company's reputation and its likely future development. When the company's organisation, culture, reputation and future development can match with participants' particular needs, the possibilities of applying for jobs are high.

a. Organisation identity and reputation

Findings in Chapter 6 indicate that organisation identity and reputation influence the strength of employees' identification with the employer brand. It is also found that participants describe the employer brand as attractive when the organisation's identity and reputation brings benefits and fulfills their higher needs.

For example, YB's (40, Senior department manager) high needs for achievement are fulfilled by his company which provides moderately challenging tasks and the empowerment to develop new ways of management.

LW (28, Department staff)'s example also demonstrates the above assumption. Jobs in state-own company are identified as short working hours, non-strenuous and high security. LW has the needs of finding a boyfriend. She believes *'find a boyfriend can be easier'* if she works in state-owned companies as she has more free time, less work stress and the job is characterised as stable.

Moreover, employers are important in building people's self-concept and social identity. Job seekers would be encouraged to associate themselves with reputable companies to meet their needs of distinguishing themselves from others and improving self-esteem. For instance, both MN (25, Department staff) and YQ (25, Department staff)'s needs of improving self-esteem are fulfilled by working in reputable companies. MN believes that:

> *'If I can work with one of [the 'big four' companies], people will look me differently…especially working with a foreign company…they will assume that your English is perfect. I think it's good, think about when you heard someone graduate from Oxford or Cambridge, you will assume that they are better than people graduate from, I don't know, a university that nobody knows right?'*

YQ also explains that her job helps her distinguish from others and improves her self-esteem:

'I was very proud to tell people that I get the offer from this company… after hearing back from them that I get the job, I was so pleased. I am quite happy to work in one of the best companies. I called my parents and they were so proud of me too. They told everyone about it. I told some of my friends and they all admired it. I mean it's one of the best places we all dream to work in. They are happy for me. I guess my parents must call everyone that day about the good news. I feel like this maybe the biggest moment in my life and I am quite proud of myself to be honest. Me and my friends had dinner after a while and we talked about each other's jobs because we will graduate at the same time, I feel like people look at you differently only because you have a good job. Most of them found jobs before me, I need to prove that I am better than most of my friends. Finally I feel like I am different from them, I have a better job and I am quite proud!'

b. Company positive future development and opportunities for personal career development

Findings from Chapter 6 indicate that future employment opportunities are another employer branding attribute evaluated by the job seekers. Participants have needs for developing new skills, gaining promotion opportunities and working experiences to build strong personal CVs. When companies can provide such benefits to meet participants' needs, the employer branding would be perceived as attractive.

For example, developing new skills are desirable to MN (25, Department staff) and YQ (25, Department staff) as both of them are new graduates. MN finds the job attractive as it allows her to practice what she has learnt in the university. YQ also expects to *'learn how to work'* in the new company. The company's offered training programme meets her needs and attracts her to apply for the job.

Career starters usually desire to gain working experiences to develop a strong CV. Therefore employers are attractive when they offer job seekers opportunities to gain working experiences, especially companies with a big brand can serve as a way of building a strong CV. YQ is attracted to her company as it is *'one of the best in the industry'*. YQ's need of adding companies with a big name into her CV is fulfilled. She further emphasizes that '*Working here is like a springboard, I will leave one day and move to a better place. Putting this name in my CV definitely helps the future job finding.'*

To summarise the discussion so far, Figure 7.1 draws the findings together and demonstrates how employer branding's tangible and intangible attribute can attract job applicants in the market. It shows that among the different employer branding attributes, only when the attributes meet with job seekers' hierarchy needs will they be attracted to the employer brand. As such, a positive employer brand image can be built accordingly.

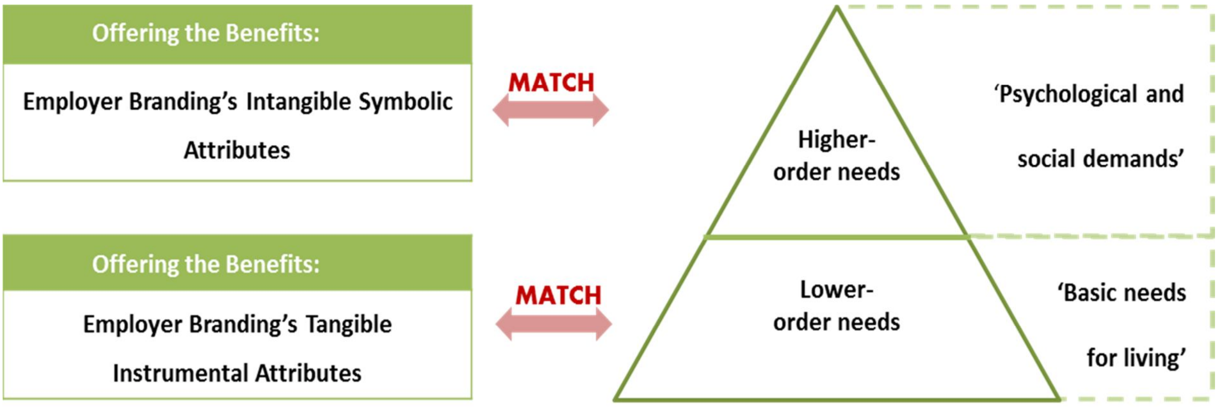

Figure 7.1: Employer branding attributes match with employees' hierarchy needs

7.2.ii Building a psychological bond with employees: consistently deliver effective benefits longer to retain hired employees

Chapter 2 observes that once job applicants are hired, companies who successfully and consistently deliver the promised benefits can develop a positive relationship with their hired employees (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). Therefore whether or not the hired employees would stay in the company and whether or not the company-employees relationship can be enhanced are dependent upon the delivery of the promised benefits (Gounaris, 2006; Hoeffler & Keller, 2002).

The characteristics of employer branding attributes identified in Chapter 6 elaborate upon the above assumption. It is identified that instead of short-term effective factors, employer branding's attributes which are evaluated by existing employees are longer effective factors. When the deliverance of the promised benefits are consistent, participant's intention to stay is strong. The following section explains these results in detail.

- **Management practice**

Management practice is a long-term employer branding attribute that participants evaluate. Examples of the management practice which participants consider include company's compensation package, employees' well-being management, company leadership, empowerment, and the level of bureaucracy and organisational communication.

The financial reward system in DJ (27, Department staff) and CL (27, Department staff)'s company motivates them to stay a long time. Under this reward system employees' payment is increased at the end of each year. DJ and CL both indicate that this payment system, including encouraging employees to purchase the company's shares, motivates them to pursue a higher position in the company and stay longer. Similarly, MN is motivated to stay for at least three years as the rate of payment increase in the third year is significantly higher than in the first two years.

Participants are also encouraged to stay when their companies' management practice benefits the employees' long-term life and well-being. The efforts in improving employees' long-term living conditions effectively reduce the possibilities of leaving the companies. For example, DJ's company builds properties near the company and offers cheap property prices for their own staff members, it can be predicted that employees who bought the properties would not leave their job easily as the cost of moving is high.

The welfare benefits which help to retain the employees are identified as effective in the longer term. DJ, CL, LW (28, Department staff) and JB (45, Department manager) are all motivated to stay because the welfare benefits from their companies are more than others. More importantly, the risk of losing the previous accumulated benefits discourages them to leave the company.

Company leadership, empowerment and the level of bureaucracy are also long-term management practices which participants evaluated. For example, ST (35, Senior department manager) is motivated to stay as he is empowered to have a voice at work. He is satisfied about the continuously high empowerment from his line manager. Organisational communication is another identified longer term effective attribute. Participants prefer a healthy and effective organisational communication and indicate that it helps to improve the accuracy of their perceptions of the company. For example, both DJ and MN are satisfied with the company communication system. Healthy and effective communication transmits a clear information and message to them so that they more easily adopt company directives and behaviour. The positive effects from healthy organisational communication help the company to keep their employees. However the inadequate communication between the company and employees negatively influences participants' job decisions. For example, YB and JB both complain that inadequate communication decreases their engagement with the company.

- **Employee career management and company development**

The attributes related to existing employees' career management are also longer-term effective attributes. Participants evaluate whether the company can offer them promotion opportunities and whether working in the company is helpful to gain experiences, develop skills and their CV. For example, MN (25, Department staff) explains that the promotion system in her company encourages the employees to work hard and stay long: *'To get promoted we need to stay in the company for a certain period of time. Your performances must reach certain levels or better than others I guess.'* ST (35, Senior department manager) and YQ (25, Department staff) emphasize the role of skill development in making their job decisions as it is related to their marketability and capacity in future job hunting.

A company's development is also evaluated when existing employees make their job decisions. They make their decisions of staying or leaving by judging whether the company's development could be helpful in designing their own career. The ability to assist employees' future career development is a longer-term effective attribute. It is found that participants are motivated to engage with the company more when the company's development could benefit their own career design in the long term. For example, DJ (27, Department staff) indicates that her company is opening an increasing number of subsidiary companies which provides more opportunities for young employees to pursue higher positions. Job seekers have the similar interests in assessing company's development; however instead of concerning their future career, they are attracted when the company's future are predicted to be positive.

- **Employees identify with and understand the values of the company**

Apart from offering employees effective benefits in the longer term, Chapter 2 also indicates that the congruence between employees' self-value-definition and their company's values motivates employees to engage with the company as 'value matching' aligns the interests and behaviour of both parties (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005; Dutton et al., 1994).

Findings in this study confirm that brand commitment involves employees identifying and understanding the values of the company. Identification with the company is strong when the employees' values are in congruence with companies' values. For example, MN (25, Department staff) views herself as *'a friendly person'* which matches with the company's culture labelled as *'friendly'*. She is motivated to stay in her company as '*friendly person should work in a friendly company'*. In the meantime SZ (55, CEO) finds it easier to work in a company which shares a similar value position. He indicates that working in a company which shares similar values *'is like having a relationship with someone who value and appreciate the same thing. In this kind of relationship everything is easy because you don't need to explain what are you doing and why you are doing this. You would understand each other well and this relationship is not easy to break'*. Similarly, YB (40, Senior department manager) perceives his new company as *'young and innovative'* while he categorises himself as *'someone with passion, ready for new challenges'*. The congruence between YB's self-value-definition and the company's definition aligns the two parties together. As a result, YB is motivated to engage with the company as in his case exertion on behalf of the company is also exertion on behalf of himself.

Summarising the above discussion and drawing the findings of 7.2.i and 7.2.ii together, Figure 7.2 extends the previous framework (Figure 7.1) to further demonstrate how employer branding's different attributes can help companies to retain their existing employees. It shows that hired employees are motivated to stay when the company consistently delivers longer-term effective benefits.

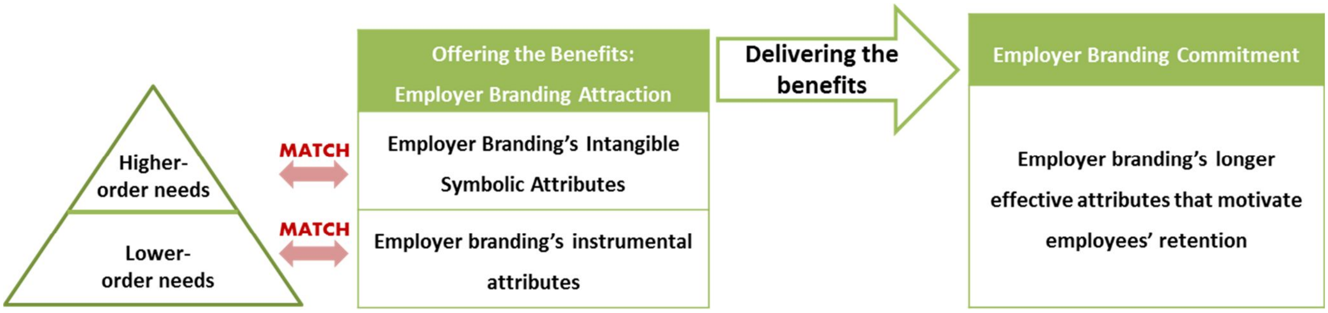

Figure 7.2: Delivering longer-term effective benefits to retain existing employees

7.3 Employees' fit with the company: explaining employer branding's role in employee attraction and retention within HR discipline

Employer branding shares a theoretical foundation with product-based branding, so that the study of employer branding begins with exploring the marketing and branding knowledge. Section 7.2 explores the employer branding concept within the marketing paradigm and explains participants' behaviour following a framework which is developed from traditional branding theories.

Chapter 3 highlights that employer branding is a multi-disciplinary, cross-functional concept therefore employer branding studies should incorporate knowledge from different areas. Aside from marketing discipline, theories in the discipline of HR Management are emphasized in employer branding studies. Numerous scholars, including Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Hulberg, 2006; Martin et al., 2004; Burmann & Zeplin, 2004; Ahmed et al., 2003 all highlight the needs of bringing HR knowledge into employer branding studies.

Chapters 2, 6 and the previous discussion in Chapter 7 focus on exploring the employer branding concept and explaining employees' branding behaviours within the marketing discipline. It is noticed that employees' branding behaviours cannot be fully explained in the current framework. For example, the current results are exclusively based on comparing employer branding's different attributes with regard to employees' needs and yield the conclusion that employees would be attracted and retained when these attributes meet with their hierarchical needs. However certain employees' branding related behaviours are underexplored within the current model. For example, job seekers higher-level needs are largely related to their feelings towards the employer. Participants in this study highlight the role of several intangible attributes which contribute significantly to their decisions, such as organisation identity, reputation and culture. Comparing participants' needs with organisation identity, reputation and culture cannot fully explain participants' job decisions as people's feelings are difficult to measure or compare. Additionally, current findings only show that branding attributes which contribute to retain the existing employees are longer-term effective attributes. How, then, does each attribute contribute to employees' retention? For instance, how does the relationship between employees and their companies influence their job decisions? The needs to extend the current results and further explore the brand behavior of existing employees' are clear.

To address the above issue and answer the call to bring the HR literature into the study of employer branding (Chapter 3, section 3.2iii), this section extends the previous analysis and elaborates how employer branding can successfully attract and retain employees within the HR paradigm. 'Fit' theory introduced in Chapter 3, section 3.2.iii will be used to interpret the data with a particular focus on explaining participants' stories from the three 'fit' perspectives: Needs-Supplies fit, Personal-job fit and Personal-organisation fit.

7.3.i Fulfilling employees' basic and value needs: Needs-Supplies fit

Cable and DeRue (2002) argue that because the needs-supplies fit largely concerns employees' basic motivation in the labor market, perceptions of the needs-supplies fit are the primary driver of further job decisions and work attitudes. In other words, whether the potential employees would choose to work for the company and how they are going to contribute to the job are driven by the fit between what employees need and what the companies can offer (Cable & DeRue, 2002).

For example, SZ's payment need is in congruence with what the company offers him, therefore the fit between his needs and the supplies from the company motivates him to build the relationship with the company. Other examples include the fit between the company location and MN's need for a low living cost. Similarly, HC's company location fits his need to work in an area with a particular religion. When JB left the previous company because of the heavy workload, he found the new company attractive because the working hours fit his workload preference. However although the workload in ST's company is heavy, he still applied for the job because the workload fits his need for self-achievement.

The needs-supplies fit can be further conceptualised into supplies-values fit. Supplies-values fit occurs when the values held or expected by the job seekers are fulfilled with what offered by the employer. Usually these held values reveals employees' conscious desires including their preferences, interests, motives and goals (Van Vianen, 2000). For example, when a job seeker has high preferences for 'challenge', organisations that can fulfil this need by offering 'opportunities for challenge' may be seen as attractive.

This following section attempts to further explain the finding of section 6.2. How do intangible attributes contribute to improve job seekers' intention to apply for jobs? While participants' behaviours in the job market are underexplored in the previous discussion, this section addresses this issue by explaining their choices within the supplies-values fit concept.

Section 6.2 reveals that organisation identity, reputation and culture are evaluated by the job applicants. It is discovered that when the organisation identity, reputation and culture fit with how participants define themselves, the possibilities of applying for a job is high.

For example, YB (40, Senior department manager) defines himself as *'someone with passion, ready for new challenges'* while the company is identified as *'young and innovative'*. The fit between his self-identity and the company identity attract him to apply for the job. YB further indicates that '*I am so happy to work here...I feel like, finally this day comes, someone understand me and agree with me.'* He finds working in a company which he can fit well is easier: *'I feel very comfortable to work with someone who shares the similar views about how to management the company, how should the company looks like in the future...I predict after working in the company it should be much easier than working in the company who doesn't understand you.'*

Similarly, MN (25, Department staff) also evaluates the fit between her personal identity with how she identifies the company. When she labelled herself and the company both as 'friendly', the attractiveness of the company is strengthened.

As regards to the organisation culture, it can also conclude that job seekers find a potential employer attractive when they fit with the organisation culture. For example, RY (56, Company founder) as the founder of the company highlights that *'a bunch of people who understand and appreciate the same value should work together well'* so that he prefers to recruit employees who can fit in the organisation culture well: *'So sometimes if I attend the* *recruitment interview, I prefer those who have the similar personality with me, or with the company. I think a bunch of people who understand and appreciate the same value should work together well.'*

CY (29, Department staff) also finds the organisation culture important when she selects potential employers. She indicates that the company culture attracts her the most. It is shown that CY as '*a new graduate without any experiences'* fits well with this organisation culture which is characterised as '*innovation leading'*.

7.3.ii Match with the needs of job skills and abilities: Personal-job fit

It indicates that employees who fit well with their organisation would not leave the company easily and they become 'globally committed' which means employees fit with everything within the company. However Van Vianen (2000) points out that employees distinguish between the fit with the organisation and the fit with the job itself. Apart from evaluating the company as a whole, employees' decisions are also driven by whether their job knowledge and abilities are fitting with the characteristics of the job (Van Vianen, 2000). As a result, when the employees' fit with the jobs are poor, they will still look for internal position (job) change which may cause negative influences on employees' job performance (Lauver & Kristof- Brown, 2001; Becker & Billings, 1993).

CL (27, Department staff) indicates that his female colleagues would leave the job when they are asked to work *'in the night time and sleep in the day time'.* Additionally, the job also asks employees to work with *'thousands of computers, equipment in the lab'* which may potentially influence female employees' health. The female employees' physical abilities are incompatible with the demands of the job as 't*hey usually need to take care of the family. Their physical conditions are not allowed'.* Also as working in the lab may '*have some side effect to the girls',* these girls may quit the job '*if they want to have babies*'.

Therefore organisations should direct efforts toward increasing employees' Personal-job fit by locating the right job to the right people. It is also suggested that in order to increase the P-J fit, companies should design their training programmes with an emphasis on strengthening employees' job knowledge, behaviors and attitudes to help them better fit with the job (Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001; Bauer et al., 1998). For example, CL indicates that training programmes help to enhance the fit between employees' job ability and the job demands:

> *'you don't need to worry too much that your degree from the university is not fully fit with the job, nobody's degree can fully match the job demands. We have different*

training programmes, a bit intense in the first three months and last through the whole year. You can pretty much learn everything you need for the job. At the end of the training programme you would know the job much better. We have practices everyday so once starting the actual work; you won't feel you've never touched these jobs before. You basically have every single skill that you need to finish the job well. The training programmes just make your life here easier, no surprises because you've practiced a lot in the training. Also you will know who you need to go to if you are in trouble. There will be someone who gives you a hand.'

7.3.iii Fit with organisations' culture and values: Personal-organisation fit

Sharing the same values with the company is important when employees build a consistent relationship with their organisation, because *'values are conceived of as fundamental and relatively enduring'* (Van Vianen, 2000, p.114).

This section explores the fit between participants own values with the company's culture and values and further explains employees' retention behaviour based on the discussion in 7.2.ii. It shows that when participants fit with the organisation culture, and the culture constructed by the people within the organisation, they will be motivated to stay. Additionally, whether employees fit with the organisation's values also influences their retention decisions.

· **Fit with organisational culture**

Van Vianen (2000) further indicates that the characteristics of organisation culture are presented in two ways. First is the organisational culture itself. Organisational culture is shaped by an organisation's strategic position and environment which largely influence the company structure and control systems. Secondly, as employees' personality and attitudes can impose influence on organisational life in different aspects, it is impossible to separate and distinguish the employees' role in organisational culture's construction. Therefore organisational culture is also constructed by the people who work in the organisation (Van Vianen, 2000). According to Schneider et al. (1998, 1995), the persons who 'make environments' and each individual's characteristics are the basic ingredients of organisational culture. Moreover, it further indicates that an organisation's culture can usually be inferred from the behaviour of the employees, so that an organisation's culture is also identified as the culture of its people (Van Vianen, 2000). As such, considering the fit between employees and company culture should also cover the match between employees' characteristics and the characteristics of others in the organisation (Van Vianen, 2000; Schneider et al., 1998, 1995).

Findings from this study indicate that employees consider the fit between themselves and their organisational culture helps to make their retention decision. RY (56, Company founder) emphasises that building a healthy and friendly company culture serves as an important factor to keep the right people. MN (25, Department staff) prefers to stay in the company as both of them share the similar characteristics of '*friendly*'. In contrast, YB (40, Senior department manager) considers leaving the company as he find difficult to fit in the company which is lacks a '*flexible and supportive culture*'.

In regards to the culture of the people, findings of section 6.2.3 indicate that participants are concerned about their relationships with working colleagues and supervisors, who are the two main contributors to the creation of organisational culture. The following section explains the finding of 6.2.3 which is unexplored in the previous analysis.

CY (29, Department staff) indicates that *'it's quite important to work with people you like and can get on well. You are not working by yourself but working with people.'* She further shares that '*working with some people [she] really like'* and the working culture created by the people in her department enhanced her engagement with the work:

> *'I feel comfortable to work in such an environment, my lovely colleagues are the highlights of the job. You know there will be someone who always willing to give you a hand when you need, also you won't feel pressure to ask for help. We are lucky that everyone in our group appreciates this. If there're anyone who doesn't like this he or she will find difficult to fit in. It's the culture thing, its invisible but I know it's there. It works better than the regulations and management policies.'*

MN's story also reveals that the culture created by colleagues motivates her to stay in the company. MN is working with *'some people [she] really like[s]'* with whom she shares similar value perceptions. Her team members are all in a similar age group and share a similar education background. The working environment and culture therefore are *'fun, relaxing and entertaining'* which contributes to her decision to stay. MN further indicates the '*If, I mean if one day I leave the company, these people are definitely the one that I will miss the most.'* Clearly MN is attached to the company because of the people within the organisation.

However LW (28, Department staff) complains that the culture creates by her working colleagues is *'dull, boring, competitive and not fun'*. Clearly LW finds difficult to fit into the 'people-built culture' in her company:

'We don't talk too much after work. They all have their families so we seldom go out for drink or food. So every day the office looks the same to me. It's dull, boring, competitive and not fun. Maybe because they are much older than me? When I say competitive don't take me wrong, I don't mean people compete with each other for high working quality or working efficiency. Because as I said we have the similar salary even my work quality is much better than others. So there's no need to compete about work. We compete about other things, like if you have a good relationship with the supervisor, do the people in the higher level like you etc etc. Just something that is unrelated to work at all. I am not interested in these dramas. Workload is not heavy so think about when a bunch of mid-age women sit in the office, all they like to do is gossip. Sometimes I am asking myself: why I am here? If you work in an environment like this, you also need to be very careful about what you said. They may interpret it into a completely different story. So after a while I don't like to share anything with them. Sometimes I feel it's dangerous to share anything with them. I think maybe they feel the same. So it is very quiet, very quiet in the office. People are very careful about the information they shared so we don't have a relaxing working environment.'

Managers also play a significant role in creating the 'people-built culture' within the organisation as the leader is the main character that fosters the organisation culture through daily management.

For example, RY (56, Company founder) as the company founder prefers to be the *'role model'* of his employees. He usually is the *'first one arrived the company also the last one who left the company'* and sometimes works till 4 a.m. in the office. RY further shares that *'most of the employees who stay long agree with this idea and work as hard as me. I am the role model, people are following me. If they don't agree with this culture, they would have already left the company'*. Clearly RY plays a central role in developing the organisation culture. Employees who can fit with the company culture which emphasizes long hours and hard work are inspired to stay.

ST (35, Senior department manager) appreciates the company's culture of 'trust'. He highlights the role of his line manager in creating this organisation culture. Developing the culture of 'trust' initiates from ST's line manager: '*My line manager (the company CEO) trusts me very much. He allows me to manage the company in my way…But in term of daily management, he is happy with my work and it just feels great that you can actually doing something without asking the permission thousands of times.'* ST fits in the culture of 'trust' well and further extends this 'trust' culture into his daily management practices:

'*I like the way how he manages the relationship between him and his employees. I do the same, I trust my department directors, and I appreciate their management style. When you find someone is good, simply trust them and empower them, the results can't be bad, management becomes much simple and smooth. Managing a company doesn't mean you need to check everything in every detail, as a manager, I think it's important to trust others.'*

However when LW (28, Department staff) complains that the culture created by her working colleagues is *'dull, boring, competitive and not fun'*, she further highlights the role of the department manager in creating this negative organisation culture:

'My department manager definitely is responsible…he is the laziest in our group; he steals others' finished work…He creates such a working environment in our department. Department staffs simply follow his working style. In a working environment like this, no one would care about the working quality, because he (the department manager) doesn't appreciate it. Whether you will be promoted or not depends on whether he likes you or not. He promotes people who he likes. People like me, the 'special one', my contribution is nothing, he doesn't like me. So the whole department is just very lazy. Nobody contributes more than what they should do, no passion about work at all. I know the overall culture in state-own company is like this, but I always hope if we can have a department manager who is different from others and is passion about work, maybe the whole department would look different.'

・**Fit with organisational values**

Individuals evaluate company values to make choices, including the choices of their participation in organisations; meanwhile companies also develop the organisational culture based on their values to guide employees' beliefs and behaviour (Westerman & Cyr, 2004).

Section 7.2.ii explains the findings in Chapter 6 and indicates that value congruence between employees' self-value-definition and the company's values motivates employees' brand commitment. This section further explores this value congruence between these two parties from the perspective of 'fit'. The result shows that when employees' values fit with their organisations' values and the values of other employees, it is more likely they are attached to the company, which is defined by Turner (1984) as employees joining the psychological group in which people share the same social identification or define themselves in the same social category (Turner, 1984).

Employees' behaviours are guided by their beliefs and values. When their deeply held values are matching with their organisation's, employees can be highly motivated to engage in the organisation's activities and perform in the way that the organisation is looking for (Cable & DeRue, 2002). In some cases employees would even contribute more apart from their own work (Lauver & Kristof-Brown, 2001). Participants in this study demonstrate that a shared value is important in enhancing their engagement. For example, YB (40, Senior department manager)'s self-value-definition is *'someone with passion, ready for new challenges'* which fits with the company as *'young and innovative'*. He is motivated to engage in the company activities and even devotes his personal time to the work:

> *'I am reading a book called 'How to better manage your employees' at the moment. I like to read it in my bedroom after work. I also keep my eyes on journals, news and books that would help me to manage the company better. It's just when you really like your job, you want to put some more time into it. I am the manager now and I don't want to let my employees down. Also I don't have any experiences of managing the whole company, I am new in this position so I have to make sure that I am doing the right thing. It's not easy to find somewhere that suits you very well, like my current company. I've been working in different companies for years so I know how hard to find the place that you can fit in well.'*

Further, if employees' values are matching with their colleagues, they will feel comfortable to work and communicate with others, which makes their leaving decision more difficult (Jackson et al., 1991). MN (25, Department staff)'s self-value-definition fits with her colleagues'. The shared value between MN and her colleagues is rooted in their personal background as *'most of us are single and have overseas study experiences. We all missed the time when we were still students so we talked about that a lot after work…The experiences of living abroad really brings us together. We value the similar stuffs, like we value trust, honest and working with passion. We also all value 'work hard and play hard' so going out for birthdays or celebrations are normal. We respect differences and we don't judge. So I feel very comfortable and relax both in work and off work hanging out with them...If, I mean if one day I leave the company, these people are definitely the one that I will miss the most.'*

In summary, this section goes beyond the previous research and explains participants' job choices by bringing in HR knowledge. Employees are attracted and retained when there are fits between their needs and the received rewards, when an individual employee's skills and abilities are compatible with the demands of the job and when an individual's personal values match with organisation's values and culture.

7.4 Aligning Branding and HR theory to effectively implement employer branding strategy

Section 7.2 discusses the findings in Chapter 6 within the marketing paradigm. It draws the conclusion that employees' decisions are largely shaped by the quality of employer branding attributes. In particular, job seekers will be motivated to apply for the company when the employer branding's functional and symbolic attributes fulfil their lower level and higher level needs. It is also identified that branding attributes which are effective on a long-term basis help companies to retain the existing employees longer.

It is noticed that this understanding of employee's choices is limited within the literature of marketing discipline. As a result, it is identified that there are still employees' brand behaviours which are underexplored or cannot be fully explained. For example, comparing individuals' needs and the attributes of employer branding places emphasis on how job seekers are attracted by the tangible attributes, leaving what shapes existing employees' retention decisions underexplored. Moreover, when the needs approach places too much emphasis on the role of lower-order needs in the job market, it is noticed that to fulfill the basic needs is only part of the motivation when job seekers make their decisions. For example, participants in this study highlight the role of several intangible attributes that contribute significantly on their decisions, such as organisation identity and company reputation. Apparently, to understand employees' brand behavior further it is necessary to extend the current focus and explain this issue from a different angle or within a different theoretical paradigm.

Section 7.3 extends the previous discussion and further explains the research findings within the HR paradigm. It shows that both job seekers and existing employees consider the fit between their needs and the rewards received from the company, the fit between their job skills and abilities with the demands of the jobs as well as the fit between an individual's personal values and the values and culture of the organisation.

Therefore, it is necessary to align the knowledge from marketing and HR together to explore and understand the role of employer branding in employees' attraction and retention. Specifically, aligning the research results of 7.2 and 7.3 shows that job seekers consider both whether employer branding's attributes can fulfil their lower-level needs and whether their needs fit with the supplies from the company (the needs-supplies fit). Moreover, job seekers also consider whether employer branding's attributes can fulfill their higher-level needs while placing emphasises on the fit between their values with the characteristics of the company (supplies-values fit), such as the organisation identity, company reputation, organisational culture and the company's future development.

The research results also suggest that job attributes, such as job knowledge, abilities and the characteristics of the job are also evaluated by the existing employees. When the needs approach fails to consider the job itself as a motivator, personal-job fit approach fills in this gap and explains that employees distinguish between their fit with the organisation and their fit with the job itself. It suggests that employees' decision to stay is also influenced by whether their skills and abilities are compatible with the demands of a specific job.

Aside from comparing employees' needs and employer branding's attributes, considering the fit between existing employees and their companies helps to better understand employee retention in this study. The fit between the employees and the organisation is considered from two perspectives: the match between individual employees' values with the company culture and that between individual employees' values and the company values.

Therefore aligning marketing and HR knowledge to explore the role of employer branding in employee attraction and retention provides a more holistic view of the employer branding concept. A model is developed which draws the findings of Chapter 6 and Chapter 7. The model illustrates how this research brings marketing and HR knowledge together for a better understanding of the employer branding concept (See Figure 7.6: Bringing Marketing and HR together to understand employee attraction and retention through the lens of employer branding).

7.5 The Model- Second stage

From this discussion of the interpretation of the findings, the second stage of the model – 'Bringing Marketing and HR together to understand employee attraction and retention through the lens of employer branding' is elaborated in figure 7.3 in next page.

Chapter Summary

This chapter discusses the findings of Chapter 6. Participants' employer branding choices are explained firstly within the marketing discipline; secondly this chapter also brings in HR knowledge to further analyse participants' decisions. The model in the second stage aligns the above research results together and presents a holistic model of employer branding concept.

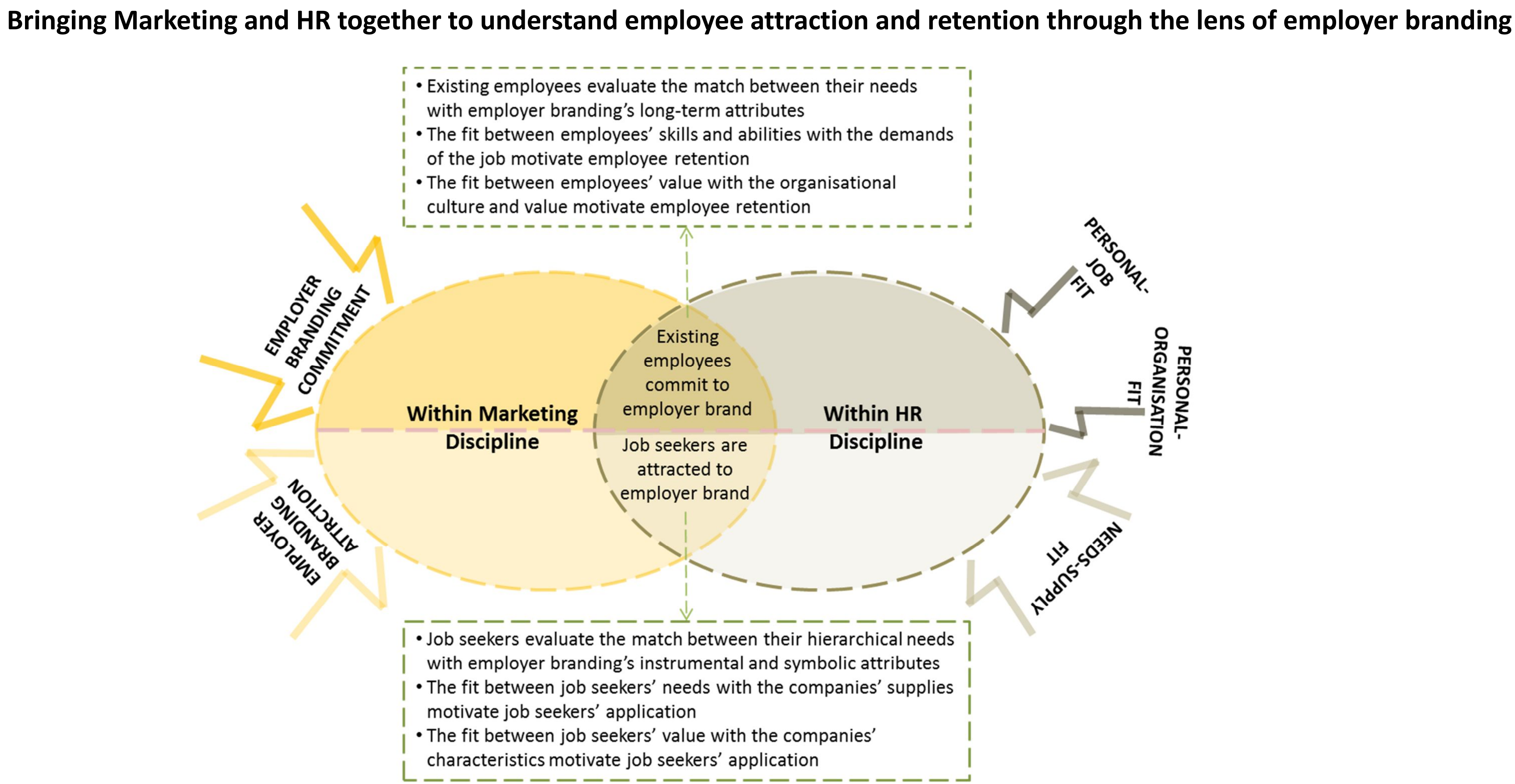

Figure 7.3: Bring Marketing and HR together to understand employee attraction and retention through the lens of employer branding

CHAPTER 8: FURTHER EXPLORING EMPLOYEES' DECISION: INFLUENCES ON PERCEPTIONS TOWARD EMPLOYER BRANDING ATTRACTION AND RETENTION

Chapter 6 identifies employer branding's attributes of attracting job seekers to join the company and the attributes of improving the existing employees' engagement with the company. Chapter 7 discusses the findings and concludes that successfully implementing the employer branding strategy requires the match between the brand attributes and employees' needs in different levels. The findings also reveal that engagement with the company is enhanced when employees fit well with the company.

However whilst the extent of employer branding's attributes can be controlled and tailored according to employees' personal requirement and the affordability of the companies, there are still factors which influence individuals' decisions significantly which are difficult to predict or change (Knox & Freeman, 2006). This chapter goes beyond the previous results and focuses on identifying what influences employees' perceptions of employer branding attraction and retention.

Introduction

When customers' perceptions of the brand stem from aligning the experiences of product, service and brand, employees' perceptions about the employer brand are also derived from the alignment of their experiences with the entire brand portfolio. Brand portfolio contains the benefits that an employer brand can offer as discussed in the previous chapters, as well as the factors that may influence the employment experiences, which are less explored and are called to be addressed (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

More specifically, individuals combine information from multiple sources when they look for jobs in the markets. Therefore it is likely that the interaction between this information sources will occur and further influence the job preferences (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2007). This calls for further research on identifying the information sources and exploring how job seekers interpret and evaluate this information to make their job decisions (Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

Furthermore, as the nature of employer branding is not limited to the economic exchange, the societal nature of the employer branding is also considered by employees, for example the social culture variables and value systems (Lings, 2004). Therefore understanding the impact of different cultures and social values within employer branding studies is necessary. It is also necessary to address the conduction of the country-of-origin focused employer branding study (Berthon et al., 2005); this section particularly concentrates on the employees' behaviour within the Chinese social-culture system.

Research results show that the effectiveness of the brand information delivery influences employees' job decision. Social influences and employees' personal situations also shape employee's perceptions of the employer. This chapter further explains employees' behaviour within the Chinese culture system in order to understand why employees' personal situations and social influences would shape their choices. These findings contribute to the developed model in the previous stage, providing an holistic framework for employer branding implementation, with a focus on the context of China.

Chapter 8 therefore addresses the third research question:

3. What shapes employees' perceptions of employer brand attraction and retention, in the context of Chinese companies?

8.1 The influence of brand information delivery effectiveness on employees' job decisions

Chapter 2 concludes that job seekers apply for jobs when the brand information is attractive and trustworthy. This section argues that job seekers' decisions are influenced by the effectiveness of the brand information delivery in which the delivery channel places an important role.

Companies exchange and communicate brand information with their customers through advertisement and other promotion activities. Similarly, employers also deliver their employer brand information through their recruitment activities. Recruitment activities usually involve the exchange and communication of information between employer and (potential) applicants through different channels or sources, including recruitment fairs, social media, and company promotion activities.

High quality recruitment activities can deliver brand information effectively and further attract more job applicants. For example, DJ (27, Department staff) and CL (27, Department staff)'s company values the campus recruitment fair as an important way to deliver their brand information. The company invests in the campus recruitment fair to build their reputation as an attractive employer. This reputation is enhanced, especially when the company keeps the partnership with the university job centre for longer periods of time so that company shows its positive performances consistently. As a result, the company is promoted as a trustworthy employer as their brand information is delivered effectively through campus recruitment fairs and university job centres:

> *'I was recruited in the campus recruitment fair three years ago. We have the recruitment fair every year since I started studying here. I attended the previous ones as well but just for fun. But I noticed that my company always has a big table there and seems the company is always the most popular one. Also they offer us some small gift, like highlighting pen or something. The people there are very nice and introduce us to sign up in the email list so we can be informed if there are job opportunities come up. Well I think people can tell in the fair that my company is nice and friendly, they look very professional there. I've been received recruitment information from my company since then. I was also invited to their campus fair a lot. Sometimes it's just those small things make differences. I signed up for other companies as well but the emails I received, or the activities they organised are not attractive.'*

MN (25, Department staff) also explains that her company's performance in the recruitment fair influenced her job decision:

> *'Our company holds the recruitment fair several times a year, mainly in the top universities in big cities. I first know the company from one of the recruitment activates in my university. It's not part of any campus recruitment fairs, it's a whole day workshop thing starts from the morning till afternoon. Lunch and drinks are provided. We have presentations about the company, group discussion, chat with the current employees or chat with a career mentor. They help us to develop the CV, give advises about our career path and answer all the stupid questions we have. So I feel like they try to help us to be in the right track so the possibility of getting the job is high in the future. Yes I may see this is not the main reason I applied the job but definitely after attending the recruitment fair, I feel like, people from this company are nice and helpful, I want to be one of them.'*

8.2 Explaining employees' decisions in the social setting: social influences

Social influence theory indicates that people do not live in social isolation; we usually consult others' opinions before making decisions. Social influence exerts itself through various types of social actors, including friends, family, classmates, teachers, colleagues and acquaintances (Van Hoye & Saks, 2011; Van Hoye & Lievens, 2007, Cable & Turban, 2003, Highhouse & Hoffman, 2001). The information collected from the above sources are word-of-mouth in nature and the accuracy of the information varies across different sources. Job seekers consider word-of-mouth information before applying jobs, especially information from people they value and trust, such as parents, families, close friends and working colleagues.

Two types of social influences are identified and discussed in this research: normative social influences and informational social influences.

8.2.i Normative social influences: pressure from parents

One type of social influence is the normative social influence which 'result[s] from a pressure to conform to certain expectations held by another person or group' (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2007).

Job applicants' parents are highlighted as the major source of normative social influence (Liden & Parsons, 1986). This shows that how individuals perceive the employers are largely associated with their parents' perceptions about the same employer. One explanation is that people tend to comply with their parents' expectations and norms in their daily life, especially the major decisions, such as marriage and job choices (Van Hoye & Saks, 2011; Gibson et al., 2007). For example, DJ (27, Department staff) and CL (27, Department staff)'s job applications are significantly associated with considering their parents. Both of them mention that the company location is considered as important. In fact, the reason that DJ and CL only apply to job in certain areas is because their parents expect them to live near their hometown:

> *'Every school I went to are close to my home, I chose a university which is in my hometown. So does my sister. I miss my parents and my mom prefers me to work in a company that is easily for me to travel back home.'*

> *'I am the only son in my family. I'd like to live with my parents and take care of them. I don't want to work in a company that is far away from them...I usually visit parents once a week or once in two weeks' time...I can't leave my parents by*

themselves. They are both over 60. I don't have a car at the moment but next year maybe I will buy one so I can go back home more often.'

LW (28, Department staff) also complies with her parents' preferences. She leaves the previous company and applies for job in the state-own company. She mentions several times that '*they [parents] give me pressure'*:

> *'They give me pressure. They expect me to get married as soon as possible. It's not that kind of pressure you know they tell you directly to work in a state-own company. They call you and tell you their friend's daughter is married, she works in a state-own company. Her work is easy so she has more time for the family, she is having a baby next year. How proud her parents are. They told me girls may not easily find someone in their 30s, men won't find me attractive. I live with my auntie and she gives me pressure too. I guess my mom told her to do so. It's difficult to say 'no' to them because seems everything they said is right. They give me pressure since I came back from UK. I don't want to let them down and to be honest I am sick of these conversations and the pressure. So I applied the jobs.'*

8.2.ii Informational social influences

Another type of social influence is the informational social influences which occur when people accept information provided by friends, co-workers and acquaintances. Word of mouth is one of the key types of informational social influences. It is an interpersonal communication which can serve as a potential external recruitment source.

The influences of word of mouth on consumers' attitudes and behaviour are widely recognised. Consumers would easily purchase unfamiliar brands recommended intentionally and unintentionally by others, especially by someone who they trust and value. When scholars apply the theory of word of mouth to the recruitment context, job seekers are attracted to employer brands which are recommended by others. The evaluation of potential employers also varies according to the credibility of the information and the credibility of its sources.

In the external market, influences of word of mouth are found to be more significant than the effect of marketing promotion and communication. Similarly, interpersonal communication and word of mouth are argued to play a more powerful role than recruitment promotion and advertising (Knox & Freeman, 2006). The reason for this is that word of mouth and interpersonal communication are more vivid and more accessible in memory. Additionally, job seekers find that information from a credible source is more trustworthy than recruitment advertisement and other public promotion activities (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2007; Herr et al., 1991; Feldman & Lynch, 1988).

Sources of word of mouth information include friends, parents and acquaintances. However the degree of each sources' effectiveness varies. Generally, job seekers prefer to obtain and trust information from credible sources (Allen et al., 2004; Fisher et al., 1979). People who are socially close to the job seekers tend to be more credible as the strength of their bond is higher. For example, CY (29, Department staff)'s decision is largely influenced by her family member who initially introduced the company:

> *'I firstly heard the company from one of my family members who's already worked there for a long time. I mean it won't be a bad idea to follow his recommendation. He has worked there for years and I can tell he is enjoying himself. He is having a good life. Also my parents and I trust this family member, we are quite close. He won't lie to us so I planned to apply the company long before finish uni work. My parents are also happy about the decision. You know most of the Chinese family is like this, we trust family members. Also my parents think he can take care of me if we work in the same company. So why not?'*

DJ (27, Department staff)'s impression of the company is influenced by one of the staff members who work in the university career centre:

> *'I visit the career centre quite a lot especially in the last academic year. I think each of the staff members there are taking care of students from different departments. I quite like the lady who usually helps me and introduces me potential companies and proofreads my CV. She is very nice and has a very good reputation. She helps so many students to find the right company. So I believe she won't introduce random companies to me. She knows what companies suit me the best. With each one she recommended I take it seriously. I do my homework, search online and adjust CV accordingly. Apparently my current company is a very successful suggestion that she made, changed my life. We are still friends and I like to chat with her occasionally, I like her advises about job and life. She sometimes still gives me information about new companies.'*

Wilden et al. (2010)'s study shows that when employees use their personal networks prior to deciding which company to join, it helps reduce their risk of joining the wrong company (Wilden et al., 2010). Therefore, personal relationships are one way to gain recruitment knowledge in the job market. Among different personal networks, friends and family are examples of strong ties. In fact, friends are perceived as the most credible and more influential sources (Fisher et al., 1979). Some job seekers even view employee referrals, such as previous working colleagues, as most credible and trustworthy among all information sources. Both JB (45, Department manager) and YB (40, Senior department manager)'s knowledge about the current company are gained from their previous working colleagues:

> *'We have nearly 12 people who graduated together, about nearly 20 years ago. Since then each of us worked in different companies, we changed jobs a lot but once in a while, we go out for food or drinks. We have our own group in QQ (A social network software, similar with Facebook). So we kind of know what each companies like. We share job information if any of our companies are looking for new people. We trust each other and know each other very well. My job was actually introduced by one member in our group.'*

> *'We like to discuss different companies in our office, especially when we are all not happy about my previous company's managers. We sometimes share what we heard about other companies, good and bad. Actually I think we were not joking at that time when we say we should all leave and work in another company. Some of them actually changed the job, especially when the job opportunities are introduced by their friends or colleagues in the office.'*

Employees who work in the prospective companies are also seen as credible resources. Harris and de Chernatony (2001) argue that employees need to be recognised as organisations' 'brand ambassadors'. Existing employees not only have a powerful impact on consumers' perceptions of both the products and organisations, but their behaviour will also largely influence their families, students, and friends' perception of the company as a potential employer (Harris & de Chernatony, 2001). Kennedy (1977) also argues that internal communications between employees can influence a company's additional labour recruitment. He states that every employee is a potential salesman for the company. They are helpful for the company to 'sell much more than its conventional product range' (Kennedy, 1977).

Company employees portray the corporate image to their audiences through conscious behaviour, but more importantly, unconscious behaviour without forethought. For example, positive feedbacks of employers in an after-work conversation may shape how audiences perceive the company's employer brand image. Especially when feedbacks emerge unconsciously, audiences are more likely to trust the information and be motivated to apply to the company in the future (Kennedy, 1977). Friends who already work for the targeted company play an important role in job seekers' initial perception of the company (Rynes et al., 1991). YB's initial impression of his current employer is positive after an after-work conversation with friend. He was motivated to apply the job afterwards:

> *'I was introduced by a friend, who's working in my current company at that moment. It was just a catch up drink and he told me the company is looking for a new CEO. I wasn't too happy about my job at that time but my friend is opposite. He is quite happy and excited about his work. So I discussed the job issue and seems everything in his company sounds better than mine. Like how the company treat the employees, their payment, benefits, holidays and so on. The conversation goes on and on. I googled the company afterwards and was very excited that the company looks nice in the internet. The other day I asked my friend more information about the company. The more I know about the company, the more I want to change my job there. I don't think I would come across the company if I didn't go out with him. So until today I still joke with him that he is so good at promoting his company. I know he didn't do it on purpose, but it works. That after work drink changes my life'.*

YQ (25, Department staff)'s friend is happy with the current employer and her positive experiences with the employer encourage YQ to apply for the same company:

> *'I was living with my friend in Beijing and apply for jobs. I live with her for about 2 months because it's quite expensive to live in a hotel and she has a spare room. I applied nearly hundreds companies but not hers because that company is not quite in my area and I know nothing about that company. Every day when she's back from work she likes to tell me what has happened in the company, how's her manager and colleagues, just very small things. She seems quite happy to work there. She barely complains about the job and the company which surprise me very much. You know usually new employees complain a lot because they need time to adjust to the new life. So I start to picture the company in my mind. I start to google the company and check their recruitment advertising. I joined their new year's dinner, as the plus one you know. Seems everyone found their jobs ok. Someone complains of course but I think most of the feedbacks are positive. So I was like: why not I give it a go? Also my friend wants me to be with her in the same company so we can still live together. She told me so many good things about the company. You know I was also thinking her apartment is easy to travel to the company, if I can get the job I don't need to move out and find other places etc. So I did apply the company.'*

8.3 Personal factors influence employee job choices

Apart from the identified social influences, there are certain personal factors which largely shape employees' job decisions. It has been discovered that the participants' age, gender, their personal situation, previous working experiences and religion can influence their job choices.

As each personal factor is discovered from participants' individual story, this section presents findings based on individual cases.

8.3.i Age – The case of SZ and ST

Chapter 6 and 7 show that SZ (55, CEO)'s retirement plan requires him to focus on jobs whose payment could provide him and the family an expected retired life. SZ emphasizes several times during the interview that *'[he is]not young any more'*. Whilst concerned that his age may only allow him to work for a limited time, SZ finds the high payment the most attractive.

It can be concluded that SZ's age influences his job decision and drives him to reconsider his career plan. Comparing with employer branding's longer effective attributes, short-term benefits are appeared more attractive to him:

> *'I mean I am not young anymore; it will be difficult to find a job with such a good payment. I was thinking about retirement to be honest. Maybe in 4 or 5 years' time. I need to plan my retired life and think about myself and family. To an old man who is retiring soon, what is better than more money? ... I won't find others who would offer me more...So basically I didn't think about my next job, there won't be any next job. Next job will be cooking for my wife at home. I don't need to make career plans any more. So I don't care too much about whether I can stay long or not. The reason of taking this job is the money, this money offer can give me a comfortable retirement life. So I took it and my retirement plan is still there. When you reach certain age, the things you used to value the most is not as important as before and the things you don't care too much move up to the top of the list.'*

In Chapter 6 it is also shown that ST (35, Senior department manager) changes jobs frequently to gain work experience in different companies. ST finds the employer branding's intangible attributes attractive: providing working experiences for future job hunting. In contrast to the notion that SZ's age may limit his choices in the job market, ST sees his age as an advantage. He mentioned several times during the interview that *'I'm still young, I have* *the time to find the perfect jobs'*. Hence ST's age also influences his job retention decisions. ST would not stay long in any company in the current stage:

> *'I change my job frequently. Whenever I found I have nothing new to learn, I leave to another company. Learning new skills is very important to me at his stage. This is the 5th company I work for. Maximally 3 years in each company I stay. Also I won't stay for so long in this company as well. When I get what I want and learn what I need, I will leave. The companies I've worked for are all different types of companies. I like to learn new things. I think working in the company is the best way to learn their techniques and how they manage the company.'*
>
> '*I'm thinking about applying a higher position, maybe in about 2 years' time. I am still young and I don't mind to work for more companies and learn more things. I think it will all be helpful for my own career. I mean why not? Sometimes I feel sorry to the company I worked for. I mean I got what I want and left. But I think this is how people gains experiences and plan their career isn't it?...Money is not the most important, experiences are. I'm only 35, I can find job easily in the industry so although I have property mortgage to pay I won't work only for money. I have a big picture of my career. I think when I am about mid-forty I would be in a high position and the job should be quite stable. By mid-fifty I should be in the top management level. Maybe I would already have my own company. I would not move job as frequently as now. It's unusual that people move job frequently in their 50s. My age is definitely an advantage to me at the moment; I don't need to worry too much, if anything bad happens I still have the time to recover. I change jobs a lot just because I am young and I want to learn new things.'*

8.3.ii Gender difference influences job choices – the case of CL and DJ's company

Job preferences between females and males are different. Gender difference shapes an individual's job choices as job seekers evaluate whether their physical abilities is compatible with the job demands. For example, female employees may not prefer jobs which require high degree of physical strength or jobs which require long working hours.

Both CL (27, Department staff) and CY (29, Department staff) work in a manufacturing department where most of the employees are male. The nature of the job decides that male employees have advantages which may get them promoted. For example, male employees' performances are evaluated better because female employees' working time is more limited, especially in the company lab where female employees - particularly pregnant women - are not encouraged to stay long. As a result, the possibility of a male employee being promoted in comparison to a female employee, is higher as the performance is evaluated based on the attendance time. Another example includes when women find the night shifts difficult, especially the female employees who have families and children, male employees usually take more night shifts. As working in the night time receives higher payment, it is common in the company that male employees earn more.

CL (male) is satisfied with the company promotion strategy and indicates that male employees deserve quicker promotion, higher payment and more benefits. He is motivated to engage with the job and is satisfied with the different payment and benefits between him and the female colleagues. In contrast, DJ (female) complains that the company fails to consider the gender differences in the management practices. DJ's intention to move to other department is enhanced because of the differences between her and her male colleagues' payment and benefits. As internal position (job) change may negatively influence employees' job performance (Lauver & Kristof- Brown, 2001; Becker & Billings, 1993), DJ is not motivated to engage with the current job:

> *'There are not so many girls left in my department. Maybe working in other departments is better? Like human resources and finance? I wouldn't say it's unfair but the boys who started the same time with me all get promoted. Their payment are better, they can buy more company share. I mean yes they work much longer than us and I completely understand that the working environment in our department is not that good. But it's just the feeling that the company not encourages us to stay here. Girls who used to work in my department are promoted much quicker when they switched to other departments. Like the head of the human resource department, she used to work with us. I am sure if she still stays here she won't be promoted in a short time. You can also find other girls in different department who worked with me before. I like my job and I want to stay, but if the situation continues, I may apply jobs in other departments. But I am not confident about my performance in the new position because I prefer to work in the manufactory department. I am happy to work with the computers or machines here but I'm not confident about my knowledge in neither management nor accounting.'*

CL also agrees that his female colleagues would leave the job when they are asked to work *'in the night time and sleep in the day time'* with *'thousands of computers, equipment in the lab'*. The female employees' physical abilities are incompatible with the demands of the job as 't*hey usually need to take care of the family. Their physical conditions are not allowed'.*

Also as working in the lab may '*have some side effect to the girls',* these female employees may quit the job '*if they want to have babies*'. However whilst the differences between females' and males' working conditions negatively influence DJ's job engagement, CL is motivated to stay at the company for longer:

> *'Yes my bonus is high, I am kind of thinking that I deserve it because it's a hard work for everyone...I think if I continue work hard, I will get promoted one day...I am happy about the job now, I have the same set salary with people who do the same job, but the bonus is different. I work longer than them so I got more money.'*

8.3.iii Personal situation- The case of YQ

Employees evaluate employer branding attributes whilst considering their personal situation. Therefore employees' different personal situations would largely shape their job decisions. In some cases they value the employer branding because the characteristics of the job matches their personal situation well. Employees even compromise their original job plans to meet their personal situation.

LW (28, Department staff) explains that although she preferred working in her previous company, the strong desire to obtain Beijing citizenship and her concerns about establishing relationships now and in the future influences her job application:

> *'I'd like to stay in Beijing. So having a Beijing ID is urgent. You know that this ID is so important to me. Without it I couldn't buy apartment or car. It's such a nightmare! So companies in Beijing are my interest. I have to work here for 5 years. No other choices...My current company helps us to apply for the citizenship. Before I visited the home office again and again, I'm so sick of it! My current company helps me to apply the citizenship, all I need to do is filling in some papers. It saves me a lot of time and travel cost.'*

> *'Beijing boys prefer girls who have the citizenship. I hate it but could understand it. Everything will be much easier if both of them have the Beijing citizenship. I mean buying property, car and everything are much easier. The kids can register in a better school if her parents are both citizens in Beijing. So this job is attractive, not necessary the job itself but the benefits come along with the job. I will be 29 next year, nearly 30 so I also start to worry about you know, find a boyfriend and get married before 30. I'm not sure if this Beijing citizenship could help to find a boyfriend, but when someone starts the conversation by asking you 'are you a Beijingness?' I would assume that people value the Beijing citizenship and it may*

helpful. When I was 25 I never thought I would apply any jobs only because the company can help me to stay. It's just the age, and pressure from the parents.'

YQ (25, Department staff) shares that her job choice was largely influenced by her mother's health problem. YQ adjusted her job selection and applied to a job which would allow her to visit her mother frequently:

'They wait until I graduated from university and told me that mom is doing chemotherapy. I was so shocked when I saw my mom without any hair and was so weak and looked completely different. I was not interested in any jobs at all and just want to stay with mom and family. After about 3 months my mom is getting better and she insists I need to go out, find a job and have my life back. I only look for jobs which are near hometown at that time, so I can travel back home quick and easy if anything emergent happens. So Beijing is probably my only choice because it's nearly home and my mom also needs to visit the hospital in Beijing every 3 months. So working in Beijing is easy for both of us. I had some interviews in other places but to be honest it's just for experiences, I didn't take them seriously. I was so happy I got the Beijing job and mom's health is getting better. I am pretty settled down in Beijing and she visits me every month and everything is getting better. I think if mom is not sick, I should have stayed in the south. My university (in the south of China) offers me a Master degree position. All my friends are there and I actually don't like Beijing as a city so much. I didn't take that Master of course. So you never know what will happen in your life even in the next second. Each of your decisions is influenced by so many people, especially the people who are important to you.'

8.3.iv Previous working experiences - The case of SZ

Employees' previous working experiences influence their perceptions of prospective jobs. Employees compare their prospective employer with their previous employer and predict their life in the new company based on the result. In particular, employees with more working experiences are more reflective and critical in their evaluations of prospective company (Wilden et al., 2010).

SZ (55, CEO) has a lot of working experiences and his previous working experiences influence his current engagement with the company. SZ has experience of working for several family businesses. As each of his work experiences lasted for periods of less than 3 years, he predicted that he would not stay long in the current company which is a family-based business. He even indicates that *'[he] know[s] [he] won't stay long before starting working here'*:

> *'Most of the companies I worked for are family business. It's a shame that they usually won't keep you for a long time. They don't want you to be empowered after all. So in each company, actually the business performance is getting better but one day they will kick you out. It's like they learn how to manage the company well from you. They don't want you to be the key person of the company. They need to make sure that the company is still under their control. I just had enough of this so when they (the new employer) offer me that salary I just took it because I know first, I still won't stay too long in this company and secondly I'm getting retire soon. It's a win-win situation. So I know I won't stay long before starting working here. I just know it and we will see how it goes. Even they won't fire me I will still leave one day, they will make you leave. It's family business; we don't share the same family name unfortunately.*

8.3.v Job seeker's religion - The case of HC

Another personal factor which shapes employees' job decisions is their religious requirements. HC's job choices are limited because of his religious requirements. HC was born in a Muslim family and he is only interested in companies in which the majority of employees are Muslim. Therefore HC (35, Manufacturing staff)' job application is limited in his local area as most of the employees in the local companies are Muslim:

> *'I was born as a Muslim and most of the families, friends in my village are Muslims. It will be very difficult for me to work in a place far from my hometown. We have several companies near the village so most of us choose to work there. Working in a place near to home is easy for me. I can go back home every day also most of my colleagues are Muslims so there won't be any problems of sharing foods. The company also understand that we need to pray during work, also they give us holidays for most of the Muslim festivals, actually the owner of the company is a Muslim as well. To be honest I prefer to work in a company which is owned by Muslim, the relationships between Muslims are very close. We understand and trust each other more and we communicate well with each other. It's just some intangible things that keep us together. I don't think we can build such a strong bond if I work in other companies. I actually never think about working in a non-Muslim company, I won't. It will be difficult for me to work in a non-Muslim company, the food,*

drinks…everything will be difficult. So yes I want to work near home as majority are Muslims.'

8.4 Explaining employees' decisions within the social-culture and value system: How do Chinese social-culture and value systems shape employees' decisions

People's choices are rooted in their social norms and values which are difficult to change (Tayeb, 1995; Kirkbride & Tang 1992). National culture also inevitably shapes people's behaviour and the way they interact with others in the social environments (Gamble & Huang, 2008). Therefore it can be predicted that social norms, values and national culture can shape individuals' job decisions.

Chinese employees' behaviours are also predicted to be shaped by the unique social-culture and value system. Therefore this section will firstly explore the key characteristics of Chinese culture systems, and secondly explain participants' choices within the environment of this social culture. It will also focus on sociocultural variables that shape how participants perceive the employer brand.

8.4.i Overview of the Chinese culture and value system

'Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.'

-Rudyard Kipling, Ballad of East and West (1889)

Using different dimensions to capture the multidimensional culture construct is widely adopted in the culture study (Soares et al., 2007). The dimensions which are reliable for conceptualising and operationalising the national culture characteristics are identified in different studies. Each national culture could find its position within the dimension mix (Faure & Fang, 2007). Among the mix of different cultural dimensions, Hofstede's dimensions of national culture, Trompenaars's seven dimensions of culture and Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's five dimensions are widely used (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997; Hofstede, 1984; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961).

Chinese culture has been thoroughly investigated by a variety of proposed dimension-based culture models. Among different cultural dimension studies, Hofestede's Value Survery Model is widely recognised in Chinese culture study (Hofstede, 1984). Within Hofestede's culture dimensions, Chinese culture and Western culture are in many respects regarded in contrast to one another. Western culture is defined by low power distance, individualism, feminine dominant, high uncertainty avoidance and short-term oriented whereas Chinese culture is classified as high power distance, high collectivism, masculinity, low uncertainty avoidance and long-term oriented (Faure & Fang, 2007; Fan, 2000; Scarborough, 1998). The following section explains each Chinese culture dimensions in comparison with Western culture:

- High power distance: Chinese people accept a hierarchical order in the society so that there is no defence against power abuse.
- High Collectivism: individuals act in the interests of the group as opposed to themselves. Therefore their self-image is defined as terns of ‘we’ rather than ‘I’ in Chinese culture system. Additionally, people belong to groups in which group members look after them in exchange for loyalty. Usually people within the same group are cooperative but they are less inclusive towards those outside of their group.
- Masculinity: Chinese culture system is driven by competition and achievement, therefore success is defined only by the winner.
- Low uncertainty avoidance: Chinese people usually do not feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations, so their avoidance of uncertainty is low. As a result, the need for well-defined rules for prescribed behaviour is low and rules are usually established to only suit the actual situation.
- Long-term oriented: Chinese culture is pragmatic and long-term oriented, therefore Chinese people have propensity to perseverance and thriftiness to achieve results (THE HOFSTEDE CENTRE, 2014; Soares et al. 2007).

Chinese culture is embodied in the Chinese value system. The value system is a permanent perceptual framework that shapes people’s beliefs and attitudes and guides individuals’ behaviour (England, 1978). Three main value systems which best describe the Chinese culture are: Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism (Faure & Fang, 2007; Fan, 2000). Among these three value systems Confucianism is the most influential and forms the foundations of Chinese culture (Pye, 1972). A characteristic of Confucianism includes an individual’s social behaviour and interaction being governed by the rules. Relationships are structured to optimise mutual benefits and maintain harmony. According to the characteristics of the Confucianism, five principles under the Confucianism system are summarised as: loyalty and duty, love and obedience, obligation and submission, seniority and modelling subject and trust (Fan, 2000).

Applying the Confucianism and other value concepts to Chinese people’s daily behaviour, Faure and Fang (2008) summarise eight essential value orientations within Chinese society.

Table 8.1 presents the Chinese value orientations. The right column of table 8.1 is the cultural references each value fits in:

Table 8.1: Chinese value orientations (Adapted from Faure & Fang, 2008, p.196)

Chinese value orientations	**Cultural references**
Guanxi	Highly Collectivism
Importance of face	High power distance, Masculinity
Thrift	Long-term oriented
Family and group orientation	Highly Collectivism
Aversion to law	Low uncertainty avoidance
Respect for etiquette, age and hierarchy	High power distance
Long-term orientation	Long-term oriented
Traditional creeds	Low uncertainty avoidance

Culture and value frameworks have been applied increasingly in business and marketing studies (Soares, 2007). The following section discusses how the Chinese culture and value systems influence participants' job decisions within this study. Interview transcriptions are quoted to better demonstrate research findings. It shows that the collectivism dominates culture, maintaining pride and relationship, high level of power distance, maintaining harmony, and the concept of 'Guanxi' appear to be the influential factors.

8.4.ii Collectivism dominates culture system

In Western culture individualism dominates and employees make their job decisions independently. In Chinese culture collectivism dominates; employees make their job decisions by considering different opinions, especially the opinions of people who they share a close relationship with – such as parents and friends (Katsioloudes & Hadjidakis, 2007; Tayeb, 1995). Participants in the study emphasize the significance of parents and acquaintances in shaping their job decisions. In one case a participant even indicates that *'sometimes [she] feel[s] like [she] choose[s] the job to cheer [her] parents, not for [herself]'*.

A respect for age and hierarchy is a sign of traditional Chinese culture. Aged people are revered because in Chinese culture experience, gained over a long period of time is associated with wisdom (Faure & Fang, 2008). Therefore older generations, such as parents, usually assist their children's decision making, especially the life-time decisions such as job finding and marriage. LW (28, Department staff)'s job decision was made under her parents' pressure. She indicates that: *'you know Chinese kids can't make their own decisions, I'm the same, I can't make my own decisions without considering parents, especially my job decision. It is too big to decide by myself.*'

LW's parents prefer LW to work in state-owned companies which are recognised to provide lifetime job security and benefits. Although LW prefers to stay in the previous foreign-investment company, she still follows her parents' suggestion: *'mainly for the sake of [her] parents' happiness'*.

Parents' influences are identified as normative social influences in section 8.2.i. It is shown that the effectiveness of normative social influences is strengthened in a culture system dominated by collectivism. As a result, LW finally sacrifices her own interest and complies with her parents' preferences:

> '*You know how Chinese people think about working in the state-owned companies... The reason that I choose to work here is my family like me to work here. Have a job in the state-owned companies means basically my job and life are secured. My families are tired of seeing me travelling all over the planet. In previous job I can't go back to see them even just once a year. They worried that I will never settle down and get married. Now they are happy. They don't care what kind of job I do in this company, the company is more important...'*

> *'You know Chinese kids can't make their own decisions... I've already been a naughty kid for the last 28 years, I worked in a different city, in a company that I liked. I travelled to UK for one year. Maybe it's the time to do something that my parents like, or something that they like me to do. They prefer me working in a state-own company and get marry soon, I followed their suggestions and applied the work here. I mean if they are happy, I will be happy. I don't think Chinese can ever make big decisions without considering about their parents, it's so difficult, actually it's impossible. It's pathetic that you can't make decisions for your own life but this is what is happening in China.'*

CL (27, Department staff) and DJ (27, Department staff) also share that rather than making their own job decisions, they consider their parents' advises before applying jobs:

> *'Of course I asked my parents. I think everyone does the same. Yes people complain that Chinese people always consider others' suggestion a lot, but we have to right? Especially if it's your parents and families who give you the advices, you definitely*

don't want to hurt them and do something completely opposite to their expectations. Of course I want to make my own decision but at the end of the day, you will find that you need to somehow follow their advices. It's in our blood, everyone does the same. We care about the parents too much.'

'Yes usually my parents *respect my own idea but I still listen to their advices. They have experiences and they won't do anything bad to you. We consult others' opinions when make decision, why not choose to listen to the people we trust the most? Yes it's my own life but we are in China, not in UK. We are different. We can't make decisions by ourselves. I followed my parents' advices and worked here, I mean if this makes my parents happy, also the job is not a bad job, why not just follow their suggestions so that everyone is happy?'*

In some cases the younger generation have to give up their original job plans as their preferences conflicts with their parents' preferences. YQ (25, Department staff) shares that a friend of her gave up her job to follow her parents' suggestion:

'She has no choice but go back to Inner Mongolia (participant's hometown). I think she already got a job in Xiamen (the city of participant's university). She prefers the city but eventually was persuaded to go back to home. She cried once but still went back eventually. I feel sorry for her but I won't say this is the only case. We don't want to argue or fight with parents. Parents are parents. I think if the same situation happens to me, to make my parents happy, I will do the same.'

8.4.iii Pride and relationship within the Chinese culture system

The concept of pride and relationships within the Chinese culture system are the most important elements in influencing peoples' decisions. Chinese people value the compliments as a way to keep their pride. As a result, Chinese employees are largely concerned with how others perceive their working places and job title. One of the reasons for this is that they can earn 'face' among family and friends by working for well-known, respected companies (Turban et al., 2001).

'Face' is explained as 'the respect, pride and dignity of an individual as a consequence of his or her social achievement and the practice of it' (Gamble & Huang, 2008; Hwang, 1987). Chinese people are reported to be highly conscious of how they appear to others. As such, when working for certain companies is considered to bring 'face', it is expected that employees are less likely to leave the company in which they take pride. Chapter 6 reveals that employees evaluate employer reputation in the job market; this can be explained as working in high reputable companies brings 'face' to the job seekers.

Chapter 7 indicates that employees' would not apply for jobs if employer branding's attributes fail to match their needs well. However, it has been discovered that employees would compromise in a situation where the job enhances their 'face'. For example, even the offered brand attributes fail to match with their needs, DJ (27, Department staff) and CL (27, Department staff)'s female colleagues still applied for the job because the reputation of the company, which would bring 'face' to both themselves and their parents:

> *'Some of my university friends, especially some girls, they are now working in the manufactory department. It's very difficult for girls I think. Think about you need to work in the day time today, night time tomorrow; you need to be physically strong. I mean even some boys can't do it. Like me. I've been through it and it's so tired. But the girls still applied the job and now quite happy. Sometimes I can't understand it but they told me that the company is good, they are happy and their parents are happy...sometimes I kind of understand why they made such choices. To Chinese people the job itself is not important, the intangible things behind of the job, like the reputation of the company are important. People usually don't care if your job is the right one for you or if the job is boring or tiring. What are you doing is not important, in which place you do your work matters. People would look at you differently when you tell them you are working in companies with big names. You feel proud to tell them the name, you gained 'face', your parents also gained 'face' when they tell their friends about where you work.'*

Enhancing 'face' also motivates employees' engagement with the company. LW (28, Department staff) indicates that working in the state-own company enhances her 'face' which motivates her to stay:

> *'Something very interesting happened early this year. You know I've been working for nearly 5 years and this is the first time someone, I mean not the company gives me some incentives before the Chinese New Year. I wouldn't say it's a bribe but I've never received anything like this before. Maybe my job is important? This makes me feel that either my job or me is important. I don't know, but I won't say I feel bad about it. Also you know when I pop into banks or hospitals or any dinner out with friends, I can tell they quite admire my job, I don't want to lie but I feel good about it. I mean this is what is happening in China. People like you because you are working in state-own companies. My auntie is so happy about my job, she is so*

confident that my job would help me to find a boyfriend. It's funny but I will be more than happy if this is true. Now I can understand why people desperately apply for jobs in state-own companies no matter what kind of job they do and how much they can get. I would take the advantages of this and stay, who wouldn't?'

8.4.iv High level of power distance

Western societies usually experience a low level of power distance between each individual. Chinese culture, on the other hand, is characterized by its high level of power distance with a low tolerance for conflicting ideas and interests. The root of the large power distance in China is the long-history centralisation of decision making (Edwards & Zhang, 2003; Tayeb, 1995).

High levels of power distance and the low tolerance of new ideas negatively influences the management-workforce relationships. Employees in a hierarchical company with large power distances between each hierarchy would fear to communicate and share the truth with their supervisors, especially when their ideas and interests oppose their supervisors'. YB (40, Senior department manager) indicates that Chinese employees usually fear to directly communicate with the top management team because of the large power distance. For example, within his company, the problem of inefficient communication between different hierarchies is intensified because of the high organizational pyramids and large proportions of supervisory personnel:

'There's something between managers and employees in China, something invisible but something do exist. It's just, you know, you won't feel comfortable to talk with each other, I mean not as comfortable as when you talk with, for example, a friend, or families or someone you are close with. Usually managers are managers, employees are employees. The gap is there. I heard that managers treat their employees as friends in Western countries but it's in China, it's different. Chinese people always fear that if they say something wrong they would be fired one day because of that. Employees in Western countries usually call managers their first name directly, but you won't find the same here. Chinese people say that not calling first name directly shows your respect to the other person. Also usually employees won't say no to their managers. They are fear to say 'no' or fear to disagree with the people with power. Nobody wants to be fired because of that you know. So there is an old saying in China: being different is dangerous. Like the CEO in my company, he agrees with the founder completely and never says 'no' to him. The founder likes him so much so everyone follows this way. No one tells the truth. Or no one dare to

tell the truth. When you come back home to work, remember it's different from the Western culture. You won't tell your manager he is wrong directly even you are right. He may see this offensive and fire you.'

'My company is the biggest in the industry. We have so many employees. It's a hierarchical structured company. We have CEO, department managers, vice-department managers, general managers, line managers, group managers, department directors… So think about if you have some complaints or some good ideas, you suppose to tell your line manager and expect he would talk with his line manager and the next manager…To be honest I don't know where I can find the top managers. I met them once a year in the annual meeting, in a huge hall. I can't even see them. So no one would say anything eventually, no feedbacks at all. We are just not bothered.'

8.4.v Maintaining harmony

Maintaining harmony is emphasized in the Chinese cultural system. Social harmony is usually achieved through people controlling their feelings, appearing humble, avoiding conflict and hiding competition in China (Faure & Fang, 2008). As a result, teamwork is recommended in the Chinese culture system whereas individualistic gain, as a sign of 'breaking the harmony' is not encouraged.

In Western companies, employees' opinion is perceived as important and companies usually incorporate individualism into their management practices. As the idea of maintaining harmony has permeated into the management practises of organisations, group orientation is a major cultural specific within the Chinese culture system, as opposed to Western companies. As a result, it is common that managers would cut individuals' benefits to keep the harmony within the company (Alas & Sun, 2007; Bjorkman & Lu, 1999; Tayeb, 1995). Furthermore, employees' outstanding performance and extra contributions may also not be recognised if the focus is on teamwork. Therefore employees would not be motivated to contribute more and stay longer, especially those employees whose performance is outstanding.

It shows from the interview that state-owned company usually adopts a narrow wage range system aimed at decreasing the income distance between employees in similar positions to reduce conflicts between each other. However, employees would not be motivated to contribute more, especially employees who work harder and for longer, they may even leave the company as a result of inefficient promotion. For instance, LW (28, Department staff) is not satisfied about the fixed payment system and the narrow wage range, especially when her contributions are much more than others:

> *'I heard a lot about it but I still feel supervised that everyone has the similar salary. I understand in doing so no one will complain, everyone is the same so everyone is happy. It's just so different from my previous company (foreign-investment company) where I get more money if I do more but here I am not motivated to finish* the *project earlier. I expected the manager would be happy about that I finish my part of the job earlier so the whole project could be finished in advance. I also expect that my bonus would be higher. But you know what? I was totally wrong. He asked me to finish others' work to make sure the project can be submitted in time. I worked very hard and managed to finish everything he asked for, but in the end everyone has the same money. I wouldn't say its unfair, it's just, I am so naïve. I have my lesson. For the rest of the year even I can finish my job earlier, I wait till the last day to submit in case he (the manager) gives me more. I also don't care about the quality of the finished work. If the manager is not happy about the work quality, everyone works extra time to fix it. Everyone has the same bonus for extra working time. Yes it seems that everyone in the department is doing equal work, get the same money and is all very happy, actually no one cares about the work quality. But why should we care about the work quality? Everyone has the same money no matter how much we contribute and how the work looks like, so no one cares.'*

It is also argued that within a culture system where maintaining harmony is a focus, expression of opinion is carefully controlled; particularly those opinions which may potentially disrupt group harmony and hierarchies. Supervisors see employees with extra talents as threats because these employees may be promoted and consequently break the hierarchy. Therefore keeping a low profile is recommended in the Chinese society as 'it is the bird ahead of the flight that gets shot the first' (translation of Chinese proverb: qiang da chu tou niao), which means that anyone to show openly their talents are seen as unwise, because showing talents may potentially break the group harmony and hierarchies (Faure & Fang, 2008).

LW is seen as a potential threat to her line manager. LW complains that the line manager refuses to recognise her contributes as LW's talents can help her to be promoted to higher positions. Additionally, her advices and suggestions are often being rejected as they may potentially disrupt group harmony. She is even being labelled as the *'special'* one, which refers to employees who fail to keep a low profile within the group:

'Just as I said, I am so naïve when I first join the company. I am the special one in the group. The line manager once told me that it's good I finish work before the deadline, but sometimes I may give others pressure. How can I give others pressure? He never appreciates of my work efficiency and the work quality. I think it is him who feels the threats. I can be promoted which he doesn't want to see. So I assume he wouldn't say anything good about me to his manager no matter how good I am. Or others may feel threatened as well? People in the group may jealous at me? It may happen. I was very upset actually but now I understand, to make sure everyone is happy, everyone needs to be similar, not in a good way though. Sometimes it's very hard for me to keep silent but since last time he rejects my advice, I feel like I'm not bothered to say anything. I will just enjoy my easy life here. I don't care anymore.'

8.4.vi The concept of 'Guanxi'

The significance of 'guanxi' (the personal relationships) is also emphasized in the Chinese social value system. Loyalty to individuals and interpersonal relationships are widely reported to be a pervasive feature in Chinese society (Hui et al. 2004; Redding, 1990). Loyalty to individuals, especially loyalty to superiors is arguably ingrained in Chinese culture, with its roots in Confucianism (Fan, 2000).

Within organisations, whilst it is atypical in Western society that interpersonal relationships play significant roles in job commitment, the role of strong interpersonal relationships in retaining employees is stressed in traditional Chinese culture (Wang, 2008). Therefore, while employees in the Western society recognise the object of commitment as the company, Chinese employees would recognise interpersonal relationship as the object of commitment (Gamble & Huang, 2008). As a result, employees who have a close 'guanxi' with company members are found to be more loyal to the company. Loyalty to the company is only the extension of employees' loyalty to the company members.

ST (35, Senior department manager)'s case demonstrates that his commitment to the company comes from a strong emotional tie with his line manager:

*'I followed my previous line manager to come here. This is the biggest reason. What I mean '*biggest' *is if he didn't come here, maybe I won't. Our relationship is beyond the relationship between a line manager and an employee...We know each other since…my first job. He was the department manager. I like him already that time. Basically we share the same philosophy in terms of how to finish the job, how to get*

> *along with co-workers. I feel very comfortable to work with him. I learned so much from him, not only techniques but also how be to a good manager. He is like a career mentor...My line manager trusts me very much. He allows me to manage the company in my way. Of course when comes to big strategic decisions I can't make by myself. But in term of daily management, he is happy with my work and it just feels great that you can actually doing something without asking the permission thousands of times...'*

Furthermore, recognising interpersonal relationships as the object of commitment also motivates Chinese employees to keep personal relationships and prevails over their commitment to work task and companies. As ST's commitment to the company is only the extension of his commitment to the line manager, whether to stay or leave is largely influenced by the line manager's job decision. ST indicates that he would follow the manager to other companies if necessary:

> *'I actually followed him when I move to the previous company, now I followed him again. Who knows if we move again together in the future?...He sometimes says* something *like having our own company or something. Maybe one day we will leave the company together and have our own company. I think it can happen. I just enjoy working with him at the moment.'*

8.5 The model- Third Stage

As has been shown, factors that influence employees' job choices include the effectiveness of the brand information delivery, social influences and employees' personal situations. Further analysis reveals that Chinese social culture hosts an environment which also shapes employees' perception of their employers.

The third stage model is developed by adding the influencing factors into the previous model (See Figure 8.1: Employee attraction and retention through the lens of employer branding-Third Stage). This final model elaborates the key literature of employer branding (Chapter 2) drawing on the identified employer branding attributes (Chapter 6) and the results of how these attributes would successfully attract and retain employees by aligning both marketing and HR theory in Chapter 7. Finally the results of Chapter 8 are added into the model to elaborate the factors which influence the effectiveness of the employer branding strategy.

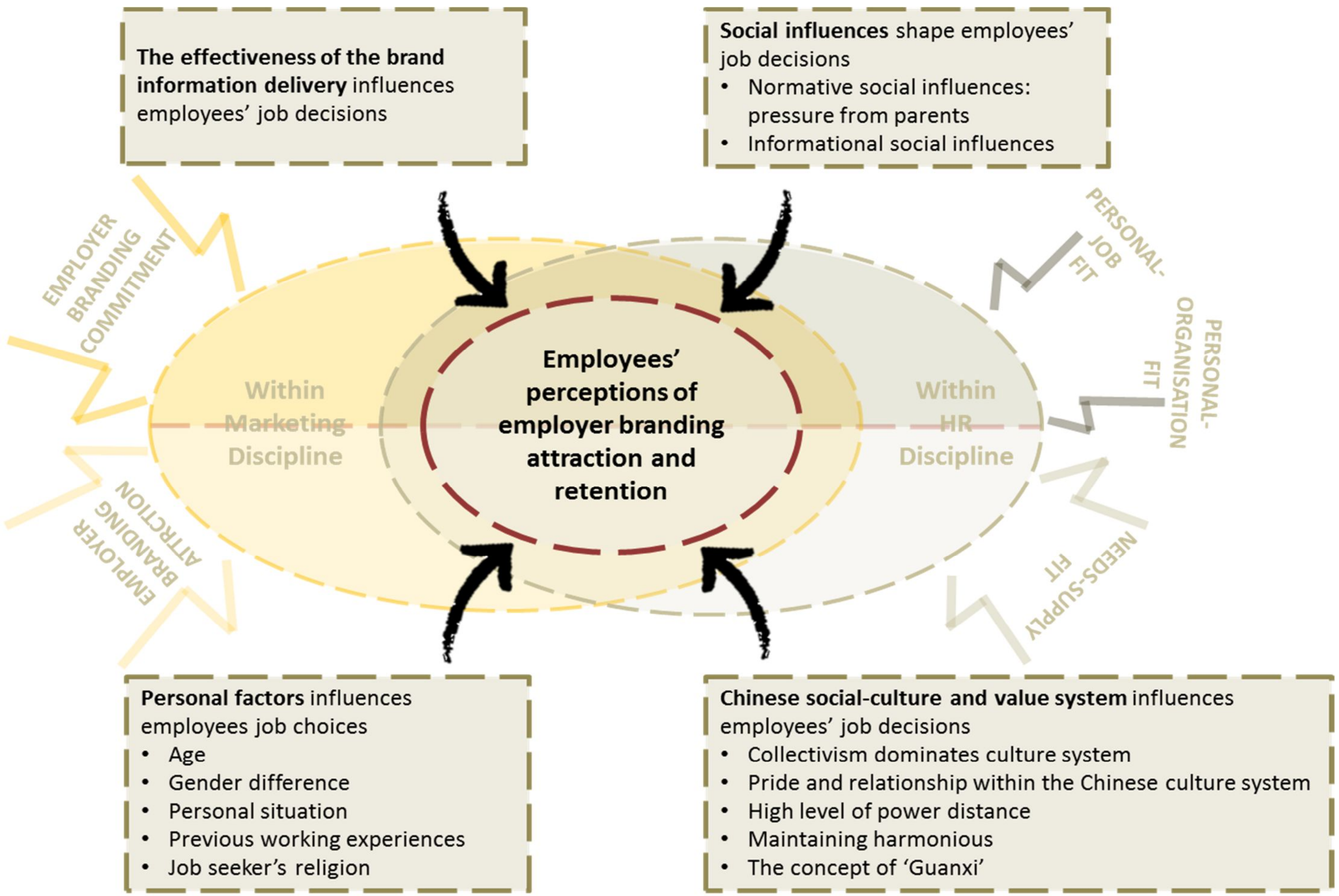

Figure 8.1: Employee attraction and retention through the lens of employer branding- Third Stage

Chapter Summary

This chapter goes beyond the previous results and identifies what shapes employees' perceptions of employer branding attraction and retention. In line with the aim of developing a holistic view of employer branding, the third stage model elaborates the overall research results by presenting the findings in the previous chapters and also adding in the findings of Chapter 8. This model contributes to a fuller picture of the employer branding attraction and retention.

CHAPTER 9 CONCLUSION

Introduction

This chapter brings together the research findings, re-visits the research questions and objectives and concludes that this PhD thesis has met the aims and objectives set down in the previous chapters. The research contributions are explained in detail, in particular the contribution to employer branding theory (key features of the PhD study). This chapter is also a final reflection on the entire research and future research suggestions are developed accordingly.

9.1 Re-visiting the research: research questions and objectives

The aim of this research is to understand the role of employer branding in staff attraction and retention through exploring employees' lived experiences in their own terms and social settings. Accordingly, three main research questions were developed in Chapter 4:

1. What are employer branding attributes that improve job seekers' likelihood of applying for the jobs?

2. What motivates hired employees to be loyal to the employer brand and stay for a long period of time?

3. What shapes employees' perceptions of employer brand attraction and retention, in the context of Chinese companies?

To successfully address these three research questions, a number of detailed research objectives are developed (see section 1.4.ii Research objectives, Chapter 1). It is argued that this PhD has met the aims and objectives set down, therefore these three main research questions are answered successfully.

Following, is a summary of the existing findings of employer branding studies in current literature and a comparison of the conclusions of that research with new findings. This section, then, provide answers for each research question and creates a foundation upon which to discuss the research contributions covered in the next section (9.4 Research contributions).

9.2 Existing findings of employer branding studies

9.2.i Instrumental-symbolic framework in employer branding attraction

Lievens (2007), Lievens and Highhouse (2003) followed the instrumental-symbolic framework and highlighted different branding attributes which are attractive to job seekers in Belgium. They further identified that symbolic attributes are more significant than instrumental attributes in job decision-making. Van Hoye et al.'s research (2013) reached a similar conclusion, that symbolic attributes are more significant than instrumental attributes in deciding the attractiveness of employers. This research was based on an investigation of the perceptions of Turkish university students of branding attributes. Other research results can be found in Wilden et al.'s study (2010). For example, while instrumental attributes were not mentioned to any great extent among the participants, symbolic attributes were evaluated heavily.

9.2.ii Retention decisions of employees

It has been identified that the post-employment performance of the recruiter is related to employee decisions about staying. The research of Wilden et al. (2010) and Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), for example, indicate that hired employees stay in the company when the pre-employment information matches with the company's post-employment performance. Employees evaluate the trustworthiness of the employer, while the employers' willingness and ability to deliver what is promised in the job market largely influences how employees perceive the quality of the company as an employer. When the promised benefits are actually delivered, employees will perceive the company to be trustworthy. However, a mismatch between promised benefits and reality can lead to employee dissatisfaction, reduced trust and, eventually, lead to employees seeking a better employer, offering a better job.

The decision of newly appointed employees' are also influenced by the quality of the post-employment performance; for example, employer investment into employer brand building, including devoting resources to employee development, organising career fairs, internship opportunities and performance awards, all of which are signals that indicate that the company cares about its workers.

Maxwell and Knox (2009) show, through their research, that a company's successes, including their past successes, current standing and expected future successes are factors employees take into account when evaluating their employers. Other factors they consider are the company's products or services. One of the reasons that employees stay in a company is that they like their company's products and the meanings attached to those products (Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

It has also been suggested that organisational culture is related to employee commitment. An organisation's culture, that is supportive and productive, and also enhances employees' work life quality, is positively related to employee brand commitment. Organisation identity is also indicated as another contributory factor to levels of employee brand commitment (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Dutton et al., 1994).

9.2.iii Identified influences on perceptions toward employer branding attraction and retention

It has been recognised that job seekers' and existing employees' perceptions of employer branding attraction and retention are influenced by multiple factors. For example, Wilden et al. (2010) discovered that job seekers' decisions can be influenced by their own experiences. The personal relationships of job seekers' are another way of gaining knowledge about future employers. Other ambassadors for the company and sources of information on the company include the opinions of current employees and recruitment agencies. Maxwell and Knox's research (2009) reveals that employees attach considerable importance to how people from outside of the company perceive the company's image and reputation. In particular, employees pay attention to the perceptions of the general public and people in their own industry.

In addition, existing studies have been conducted predominately within the context of Western companies (Wilden et al., 2010; Knox & Freeman, 2006; Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Del Vecchio et al., 2007; Berthon et al., 2005; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens et al., 2003). The specific perceptions of Chinese employees' towards employer branding attributes are not captured yet, primarily due to the unique sociocultural and national environment. There is only one paper by Jiang and Iles (2011) that explores employer branding in the private sector of Zhejiang province, China. This paper develops a framework of employer brand equity based on interview results from three cases studies. The employer branding equity framework presented is a preliminary, theoretical framework which only examines the perceptions of HR executives of employer branding equity.

9.3 Findings of this research

9.3.i Provides an holistic view of the employer branding concept

This study presents an overview of the extant literature relating to employer branding. A conceptual framework which provides an holistic view of the employer branding concept is developed.

Firstly, the role of employees in a company's marketing activities is introduced, together with an overview of the internal marketing concept which sees employees as the company's internal customers. Employer branding as an effective internal marketing strategy is described in detail. Definitions of employer branding, steps in building employer branding and the theoretical foundations of employer branding are explored in great depth.

Figure 9.1 (developed in Chapter 2) highlights the role of employer branding in employee attraction and retention. It presents a detailed conceptual framework of how the characteristics of employer branding influence employees' behaviour through critically reviewing the literature from a marketing perspective.

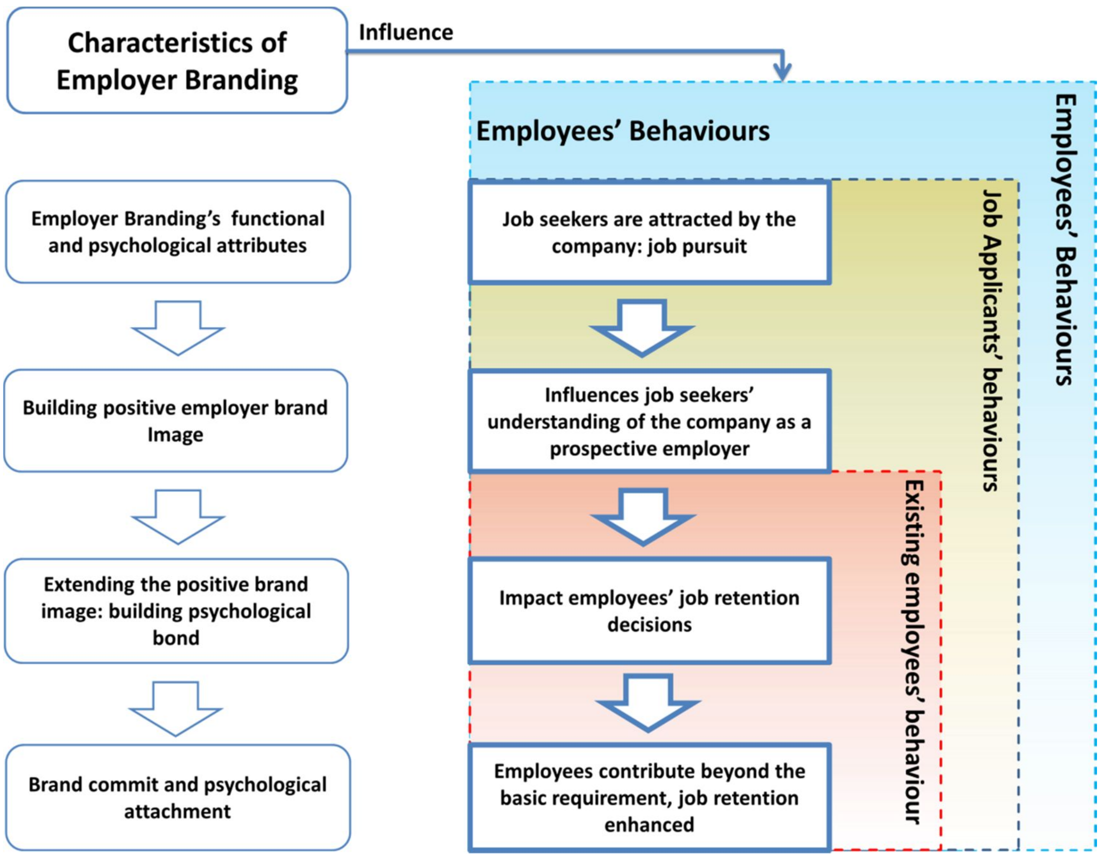

Figure 9.1: How the characteristics of employer branding influence employees' behaviour

Secondly, the benefits of applying employer branding strategy are also discussed in Chapter 2. Applying employer branding strategy is beneficial for companies gaining employees' life time value through enhancing employee based equity. Employer branding contributes to the strengthening of employee equity through improving employee's value equity, brand equity and retention equity, all of which are difficult for competitors to imitate. A further conceptual framework is developed in Chapter 2 to illustrate the benefits of applying employer branding strategy (See Figure 9.2: An interpretation of the relationships between three employee equity components).

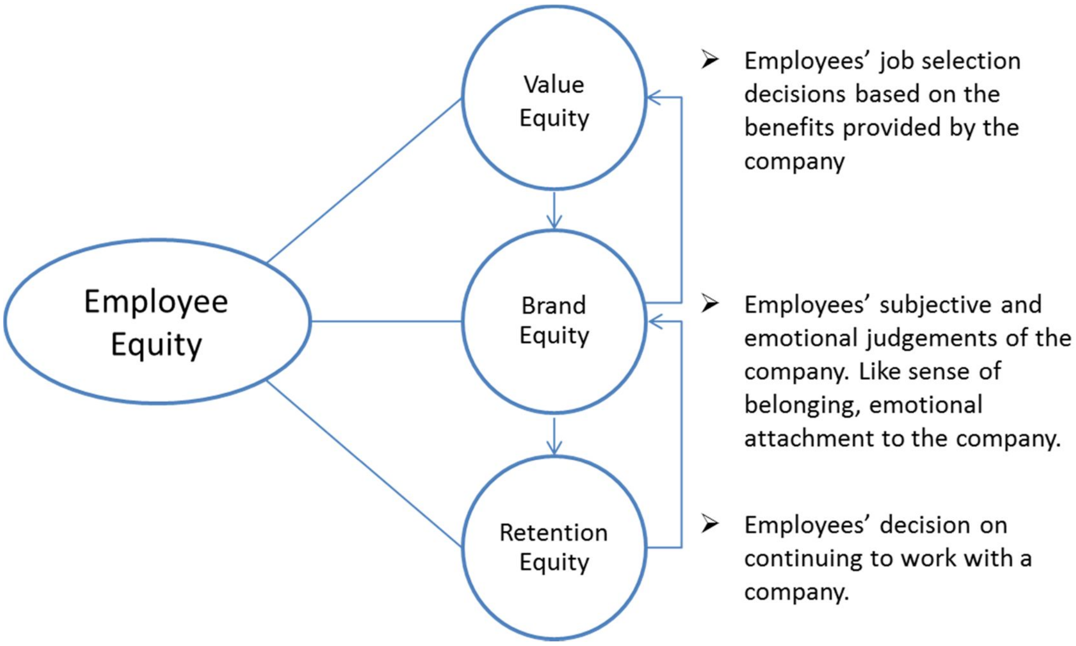

Figure 9.2: An interpretation of the relationships between three employee equity components

Finally a conceptual framework is developed which provides an holistic view of the employer branding concept as shown on the following page (See Figure 9.3: A Conceptual Framework of Employer Branding). It presents the extant literature of employer branding, including the characteristics and theoretical foundations of employer branding. This framework also describes how these characteristics influence employees' behaviour accordingly and highlights the benefits of applying such a strategy within organisations. Thus, this study provides an holistic and thorough review of the employer branding literature so that the first research objective is achieved.

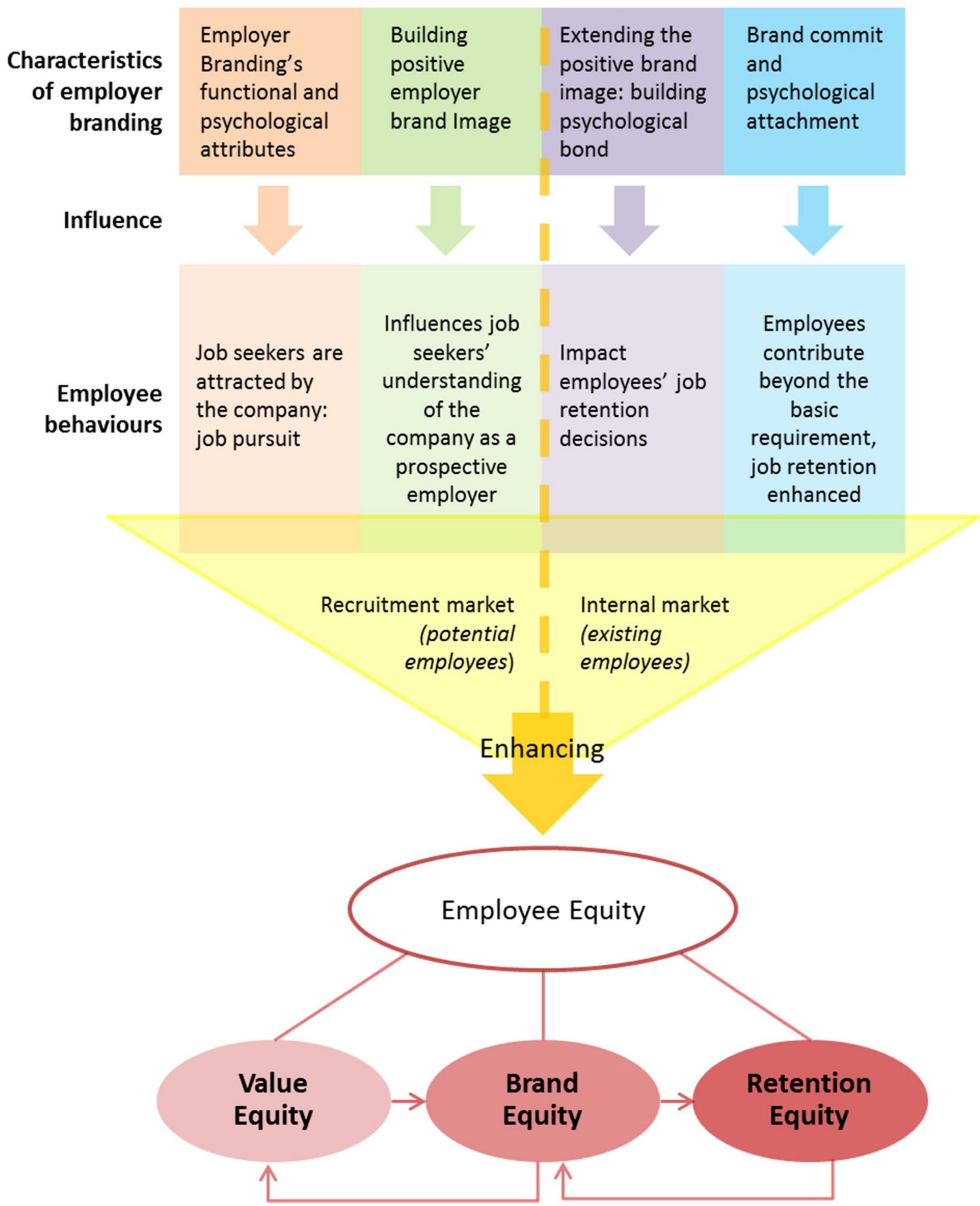

Figure 9.3: A Conceptual Framework of Employer Branding

9.3.ii Employer branding attraction and retention

Following the instrumental-symbolic framework, this research further identified a broader range of branding attributes that would contribute to job seekers' likelihood to apply for jobs and existing employees' commitment to their employers in China. Chapter 6 introduces each identified branding attributes in detail based on interpreting participants' experiences. Chapter 7 explains the findings in Chapter 6. It demonstrates the way in which employer branding can be perceived as a cross-disciplinary strategy and explains employees' employer branding behaviours accordingly.

Thus the first and second research questions have been answered:

Research question 1: What are employer branding attributes that improve job seekers' likelihood of applying for the jobs?

Research question 2: What motivates hired employees to be loyal to the employer brand and stay for a long period of time?

The identified employer brand's attributes which are attractive to job seekers fall into two categories: the tangible instrumental factors and intangible symbolic factors. The tangible instrumental factors can be further divided into five sub-categories, including the salary on offer, company location, job workload, the company's current performance and the people working in the prospective company.

Symbolic functions of employer branding also play an important role in attracting job applicants. Symbolic attributes of employer brands can be categorized in the following sub-categories: organisation identity, corporate brand and corporate reputation, organisational culture, company positive future development and the opportunities for personal career development.

Compared to short-term attributes, findings of this study show that employer branding's attributes which motivate the hired employees to stay are characterised as effective on a long-term basis. For instance, the identified attributes, such as company management practice, employee career development and employee relationships with the company are perceived to be important influences in an employee's decision to stay or leave.

Results in this stage describe employer branding's attributes that contribute to employee attraction and retention based on interpreting participants' own experiences. These results provide insights into employer branding attraction and retention so that the fourth research objective is achieved. The first stage model was built to elaborate the findings so far (See Figure 9.4: A Model of Employer Branding Attraction and Retention – First Stage):

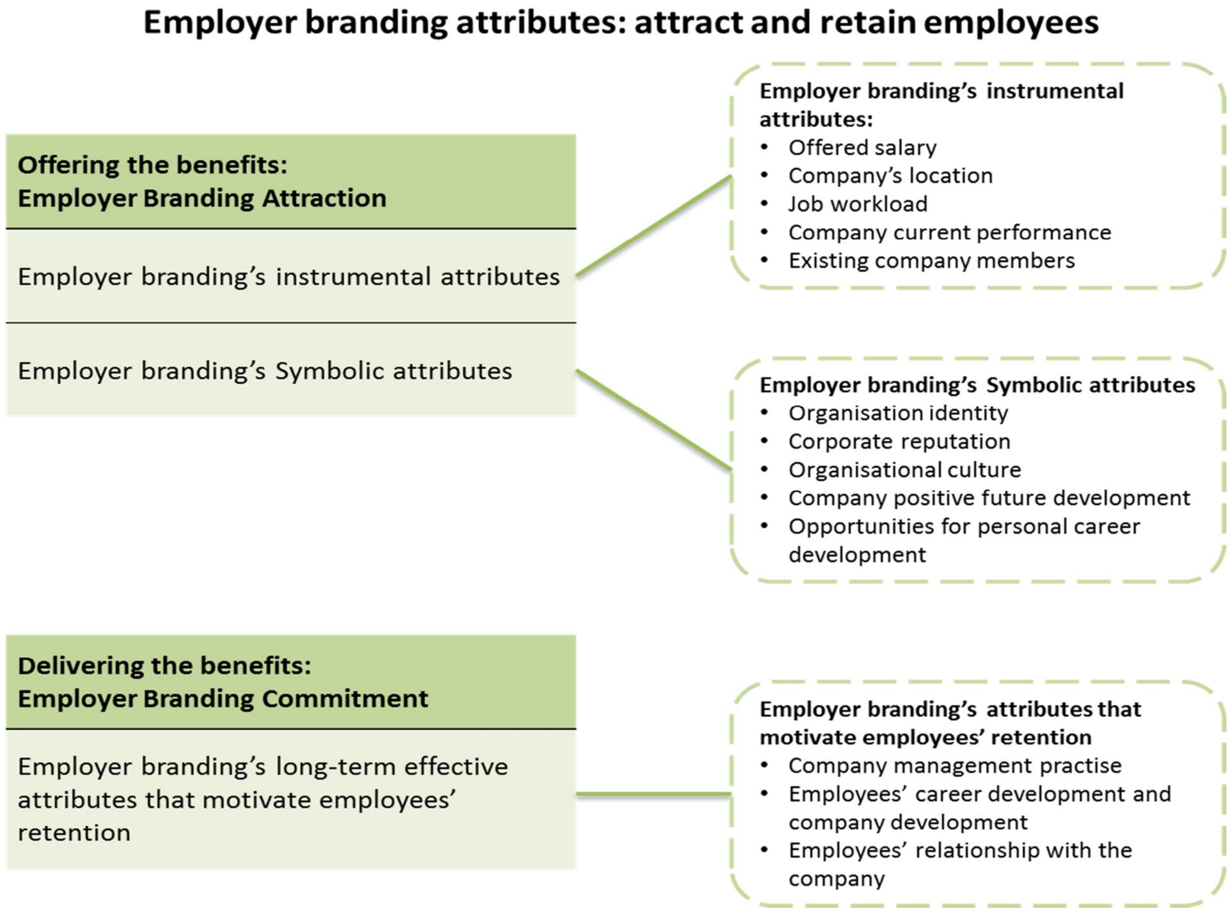

Figure 9.4: A Model of Employer Branding Attraction and Retention – First Stage

Findings suggest that employer branding is a cross-disciplinary strategy. Research findings are explained within two disciplines: knowledge of marketing and knowledge of HR. This study also successfully combines these two knowledge stream and develops a model accordingly.

Chapter 7 explains the findings in Chapter 6. It brings in 'needs theory' from a psychology perspective to explore job seekers' choices in the job market. It concludes that only when employer branding attributes, including both functional and symbolic attributes, match with job seekers' hierarchical needs, will job applicants be attracted to apply for the job. As regards existing employees, they would also be motivated to stay when the employer branding benefits can be delivered consistently. Consistently delivering the benefits over the long term will encourage employees to remain loyal, attached and committed to the employer brand.

However this understanding of employees' choices is limited within the literature of the marketing discipline. The 'fit' theory is used to further explain the findings from an HR perspective. It shows that both job seekers and existing employees consider the fit between their needs and the rewards received from the company, the fit between their job skills and abilities with the demands of the jobs as well as the fit between an individual's personal values and the values and culture of the organisation.

Therefore, the discussion so far provides further insights into employer branding attraction and retention. Furthermore, marketing and HR knowledge are incorporated together to explain employees' behaviours. It is concluded that job seekers consider both whether employer branding's attributes can fulfil their lower-level needs and whether their needs fit with the supplies from the company (the needs-supplies fit). Moreover, job seekers also consider whether employer branding's attributes can fulfil their higher-level needs while placing emphasises on the fit between their values with the characteristics of the company (supplies-values fit), such as organisation identity, company reputation, organisational culture and the company's future development.

It also suggests that job attributes, such as job knowledge, abilities and job characteristics are evaluated by the existing employees. When the needs approach fails to consider the job itself as a motivator, the personal-job fit approach fills in this gap and explains that employees distinguish between their fit with the organisation and their fit with the job itself. It suggests that employees' decisions to stay are also influenced by whether their skills and abilities are compatible with the demands of a specific job.

Aside from comparing employees' needs with employer branding's attributes, this study also gives the conclusion that when individual employees' values match with the company culture and values, their intention of staying is strong.

The second stage model draws together the research results so far (See Figure 9.5: Bring Marketing and HR together to understand employee attraction and retention through the lens of employer branding). In this model research findings are explained within two disciplines: knowledge of marketing and knowledge of HR. This model also further explains employees' brand attraction and retention by incorporating marketing and HR knowledge together. Therefore the fifth research objective is achieved as employer branding is understood as a cross-disciplinary strategy and employee behaviours in response to employer branding is explained accordingly.

Figure 9.5: Bring Marketing and HR together to understand employee attraction and retention through the lens of employer branding

9.3.iii Influences on perceptions toward employer branding and employer branding in China

This research identified influences on perceptions toward employer branding attraction and retention, in the context of China. Chapter 8 firstly identified factors which influence Chinese employees' job choices, including the effectiveness of the brand information delivery, social influences and employees' personal situations. Secondly, Chapter 8 explored employees' behaviour within Chinese culture and value systems in detail and reveals that the collectivist culture system, the concept of pride and relationships, high levels of power distance, intent to maintain harmonious and the significance of 'guanxi' host an environment which largely shapes employees' perceptions of employer branding.

Thus the third research question has been answered:

Research question 3: What shapes employees' perceptions of employer brand attraction and retention, in the context of Chinese companies?

Finally the third stage model draws the research findings, elaborates research results and provides an holistic view of employer branding (See Figure 9.6: Employee attraction and retention through the lens of employer branding- Third Stage). This final model describes the key literature of employer branding (Chapter 2) drawing on the identified employer branding attributes (Chapter 6) and the results of how these attributes would successfully attract and retain employees by aligning both marketing and HR knowledge in Chapter 7. Finally the results of Chapter 8 are added into the model to show the factors which influence the effectiveness of employer branding implementation.

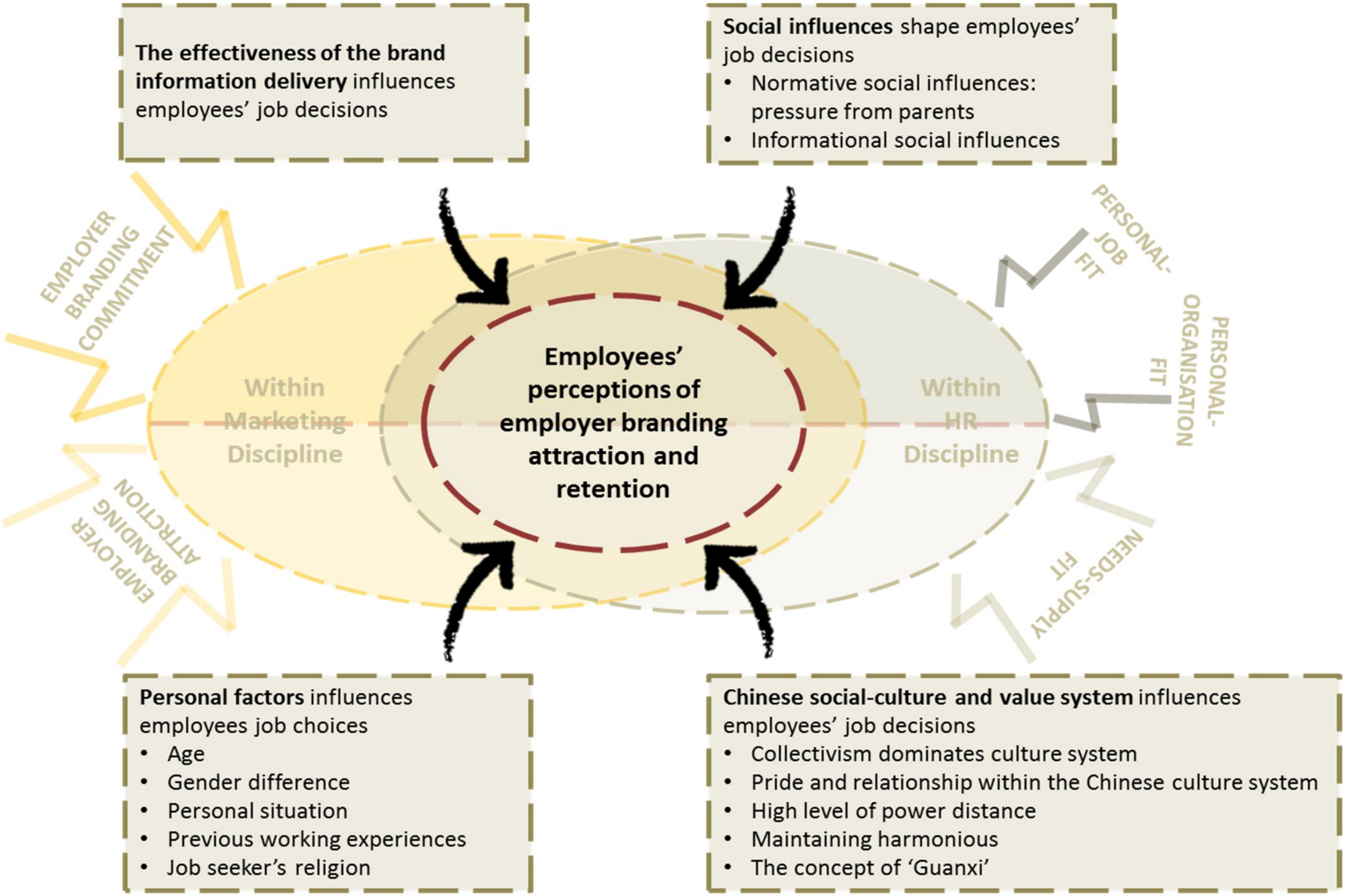

Figure 9.6: Employee attraction and retention through the lens of employer branding- Third Stag

9.4 Research contributions

This section summarises the main contributions to theories in detail (key features of the PhD study) and identifies the research implications for employee recruiting and retaining practice. Secondly, the research evaluation criteria proposed in chapter 5 (section 5.6) are re-visited to explore whether or not each criterion is successfully met. Finally, publications developed from this thesis are listed in the end.

9.4.i Further understanding of the employer branding concept

Despite the increasing recognition that employees drive competitive advantage in modern markets, literature on marketing strategies implementation remains dominated by an external focus on customers and competitors (Lings, 2004). This research clearly explains employees' role in companies' marketing activities. Internal marketing strategy which values employees as internal customers is thoroughly studied and the benefits of applying such a strategy are discussed.

Secondly, this research advances the understanding of employer branding. A conceptual framework is built to provide theoretical foundations of employer branding concept. It presents the characteristics and theoretical foundation of employer branding in detail. This model also demonstrates how employer branding is related to traditional branding theories and discuss how it can be applied to employee recruitment and retention. Benefits of applying employer branding strategy are explained clearly.

While the identified branding attributes which contribute to brand attractiveness are limited (Lievens et al., 2007), this research identifies a broader and more detailed range of employer branding attributes which enhance job seekers' intentions to apply for jobs.

Meanwhile, limited attention has been paid to employer branding's effect on employees' retention (Lievens, 2007; Berthon et al., 2005), for example, Wilden et al. (2010) propose that *'further research should therefore explore the role of the employer brand in employee retention and its possible implications for customer attraction, satisfaction, and retention'* (p.70). The effect of employer branding in the post-recruitment stage are identified. Factors that motivate employees to be loyal to employer brands are discussed so that companies' employer branding strategies can be adapted accordingly.

Furthermore, it is pointed out that current employer branding studies fail to identify how different brand attributes perform in different conditions and how the perceptions of different groups from outside of the company influence employees' decisions (Wilden et al., 2010; Maxwell & Knox, 2009). This research addressed this gap by identifying the factors influencing employees' job choices and the sources of information which constructs the company image.

9.4.ii The Right 'Fit'? Bringing marketing and HR knowledge together to understand employer branding attraction and retention

The existing employer branding research is limited in that it primarily relies on explaining employer branding attractiveness by following the instrumental-symbolic framework within the marketing discipline (Lievens et al., 2007). This thesis successfully incorporates HR management knowledge into this employer branding study and further bridges these two research streams that have evolved relatively separately from each other. Therefore, both theoretically and practically, this study contributes to develop interest in the links between marketing and HR theory. It provides *'a language and a degree of conceptual clarity that is lacking in the extant branding and HR literature'* (Martin et al., 2004, p.79).

It is also noted that employee attraction and retention issues have already been largely studied within HR management studies so that some may argue that employer branding research is little more than 'old wine in new bottles' as it overlaps with organisation behaviour studies (Martin et al., 2004, p.79). However, it is already realised that there are limits to what can be achieved by adopting any single techniques alone. Compared with multiple management functions operating in isolation, a cross-discipline operation around the core business process is required (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2009; 2003). This study highlights that bringing marketing theories into the traditionally HR-dominated employee behaviour study provides a new insight to the talents shortage and low employee engagement problems. Employer branding identifies the potential for HR professionals to draw on the branding literature as a new performance discourse. Moreover, this study also contributes to HR theories as the employer branding concept integrates different but related constructs within the HR management paradigm under one large umbrella. These constructs include literature from recruitment, selection and retention.

9.4.iii Insights into employer branding application in China

Existing studies have been conducted predominately in the context of Western companies (Van Hoye et al., 2013), there is a gap of employer branding studies in non-Western countries. Especially in China, only one paper by Jiang and Iles (2011) is found to explore employer branding in the private sector of Zhejiang province, China. When this paper research presents a starting point of employer branding study in China, further research is needed to address this gap.

This research provides a more detail and clearer map of employer branding in China, including provide a list of brand attributes that Chinese employees value the most and investigate influences on perceptions toward employer branding attraction and retention in China. This research also explains why Chinese employees' perceptions towards brand attributes are different from employees of Western countries. It yields the conclusion that social environment in China shapes employees' decisions as Chinese people's job decisions are influenced by the national culture and value system. These findings are more advanced than the preliminary theoretical framework developed in Jiang and Iles's (2011) paper.

9.4.iv Exploring employees' personal experiences of employer branding attraction and retention

Previous employer branding studies have focused on exploring employees' behaviours at an institutionalised level with an aim to generalise claims through testing or examining employees' behaviours (Grace & King, 2012, 2010; Kim et al. 2010; Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Lievens, 2007; Berton et al. 2005). Employees' behaviours on an individual level, such as how different individuals perceive employer branding has largely been neglected. Researchers are encouraged to explore employees' personal experiences of employer branding attraction and retention (Wilden et al., 2010; Maxwell & Knox, 2009; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Lievens, 2007; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2005). This research addressed this gap by adopting a qualitative-based method which successfully captured employees' personal experiences of employer branding with rich descriptions in detail.

9.4.v Implications for employee recruitment and retention practice

The value of the employer branding concept for practice parallels the theoretical contributions. Reviewing how employees perceive different employer branding attributes helps to ensure that employer brand reflects the interests of employees as well as the distinctive identity of the organisation (Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

Therefore employers can formulate appropriate responses to these requirements and make internal products more attractive to potential and existing employees than their competitors. For example, the identified employer branding's attributes set, including both tangible and intangible attributes which are attractive to job seekers provides a guideline for companies to design their recruitment activities. Companies are advised not only to consider the offered salary, their company location and job workload to meet with job seekers' needs, but more importantly, to build an attractive corporate brand and reputation, develop a friendly organisational culture and provide job seekers opportunities for their future development in order to effectively attract more job applicants.

Similarly, employer branding's attributes which are effective on a long-term basis can be developed to maximise employees' commitment and loyalty. Companies are suggested to improve management practices in terms of quality and design and to provide programmes to assist employees' career development and build stable and healthy relationships with their staff members.

Additionally, employer branding provides an holistic package of management practice that channels employee attraction and retention activities into a coordinated human resource strategy. As such, the sub-activities under the attraction and retention activities, including recruitment, staffing, training, career management and development can be implemented more effectively than each of the management practices operating alone.

9.4.vi Evaluation of the Thesis

In Chapter 5 (section 5.6), criteria for evaluating qualitative research were listed. This section revisits each criterion and assesses whether or not this thesis has met all the four criteria:

- **Sensitivity to context:** *theoretical; relevant literature; empirical data; sociocultural setting; participants' perspectives; ethical issues*

This study presents an overview of the extant literature relating to employer branding, including the role of employees in company's marketing activities and the internal marketing concept. A conceptual framework, which provides an holistic view of the employer branding concept, is developed. The characteristics of employer branding, how these characteristics influence employees' behaviour accordingly and the benefits of applying such strategy within the organisation are described in detail (See Chapter 2 & 3).

This research presents a reflective account of research findings and is exploratory in nature. It opens to emerging themes and presents the captured topics that are related to research questions (See Chapter 4 & 5).

The researcher is also closely involved in the research to study participants' experiences in depth. Power relations between participants and the researcher are always balanced in research design, analysis and reporting. For example, the researcher did not perform as a more powerful or knowledgeable character during the in-depth interview. Moreover, data analysis and reporting also focus on presenting participants' voices based on their own accounts of their experiences (See Chapter 6).

- **Commitment and rigour:** *in-depth engagement with topic; methodological competence/skill; thorough data collection; depth/breadth of analysis*

I have been engaged with this research since the first day of this PhD journey. I am deeply immersed in the data through collecting, transcribing, translating and analysing the collected data in person.

Chapters 4 and 5 show a reflective account of methodological choices. In-depth conversations (each interview lasts 2 to 2.5 hours) with my participants have provided this study with a rich set of data. Thematic analysis is applied to thoroughly and systematically discuss the data with maximally capturing and presenting participants' experiences.

- **Transparency and coherence:** *clarity and power of description/argument; transparent methods and data presentation; fit between theory and method; reflexivity*

Section 5.3 of Chapter 5 carefully describes the process of analysis and outlines every step within this process while section 5.4 outlines how the analysis results are presented in chapter 6, 7 and 8.

Chapter 6 shows a general discussion and interpretation of findings with significant consideration being given to presenting participants' own voices authentically. Chapter 7 and 8 discusses the findings in relation to the objectives of this study. It also brings in researcher's voice to explain individual participants' employer branding choices within the existing theoretical framework. Therefore, the research findings are presentable to people who are knowledgeable about employer branding and related areas.

- **Impact and importance:** *theoretical (enriching understanding); socio-cultural; practical*

Impact and importance refers to the usefulness of the research, which can be assessed by the objectives of the analysis, research applications and if the research has practical import to certain community (Langdridge, 2007; Yardley, 2000).

Research objectives are listed in the introduction chapter and each objective is revisited in section 9.1. Research contributions are presented in section 9.2 which outlines the contributions to knowledge and the research implications to employee attraction and retention in practice. Therefore the usefulness of this thesis, both theoretical and practical is addressed. Research findings are also presentable to wider audiences, such as company HR recruitment professionals and HR management professionals.

Therefore the above listed criteria of assessing the quality of this thesis have all been fulfilled.

9.4.vii Related publications

Some of the research presented in this dissertation has also been published or presented in the following outlets. Feedbacks from academic audiences are reflected upon in my thesis. These publications are also listed in Appendix B (Please see Appendix B: Related publications).

a. Conference papers:

Ren, C., & Woodruffe, H. R. (2014). *The Right 'Fit'? Bringing Marketing and HR Together: A literature study of employer branding*. Academy of Marketing, Bournemouth.

b. Paper presented:

Ren, C., & Woodruffe, H. R. (2014). *Employer Branding: Building a positive employer brand image to attract job seekers in China – the role of organisation identity and corporate reputation.* Paper presented at the International Colloquium on Design, Branding and Marketing (ICDBM), Nottingham Trent University.

Ren, C., & Woodruffe, H. R. (2014). *An Exploratory Study of the Role of Employer Branding in Employee Attraction and Retention within Chinese Companies*. Paper presented at the Academy of Marketing, Bournemouth.

Ren, C., & Woodruffe, H. R. (2013). *An exploratory study of the role of internal branding in employee attraction and retention in the Chinese manufacturing sector*. Paper presented at the Academy of Marketing, Cardiff.

Ren, C., & Woodruffe, H. R. (2013). *An Exploratory Study of the Role of Employer Branding in Employee Attraction and Retention*. Paper presented at the NBS Doctoral conference, Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University.

Ren, C., & Woodruffe, H. R. (2012). *Exploring Factors Influencing Employee-based Brand Building for SMEs in Mainland China*. Paper presented at the NBS Doctoral conference, Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University.

9.5 Research limitations

Following evaluation and reflection on the research process, it is evident that there are a number of relatively minor constraints within the project. The identified limitations fall into three categories: limitations in terms of personal knowledge limitation; limitations in terms of research methodology; and limitations in the interpretation of data.

9.5.i Personal knowledge limitations

This research aims at providing a clear understanding of employer branding, which is currently an under-explored concept. Employer branding is a cross-functional topic that merges literature with both Marketing and HR. This necessitates a comprehensive and integrative understanding of relevant topics and demands a thorough review of a comparatively large body of literature. Furthermore, any discussion of employer branding in China also requires an empathy with Chinese culture and its value system which, in itself, presents another challenge for this research.

While key literature and knowledge are fully covered in this study, and the proposed research questions are successfully addressed, it is simply not possible to deal with all the literature available related to employer branding. Therefore, the first limitation to this research that must be acknowledged is in terms of my own knowledge and understanding of employer branding. Research beyond this thesis is already scheduled to gain further understanding of employer branding in China, and my thoughts are presented in section 9.6: Future research suggestions.

9.5.ii Limitation of research methodology

Although an approach based on exploration, understanding and interpretation is an appropriate strategy for this research, this method is not without its limitations as already discussed in the methods section (Chapter 5, section 5.7). It can be argued that the sampling techniques, limitation of the collected data and potential bias in interpretation within this research constitute a limitation of research methods.

It can also be argued that qualitative study findings cannot be generalised beyond specific contexts. For example, participants' own experiences of their employer cannot be applied to other employers. The research results only present individual participant's recollections. However, findings of this research are still valid and applicable to the setting of employee recruitment and retention in China and they do provide a starting point for future research. Building upon this study, it is evident that empirical research can quantify and solidify the findings of research. A detailed research plan is presented in section 9.6: Future research suggestions.

9.5.iii Limitation of the data source

Tables 5.6 and 5.7 in Chapter 5 (section 5.2) illustrate the profile of the selected participants and their companies. Although the 19 participants are recruited with the intention of covering employees from every level of the companies, it is a fact that the sample size for each group is inconsistent. Among employees who work as supporting staff, for example, the majority are from manufacturing departments. The sample of employees from sales and other supporting groups is relatively small. As it proved difficult to access members of the company executive teams, only three participants were interviewed from that group.

The participants were drawn from 9 companies in total. Although these 9 companies covered private companies, foreign investment companies and state-owned companies of different sizes in different industries, the range of company type is still limited. Family-based businesses are not included in this study, presenting the possibility of a focus for future study in this area.

9.6 Future research suggestions

The completion of this thesis has proven to be a starting point rather than a finishing point as this research has provided a beginning for further research in employer branding studies. The following key areas for future research have been identified:

Firstly, further research can be conducted by extending the current findings:

Although a broader range of employer branding's attributes that contribute to employees' attraction and retention are identified in this study, employer branding research generally is still in its early stages to be further developed. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to build upon the current theoretical framework and continue identifying employer branding attributes that enhance the intention of job application and retention. Further research of this kind may contribute to refine and modify the 'Employer branding attributes: attract and retain employees' model developed in Chapter 6.

It was noticed that participants of this study are from different hierarchies within the company and from different social backgrounds. The other way to extend the current research is to further investigate certain employee groups' perceptions of employer branding. For example, case study techniques can be adopted to compare how different employee groups evaluate employer brandings. These groups can be defined based on employees from different positions, for example, a case study to compare how senior and junior level employees evaluate the employer branding. The groups can also be defined based on employees' different social backgrounds. Chapter 8 discovered that different age, gender and religious groups evaluate employer branding attributes differently, although this difference is explained through exploring the unique environment which Chinese social culture and value systems host, it would be worthwhile to conduct more case studies to further explore factors that influence employees' choices and the reasons behind such choices. It is also noticed that employer branding research is only at its starting point in China, further exploring how individual employees' different situations shape their perceptions towards employer branding and the unique culture and value behind these choices are suggested (See example: Jiang & Iles, 2011).

Secondly, several new research directions are identified in this research:

Several concepts which are closely related to employer branding have also been studied within the marketing field, for example, internal advertising and employer attractiveness. While advertising plays an important role in customer attraction, similarly, internal advertising strategy is also recognised in terms of its potential for advertising to employees. The other closely related concept is employer attractiveness, which describes the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organisation (Berthon et al., 2005). Future research can explore these related concepts further which would help better capture and explain employee behaviours in response to employer branding. For example, as advertising in the external market effectively strengthens the attractiveness of a product brand, examining whether internal advertising strategy also has similar positive effect on increasing employer brand attractiveness is one potential research focus. Secondly, the employer attractiveness concept has been studied in vocational behaviour, management, psychology, communication and marketing (Bergstrom et al. 2002; Collins & Stevens, 2002; Ewing et al., 2002; Gatewood et al. 1993; Soutar & Clarke, 1983). Similarly, employer branding is also cross-disciplinary in nature. Therefore exploring employer attractiveness literature and discovering whether it can be applied in employer branding study will provide employer branding research with new insights and directions.

In addition, company managers play an important role in organisational-level strategy implementation. Research findings of this study also reveal that managers can potentially shape the effectiveness of employer branding implementation. For example, the research revealed that the factors that existing employees evaluate in Chapter 6, including employee empowerment, organisation communication, management-workforce relationship and organisation culture are all largely shaped by managers' performances. Therefore the other future research direction is to identify how managers influence employer branding implementation within organisations. Examples of similar research include King and Grace (2006)'s study titled: Exploring managers' perspectives of the impact of brand management strategies on employee roles within a service firm (King & Grace, 2006).

Finally, further empirical research can quantify and solidify the findings of this research. Firstly, this research identified different employer branding attributes that contribute to employees' attraction and retention, a framework is built upon these results (See 'Employer branding attributes: attract and retain employees' model developed in Chapter 6). Future research can test each attribute and quantify the extent of each attribute in employee attraction and retention. Secondly, the model in the third stage (See 'Employee attraction and retention through the lens of employer branding- Third Stage' developed in Chapter 8) presents the factors that shapes employees' perceptions of employer branding attraction and retention. It is also possible for future research to test each factors and quantify the relationships between the effectiveness of each factor and its influence on employee attraction and retention. Examples of quantitative based employer branding studies include Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005) and Lievens (2007).

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Appendix A: Participants' Consent Form

Newcastle Business School

Informed Consent Form for research participants

Title of Study	Exploring Factors Influencing Employee-based Brand Building for SMEs in Mainland China
Person(s) conducting the research	Chen Ren
Programme of study	PhD
Address of the researcher for correspondence	Room 415 Newcastle Business School City Campus East Newcastle upon Tyne NE1 8ST
Telephone	0044 7414 8833 81 (UK) 0086 13838592896 (China)
E-mail	chen.ren@northumbria.ac.uk
Description of the broad nature of the research	To explore brand building within SMEs in mainland China.
Description of the involvement expected of participants including the broad nature of questions to be answered or events to be observed or activities to be undertaken, and the expected time commitment	Participants will be involved in the research, with their permission, through: 1. Being interviewed by the researcher. The interview will last about 1 to 2 hours. 2. Being observed in their job role. Participants will be selected from different organizations. The length of the observation in each company will be approximately one week. The interview will be unstructured and exploratory in nature. It will focus on the experiences of

	individual employees on how they understand brand building inside their organization. All interviews will be recorded with a digital voice recorder and transcribed later. Anonymity will be assured. The researcher will also omit or change organizations' and individuals' names during data collection and transcription. Agreement from the company manager will be obtained before interviews and observation. Primary data will be stored securely in both paper and electronic form. The original data will be kept in a locked space and the e-document database will be protected by a password. Hard copies of the anonymised transcripts may be given to the supervision team for review to ensure the analysis is appropriate. The data from individual interviews and observations will be made available to individual participants on request. It will be explained to the participants that the data obtained in this research will be used for publishing in different forms for different audiences, including conferences, peer reviewed journals, articles, etc.

Information obtained in this study, including this consent form, will be kept strictly confidential (i.e. will not be passed to others) and anonymous (i.e. individuals and organisations will not be identified *unless this is expressly excluded in the details given above*).

Data obtained through this research may be reproduced and published in a variety of forms and for a variety of audiences related to the broad nature of the research detailed above. It will not be used for purposes other than those outlined above without your permission.

Participation is entirely voluntary and participants may withdraw at any time.

By signing this consent form, you are indicating that you fully understand the above information and agree to participate in this study on the basis of the above information.

Participant's signature Date

Student's signature Date

Please keep one copy of this form for your own records

诺森比亚大学
纽卡斯尔商学院

研究参与者知情同意书

研究课题	企业雇主品牌对于员工招聘和保留的影响 - 基于中国企业的案例分析
研究人	任辰
所学专业	市场营销学博士
研究人联系地址	英国纽卡斯尔市，东校区，纽卡斯尔商学院，415 房间 邮编：NE1 8ST
联系电话	0044 7414 8833 81 （英国） 0086 13838592896 （中国）
邮件地址	chen.ren@northumbria.ac.uk
描述所做研究的本质	探索企业采用顾主品牌战略对于员工招聘和保留的影响
研究者期望的参与描述，包括需要回答的问题，参与的事件或者参加的活动，预定执行的时间	采访将会持续 1-2 个小时。研究参与着来自不同公司。 采访采取深入采访模式。采访将被录音并以文字方式记录。 所有获得的信息，包括公司的名称和参与者的名称都将匿名处理。 所有的数据将被安全保存，采访着可以检查所有的采访记录。 研究结果会以不同形式出版，包括期刊，杂志等。

研究所获得的信息，包括这个研究参与者知情同意书将被严密（例如：将不会转给其他人）和进行匿名处理（例如：个人和公司的名字不会被提及）。

以上涉及到研究本质的所获得的数据为满足不同的读者可能会以不同的形式被复制和出版

除以上条款，没有你的许可将不会用于其他目的。

参与者是完全自愿参加而且可以在任何时期退出.

签订这个表格，就意味着在上述的基础上你完全理解以上内容和同意参加这项研究

参与者姓名 **日期**

学生名称 **日期**

Appendix B: Related publications

a. Conference papers:

Ren, C., & Woodruffe, H. R. (2014). *The Right 'Fit'? Bringing Marketing and HR Together: A literature study of employer branding*. Academy of Marketing, Bournemouth.

b. Paper presented:

Ren, C., & Woodruffe, H. R. (2014). *Employer Branding: Building a positive employer brand image to attract job seekers in China – the role of organisation identity and corporate reputation.* Paper presented at the International Colloquium on Design, Branding and Marketing (ICDBM), Nottingham Trent University.

Ren, C., & Woodruffe, H. R. (2014). *An Exploratory Study of the Role of Employer Branding in Employee Attraction and Retention within Chinese Companies*. Paper presented at the Academy of Marketing, Bournemouth.

Ren, C., & Woodruffe, H. R. (2013). *An exploratory study of the role of internal branding in employee attraction and retention in the Chinese manufacturing sector*. Paper presented at the Academy of Marketing, Cardiff.

Ren, C., & Woodruffe, H. R. (2013). *An Exploratory Study of the Role of Employer Branding in Employee Attraction and Retention*. Paper presented at the NBS Doctoral conference, Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University.

Ren, C., & Woodruffe, H. R. (2012). *Exploring Factors Influencing Employee-based Brand Building for SMEs in Mainland China*. Paper presented at the NBS Doctoral conference, Newcastle Business School, Northumbria University.