



GÖTEBORGS  
UNIVERSITET

# ORGANISATIONAL ATTRACTIVENESS IN A TIME OF CRISIS

## Employer knowledge within the pharmaceutical field during the Covid-19 pandemic

Fanny Hultén & Nadine Weiss

---

Essay/Thesis: 30 hp

Program and/or course: Strategic Human Resource Management and Labour Relations

Level: Second Cycle

Semester/year: St/2022

Supervisor: Bertil Rolandsson & Pille Strauss-Raats

Examiner: Jing Wu

# **Abstract**

Essay/Thesis:	30 hp
Program and/or course:	Strategic Human Resource Management and Labour Relations
Level:	Second Cycle
Semester/year:	St/2022
Supervisor:	Bertil Rolandsson & Pille Strauss-Raats
Examiner:	Jing Wu
Report No:	xx (not to be filled in by the student/students)
Keyword:	Covid-19 pandemic, organisational attractiveness, employer knowledge, employer familiarity, employer image, employer reputation, information sources, mass media, students, crisis

- 
- Purpose: The aim of this thesis is to investigate how organisational attractiveness in the pharmaceutical industry has been influenced by increased media attention due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on a case of a multinational biotechnological and pharmaceutical Company X that was repeatedly in the spotlight of international media during the pandemic, the thesis explores how university students used different information sources for forming employer knowledge and if a connection could be found between employer knowledge and organisational attractiveness.
- Theory: The concept of employer knowledge consists of the three dimensions of employer familiarity, employer image and employer reputation, which display the beliefs that job seekers have about a potential employer based on different information sources. The thesis uses the framework by connecting it to different information sources and organisational attractiveness in the context of the pandemic.
- Method: Using a purposive sampling approach, 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted with university students about to enter the labour market that currently reside in Sweden. The study differentiates the target group based on their contextual backgrounds, such as occupational group (science or business) and Swedish or International origin. Thematic analysis was used to transform the collected data into empirical results.
- Result: The results indicate that the increased media exposure during the Covid-19 pandemic influenced all dimensions of employer knowledge, especially employer familiarity. Becoming a household name positively influenced the student's perception of organisational attractiveness. The different contextual backgrounds of the students become visible in their level of employer knowledge, their usage of information sources, their perception of the pharmaceutical industry and their reflection of media content.

## **Acknowledgements**

First, we want to thank all of the informants who participated in the study and contributed with interesting insights. Your participation has been essential for conducting our research.

Secondly, we want to thank Company X for allowing us to study employer knowledge in such an interesting context. Last but not least, we want to thank our supervisors, Bertil Rolandsson and Pille Strauss-Raats, for their invaluable guidance and support throughout the process.

## **Table of content**

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>7</b>
Objective of the research	9
<b>Previous Research</b>	<b>11</b>
Organisational attractiveness amongst potential applicants	11
The importance of reputation and its effect on organisational attractiveness	12
Information sources and their impact on reputation	13
Mass media as an information source	15
Scandals within the automotive industry	16
A scandal in the context of Covid-19 - The Adidas rent incident	17
Research Gap	17
<b>Theoretical framework</b>	<b>19</b>
Employer knowledge	19
Employer familiarity	19
Employer image	20
Employer reputation	20
Making sense of theory and previous research	21
<b>Methodology</b>	<b>24</b>
Methodological approach	24
Data collection	24
Sampling strategy and participants	25
Interviews process	27
Interview guideline	28
The researcher's position and relation to Company X	29
Data analysis	30
The quality of qualitative analysis - The four criterions of trustworthiness	31
Credibility	31

Transferability	32
Dependability	32
Confirmability	33
Ethical considerations	33
<b>Empirical results</b>	<b>35</b>
A rise in visibility leads to attractiveness	35
Becoming familiar with Company X	36
Establishing a household name	37
Exploring the appeal of working at Company X	38
Perceived opportunities and the differences between business vs science	38
Organisational culture – assumption and interpersonal communication	40
Viewing Company X through media in the context of Covid-19	41
Generating employer knowledge through media	41
Clear separation of media output and Company X	43
Frustration over Covid-19 media content	44
The longevity of media attention at the later stage of the pandemic	46
The opinions of others	47
The importance of reputation	47
Discrepancies of reputation within and outside Sweden	50
The perception of the pharmaceutical industry	50
Stereotyping the industry – shady, structured, or big pharma?	51
The status of academia vs industry amongst science students	53
<b>Discussion</b>	<b>55</b>
Employer knowledge formation during the Covid-19 pandemic	55
Employer familiarity	55
Employer image	57
Employer reputation	59

Perception of the pharmaceutical industry	60
Organisational attractiveness amid the pandemic	60
The impact of the contextual background of the students	62
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>65</b>
Research summary	65
Limitations of our research	67
Contributions to the scientific field and suggestions for further research	67
The practical implications of the research	68
<b>References</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>79</b>
Appendix 1: Interview guideline	79
Appendix 2: Themes, sub-themes and basic themes	83

## **Introduction**

The world has changed dramatically since the emergence of the Corona disease (Covid-19) in 2019. The infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021) spread quickly worldwide and was eventually characterised as a global pandemic in March 2020 (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). The impact of the pandemic was staggering, with the majority of countries implementing societal restrictions, controlling human action and behaviours, closing down borders and placing restrictions on business endeavours. This led to a worldwide shortcoming of materials and productions shutting down (Verick et al., 2021). As a result of the major disruptions and uncertainties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, many organisations struggled to meet the needs of their different stakeholders (Adelua et al., 2021; Merchant & Lurie, 2020). The pandemic has had a major influence on the labour market and created ripples throughout the economy. In Sweden, many companies were forced to lay off their employees, which increased the unemployment rate (Statistiska centralbyrån [SCB], 2021). According to Kashyap and Raghuvanshi (2020), the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in greater uncertainty and harmed the global economy more than similar crises in the past, such as the SARS outbreak in 2003 or the financial crisis in 2008.

In order to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus, several biopharmaceutical enterprises rushed to develop a vaccine. Vaccine hesitancy and the need for transparency during the development stage resulted in such companies being under harsh critique by the media (Mogaji, 2021). The question raised in this thesis addresses whether the evaluation of these companies as attractive employers changed based on them taking the risk of developing a new drug under the media's scrutiny during a crisis. To investigate this unique phenomenon, we introduce the multinational biopharmaceutical Company X which was increasingly in the

spotlight of international and Swedish mass media due to developing, producing and distributing a Covid-19 vaccine. The company faced large amounts of negative publicity in various kinds of media about possible side effects or distribution problems. The increased public interest in Company X is displayed in Google Trends (2022), which analyses the popularity of search requests made to Google. Figure 1 shows the substantial increase in interest in the keyword 'Company X' in the summer of 2021. Previous research indicates that such heightened negative media can affect the perception of both the product brand and how the company is perceived as an employer (Kanar et al., 2010; Panico et al., 2014).

### Figure 1

*Interest in Company X over the last five years (Google Trends, 2022)*



This study explores this phenomenon by considering the employer knowledge dimensions of employer familiarity (i.e. awareness), employer image (i.e. attribute recall) and employer reputation (i.e. affective evaluation) (Aaker, 1996; Alba & Hutchinson, 1987; Cable & Turban, 2001; Keller, 1993). Employer familiarity presents the level of awareness a potential employee has about a specific organisation and is, therefore, a prerequisite for the other dimensions to exist (Cable & Turban, 2001). While employer image displays an individual's perceptions of organisational attitudes, employer reputation is about an individual's perception of how the public evaluates a specific organisation. Cable and Turban (2001) argue that the relationship between employer image and employer reputation is bi-directional,

which means that both dimensions influence each other. Several studies emphasise the importance of both dimensions since a favourable reputation can lead to desirable effects such as the organisation's ability to attract high-quality talents (Kanar et al., 2015), an improved financial performance (Panico et al., 2014), sending signals to stakeholders about the quality of the company (Dinnie, 2003) and finally overall organisational attractiveness (Cable & Turban, 2001). Over time, different information sources build up and shape the employer knowledge dimensions (Lemmink et al., 2003). Dowling (1986) identified the three major information sources, personal experience, interpersonal communication and mass media communication, that can influence employer knowledge. It is essential to understand that the company cannot control all information sources. For instance, mass media reporting or peer word of mouth do not always act in the organisation's best interest by presenting unfavourable information (Kanar et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2013).

Being exposed to unfavourable information can affect the perception that job seekers have of an organisation's attractiveness, with students on the verge of entering the labour market being an interesting group to study as they are about to make their first career-defining decision. For Company X, qualified students present an attractive target group as the organisation is a part of a highly competitive labour market and offers graduate programmes. Therefore, this explorative study investigates students' perceptions of employer knowledge and organisational attractiveness.

### **Objective of the research**

This thesis provides knowledge about the conditions for organisational attractiveness that companies have to navigate in times of crisis. Hence, the study aims to investigate how organisational attractiveness in the pharmaceutical industry has been influenced by increased media attention due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the case of Company X, which was

repeatedly exposed in the international media during the pandemic, the thesis explores how university students used different information sources to form employer knowledge and if there is a connection between employer knowledge and organisational attractiveness.

This study has a sensitivity to the contextual backgrounds of the target group. We explore their contextual backgrounds by dividing the students into the two occupational groups, science and business, and include whether the informants have a Swedish or International background. By incorporating the backgrounds of the target group in our research, we aim to identify differences and similarities based on their contextual differences.

We formulated two research questions that will guide us through the research process.

1. How did students form employer knowledge during the Covid-19 crisis?
2. In what way did the Covid-19 pandemic influence students' perception of organisational attractiveness?

The first research question aims to identify the information sources that the students use to form the different dimensions of employer knowledge. Using a variety of information sources, we place a particular emphasis on the media. The second research question focuses on the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic had on organisational attractiveness since Cable and Turban (2001) state that employer knowledge directly affects organisational attractiveness. Both research questions are approached by considering the contextual backgrounds of the students in terms of their study area (business/science) and nationality (Swedish/International).

## **Previous Research**

The following section identifies previous research about drivers and predictors of organisational attractiveness and its connection to corporate reputation. To discover how reputation is formed, we introduce various information sources that can, or cannot, be directly controlled by the company. Due to the unique circumstances of Company X being in the media spotlight for a Covid-19 pandemic related topic, the section will strongly emphasise the information source media.

### **Organisational attractiveness amongst potential applicants**

In today's competitive business environment, companies try to become the employer of choice for their employees and job seekers to effectively attract, retain and motivate them (Sutherland et al., 2002). In a quantitative study on organisational attractiveness in a military setting, Lievens et al. (2005) found that a broad range of factors impacted the organisational attractiveness of companies for potential applicants. These included gender, familiarity with the organisation, perception of job and organisational attributes and traits associated with the organisation (Lievens et al., 2005). Traits could be excitement, sincerity, competence, or prestige, whilst job or organisational attributes included task diversity, job security, social activities, pay and benefits and structure and development opportunities. Turban et al. (1998) point out that early impressions of an organisation strongly predict applicants' attraction to a company in later recruitment stages. In order to influence job seeker decisions and attitudes towards an employer, research about employer knowledge has gained popularity (Cable & Turban, 2001; Cable & Turban, 2003; Lievens et al., 2005, Collins, 2007). Expanding the employer knowledge framework of Cable and Turban (2001), Lievens et al. (2005) elevate the framework by indicating that the dimensions of familiarity with the organisation, perception of the job and organisational attributes and traits associated with the organisations

seem to be interactive. Organisational attractiveness had a significant relationship with all three dimensions but was the most prominent with organisational familiarity and trait associations (Lievens et al., 2005). The researchers also found that the effects of trait associations and job and organisational attributes were more prominent when familiarity with the organisation was higher and recommended that companies develop their efforts in image management to attract more employees. Image management could be considered a type of employer branding strategy, which Ambler and Barrow (1996) define as the functional, economic and psychological package of benefits employed at a specific employer.

### **The importance of reputation and its effect on organisational attractiveness**

Cable and Turban (2001) demonstrate that the efforts to recruit potential employees are similar to the efforts of organisations to convince and attract consumers to purchase their products or services. Both consumers and job seekers develop different perceptions of companies based on information about the respective organisations (Collins & Stevens, 2002). Therefore, an organisation's reputation and perceived image are valuable assets (Kreps, 1990; Tadelis, 1999). Research by Cable and Turban (2003) revealed that job seekers use organisational reputation to signal job attributes, and reputation affects the pride of working at the respective organisation. Applicants use different signals or information to assess an organisation's attractiveness (Rynes, 1991). The concept of signalling theory refers to an asymmetrical informational relationship between two or several parties, with the information related to an organisation's characteristics being categorised as the organisation's signals (Rynes, 1991; Younis & Hammad, 2021).

Additionally, a study from Cable and Turban (2001) revealed that job seekers are willing to pay a premium in the form of a lower salary to join employers with a positive reputation. Following this, it can be said that a positive organisational reputation is directly related to

organisational attractiveness (Cable & Turban, 2001). On the other side, an unfavourable corporate reputation can negatively affect an organisation's ability to attract job seekers (Kanar et al., 2015).

### **Information sources and their impact on reputation**

To understand the effectiveness of an organisation's recruitment activities, it is crucial to understand how potential employees interpret and utilise information from different sources (Barber, 1998; Cable & Turban, 2001; Rynes, 1991). Prior research identified various information sources that influence corporate reputation both within and outside of the firm's direct control (Kanar et al., 2010; Panico et al., 2014). Information sources controlled by the organisations, such as recruitment advertisements, employer branding campaigns or sponsoring activities, are positively related to organisational attractiveness (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Van Hoye & Lievens, 2005). However, information sources beyond the company's direct control, such as mass media reporting or peer word of mouth, do not always act in the organisation's best interest by displaying unfavourable information (Lee et al., 2013; Kanar et al., 2010). On top of information sources that can, or cannot, be controlled by the company directly, Cable & Turban (2001) introduce the experimental-information dimension. This concept represents "*the degree to which a job seeker obtains organisational information by personally experiencing some aspects of an organisation [...] versus learning information from media presentations*" (Cable & Turban, 2001, p.137). Job seekers can experience the organisation personally through internships, job interviews or information sessions. In this case, potential employees have used their own experience to interpret the organisation. In contrast, job seekers can also collect pre-processed information that others have interpreted through reading annual reports, newspaper articles or recruitment brochures (Cable & Turban, 2001). In general, direct experience with an employer (e.g. personal

involvement in the recruiting process) is considered more effective when forming an employer reputation than indirect communication (media consumption, word of mouth communication) (Ader, 1995). However, direct experience is not always provided before entering the recruitment process. Following this, stakeholders must often rely on other information sources. In that case, media coverage and word of mouth advertisement are particularly powerful sources of influence (Deephouse, 2000; Panico et al., 2014).

The presented research essentially confirms the framework proposed by Dowling (1986) that explores the different information sources impact how job seekers perceive an employer. According to Dowling (1986), three primary groups of information sources shape the image: personal experience, interpersonal communication, and mass media communication. Whereas personal experience and interpersonal communication are perceptions of the firm by job seekers, mass media communication (job advertisements, publicity releases) represents the perception of others (Dowling, 1986).

Some information sources are perceived as more credible by job seekers than others (Fisher et al., 1979). The credibility of an information source consists of two factors: expertise and trustworthiness (Ilgen et al., 1979; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Tuppen, 1974). The expertise of a source refers to whether the information given by the sources is perceived as useful to the job seeker. For instance, information sources with direct relevance to a potential job position (e.g. company information sessions) are perceived as more relevant than sources without direct information (e.g. product advertisement) (Cable & Turban, 2001). On the other hand, trustworthiness refers to how information is perceived accurately or truthfully. A typical example is that information exposed by recruiters is seen as less trustworthy since job seekers tend to believe that recruiters will only provide positive information about the company (Cable & Turban, 2001; Fisher et al., 1979).

## **Mass media as an information source**

An intense media exposure can change how different stakeholders perceive a company.

Wartick (1992) investigated this phenomenon by analysing 29 companies exposed to high media coverage levels. The study concluded that the overall corporate reputation is likely to change based on the media exposure's tone, direction, and total movement (Wartick, 1992). Research by Jonkman et al. (2020) shows that the visibility and tone of a company presented in the news strongly influence corporate reputation. A positive tone of the news influences corporate reputation positively. However, the results showed that the effect of negative news was three times larger than the effect of positive news (Jonkman et al., 2020). The duration of increased media exposure depends on the circumstances of the scandal. Vassilikopoulou et al. (2009) demonstrated that customers tend to forget about the crisis, primarily when the company handles the scandal in a socially responsible way, such as informing the customers about their wrongdoing. According to their research, the effects of a crisis occur only for a few months in most cases. However, other research states that some companies can never fully recover from increased harmful media exposure. The companies are attributed to the negative media content in the long term (Seo et al., 2014).

However, some theories refute the impact of media on already existing attitudes or perceptions. For example, the central assumption of the limited effects theory is that the mass media cannot directly change the attitudes or behaviour of individuals since viewers tend to interpret media messages following their already existing beliefs and attitudes (Katz, 1987; Lazarsfeld, 1957). Barnidge et al. (2020) show that people use selective exposure by consuming media that they believe suits their bias. The same individuals also believe general media to be more biased. To understand previous cases in which the media reported

negatively about an organisation, we introduce two cases of brand scandal and the consequences in the next section.

### ***Scandals within the automotive industry***

One typical example in the literature that shows how media exposure influences corporate reputation is the Volkswagen (VW) diesel scandal. VW abruptly hit the media headlines in September 2015 by equipping cars with devices that cheated on emission tests and, therefore, violated the Clean Air Act (Clemente & Gabbioneta, 2017). Research by Mačaitytė & Virbašiūtė (2018) revealed that the scandal negatively affected VW's stock price, financial performance and reputation. The fall in reputation is visible in the RepTalk list from the Reputation Institute. The RepTalk list is the standard for measuring reputation and how the public views globally known companies. VW was voted 7th position in 2014, while in 2017, the company was voted 100th position (Clemente & Gabbioneta, 2017). Today, the company recovered slightly and was voted 68th position in 2020 (Reputation Institute, 2022) but never returned to previous positions. Georgeevski & AlQudah (2016) drew an interesting comparison between the two company scandals of the Volkswagen diesel scandal and the Toyota pedal scandal. Their study revealed that the outcome of the increased media attention differed. A functional wrongdoing in the pedals from Toyota led to nearly 400 wrongful deaths (Georgeevski & AlQudah, 2016), which severely impacted the perception of the car brand as considered safe. The VW scandal did not harm any individuals and is still considered a safe brand. However, the brand is seen as less sustainable. While Toyota had to suffer from massive damage to its brand and reputation, Volkswagen's image did not suffer the same way. A possible reason is its previously strong brand reputation in the European automotive market (Georgeevski & AlQudah, 2016).

### ***A scandal in the context of Covid-19 - The Adidas rent incident***

One case where a pandemic related incident put an employer into the media's spotlight was the Adidas rent incident in Germany. Due to the ongoing lockdown, Adidas announced withholding rent payments in April for all its German stores (Boehmer & Harrison, 2021). The announcement was followed by increased negative attention in the news and social media, leading to decreased purchase intentions and lower stock prices. As a result, Adidas's BrandBuzz score, measured by the British reputation measure institute YouGov, dropped to the lowest value since the tracking started 12 years ago and had a spill-over effect on the German sporting and goods manufacturing market. For example, sponsored brands and connected organisations of Adidas also faced critique. According to Boehmer and Harrison (2021), Adidas was likely perceived as worsening the impact of the pandemic by shifting the financial burden to the landlords. However, after two months of lower brand metrics, Adidas returned and even exceeded the YouGov score from before the scandal. Compared to previous research investigating the diminishing negative effect of a brand scandal (Vassilikopoulou et al., 2009; Vassilikopoulou & Stavroulakis, 2013), the timeframe of the Adidas case seems extremely short (Boehmer & Harrison, 2021). Possible reasons for this fast brand recovery are a positive track record and a well-established hold in the German consumer market. Moreover, Beohmer and Harrison (2021) suggest that the quick brand recovery was amplified by situational factors, such as the pandemic. In that case, the customer's minds are occupied with other topics that seem more relevant (Boehmer & Harrison, 2021).

### **Research Gap**

While there is previous research on how the reputation of organisations is built or shaped due to revealing new information, limited studies consider the circumstances during the Covid-19

pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic added a new dimension to the labour market, with a significant increase in economic, social and individual uncertainties (Kashyap & Raghuvanshi, 2020). Following, this thesis fills this gap by exploring the conditions for organisational attractiveness that companies have to navigate in times of crisis. Hence, the unique case of Company X, being involved in developing a Covid-19 vaccine and therefore being in the spotlight of international mass media, presents a rare opportunity to investigate the concept of employer knowledge and further explore the topic within the scientific field. On top of that, we identified a gap in previous research that explores employer knowledge by emphasising the contextual background of the target group. Our research explores the sensitivity to contextual backgrounds by integrating the different characteristics of the target group (business/science and International/Swedish) into our empirical findings and analysis.

## Theoretical framework

This thesis uses the employer knowledge framework by Cable and Turban (2001) as a theoretical concept. The following chapter outlines the three dimensions of employer knowledge and how they relate to each other. In order to make sense of the theoretical framework in the context of our research, we merged the concept of employer knowledge with previous research and adapted our own theoretical framework. The framework is presented at the end of this chapter.

### **Employer knowledge**

Cable and Turban (2001) investigated the concept of employer knowledge by drawing upon the conceptualisations of the marketing concepts of brand equity and brand knowledge. Their study argues that employer knowledge, defined as a job seeker's beliefs towards a potential employer, affects individuals' overall organisational attraction and job choice decisions (Cable & Turban, 2001). Cable and Turban (2001) differentiate between the three related dimensions of employer knowledge: employer familiarity, employer reputation and employer image. All three dimensions of employer knowledge are related to each other and have the combined power to influence the organisational attractiveness of an employer (Cable & Turban, 2001).

### ***Employer familiarity***

Cable and Turban (2001) define employer familiarity as "*the level of awareness that a job seeker has of an organisation*" (p.124). Job seekers have to be aware of an organisation's existence in order to store knowledge about that organisation. This makes the concept of employer familiarity the fundamental basis of employer knowledge (Cable & Turban, 2001). Based on Aaker's (1991) model of brand awareness, Cable and Turban (2001) conceptualised

the different employer familiarity levels ranging from unawareness (job seeker never heard of the organisation), recognition (job seeker recognises the name of the employer), recall (job seeker is familiar with the employer and have limited knowledge about, e.g. the products) and top of the mind awareness (the organisation is the first employer recalled by the job seeker).

### ***Employer image***

The employer image portrays the "*set of beliefs held by a job seeker about an employer*" (Cable & Turban, 2001, p.125). It can be subdivided into the three categories: employer information, job information and people information. Employer information refers to descriptive details of the firm, such as factual information, historical attributes and company-specific processes, norms or policies. Job information consists of the knowledge a potential employee acquires about the specific job, including the type of work, the job title and description, the salary level and career opportunities (Cable & Turban, 2001; Jurgensen, 1978; Lacy et al., 1983). The third category, people information, refers to the individuals involved with the respective organisation, such as potential co-workers. In general, individuals feel more comfortable with others who are viewed as similar to them (Byrne, 1969).

### ***Employer reputation***

Organisational reputation can be defined as a public evaluation of an organisation relative to other organisations (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990). Based on this definition, Cable and Turban (2001) conceptualise employer reputation as "*a job seeker's belief about the public's affective evaluation of the organisation*" (p.127). The difference between employer reputation and employer image is that reputation describes how individuals believe others evaluate the organisation. In contrast, the image consists of the individual's own beliefs about the employer. Following, employer image includes an affective evaluation component while

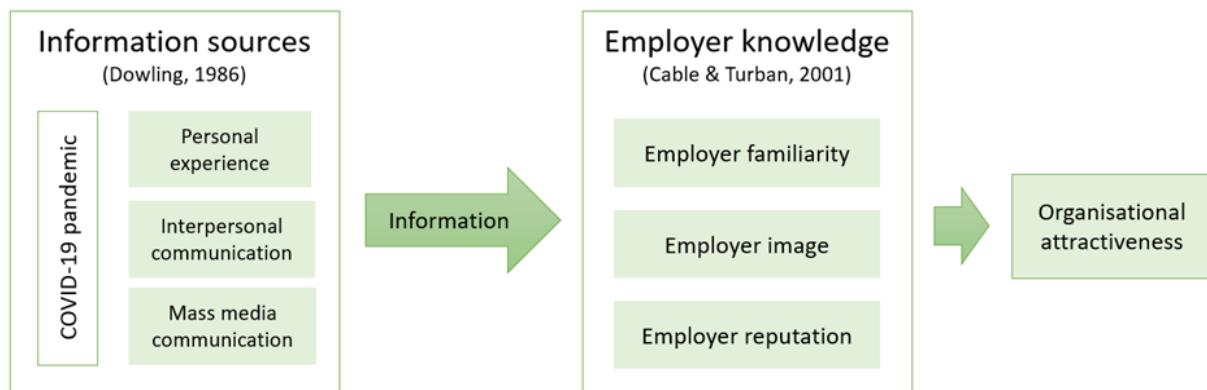
employer reputation does not (Cable & Turban, 2001). Previous studies revealed that reputation signals employer attributes and behaviours (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Swait et al., 1993).

### **Making sense of theory and previous research**

In order to answer the research questions, we devised a framework that is based on the theoretical concept of employer knowledge by Cable and Turban (2003), the information sources of Dowling (1986) and the concept of organisational attractiveness (Lievens et al., 2005). As shown in Figure 2, we aim to investigate how information gathered from the three information sources by Dowling (1986) impacted the three employer knowledge dimensions: employer familiarity, employer image and employer reputation. Moreover, the thesis explores how university students used different information sources for forming employer knowledge about Company X and if a connection could be found between employer knowledge and organisational attractiveness. Based on the relationship between the employer knowledge dimensions and organisational attractiveness (Lievens et al., 2005), we further investigate how the information sources in the context of the Covid-19 as pandemic affected the organisational attractiveness of Company X.

**Figure 2**

*Theoretical framework of the thesis*



To match the different kinds of information with the respective information sources, we derived sub-categories of information sources based on the three information sources by Dowling (1986). The overview is presented in the following table.

**Table 1**

*Adapted information sources by Dowling (1986)*

Information sources by Dowling (1986)	Sub-category	Examples
Personal Experience	Working experience	Internship, interview process
	Education related experiences	Guest lectures, study visits
Interpersonal communication	Employees of Company X	Conversations with employees
	Non-employees	Conversations with non-employees
Mass media communication	Company internal communication	Job advertisement, publicity release, information session
	Company external communication (media)	Online news, TV, radio, social media

Controlled by organisation   Partly controlled by organisation   Not controlled by organisation

Some of the information sources can or cannot be directly controlled by the organisation (Kanar et al., 2010; Panico et al., 2014). Following, we categorised the information sources into the three categories controlled by the organisation, partly controlled by the organisation

and not controlled by the organisation. The company's internal communication, such as job advertisements or publicity releases, is considered company controlled. Not directly controllable information sources are media and word of mouth conversations with non-employees such as friends and family. We defined partly controllable information sources as sources that the organisation can control to a certain extent. This includes personal experience such as being part of an application process, the word of mouth conversations of employees with the target group and education related information sources. Education related information sources are partly controllable since this category does not only include guest lectures by representatives of Company X but also what is presented about Company X in general during the academic education.

In the context of our study, we define media as a collective term for various media outlets such as traditional media (print media, newspaper, radio, television, magazines) and digital media (online newspaper, social media). When using the term media in the thesis, we refer to all media outlets mentioned above. It will be mentioned if a specific media outlet is relevant to our study.

## **Methodology**

This section explains the chosen methods for collecting and analysing the data. Additionally, a reflection on the quality of the analysis as well as ethical considerations is given.

### **Methodological approach**

We have chosen to approach our research analysis through a qualitative lens. More specifically, we have decided to approach qualitative analysis from an interpretivist epistemological position, which means that the focus lies on understanding and examining the participants' interpretation of the study (Bryman, 2016). Through qualitative research methods, we gathered in-depth data about the information and information sources students use to form their employer knowledge and therefore reach a nuanced and thorough result.

### **Data collection**

The data was collected by conducting semi-structured interviews with students residing in Sweden who currently pursue a university degree in science or business. The method of semi-structured interviews was chosen to ensure an open dialogue and let the participants determine the direction of the interviews (cf. Bryman, 2016). The following sub-chapters present the different steps of data collection.

### ***Sampling strategy and participants***

Considering the scope of the thesis, we set the following requirements to participate in the study:

- Master's or bachelor's students within their last year before graduating
- Students within the business or science field
- Currently living in Sweden
- Swedish or international background

Students were chosen as the target group as they present a population of interest in a competitive labour market environment for employers such as Company X. We choose students close to graduating as they are on the verge of entering the labour market and are, presumably, for the first time stepping into full-time positions within their study field. That makes them a valuable asset for organisations such as Company X.

We aimed to gather perspectives from different study fields to see if the dimensions of employer knowledge of Company X differ between them. The two occupational groups, Business and Science, were picked due to their relevance for potential positions at Company X, with the latter target group especially being of interest to the company due to the pharmaceutical background of the case company. The Business target group includes bachelor's or master's students in their final year enrolled in business related education programs (e.g. management, human resources, marketing, leadership, finance, economics etc.) at public universities in Sweden. The participants within the Science target group were eligible if they were at the end of their bachelor- or master's studies within a scientific field (e.g. biology, chemistry, biopharma, molecular biology, pharmacy etc.) at a public university located in Sweden.

We choose to limit the study to students living in Sweden since we are collaborating with the Swedish side of the case company, and their main focus lies on the Swedish labour market. However, Company X is interested in specific qualities amongst their candidates and often recruits internationally. Based on that, we added the perspective of Swedish versus International students. We define international students as students living and studying in Sweden without identifying themselves as Swedish. Most international students had a European background, except for two students from South Africa and the United States of America. However, the students had to be residing in Sweden when the study took place.

As the study requires a selection based on the above-described criteria, we chose a purposive sampling technique (Bryman, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Purposive sampling often involves more than one sampling approach to reach the target group successfully (Bryman, 2016). Initially, we reached out to potential participants using the convenience sampling approach. This approach allowed us to use the availability of participants in our private or professional reach due to our nature as students. To reach a broader response group, we contacted 15 relevant Swedish university faculties via e-mail and requested to forward an informative text about the interviews to the relevant student population. On top of that, we directly approached the target group via the social media platform LinkedIn after filtering with the LinkedIn search engine for candidates that fit the requirements. Further participants were recruited via snowball sampling, where already interviewed participants proposed other participants who met the relevant characteristics for the research (Bryman, 2016).

While reaching out to potential participants, we ensured that the number of participants was split equally between the study fields (business/science), their nationality (Swedish/International), and their gender. We later realised that gender had no visible impact on our data analysis. Hence, we did not focus on gender in the results presented.

### ***Interviews process***

In order to reach geographically dispersed participants (Germain et al., 2017), the interviews were all conducted digitally with the help of the video communications platform Zoom. Zoom allowed a wider selection of participants as it removed travel costs and possible Covid-19 restrictions. All interviews were conducted in English. Most interviews were conducted with both researchers present, except for two interviews held separately due to scheduling conflicts.

The interviews began with a presentation of the researchers, the study's aim and background. We added further information about participation being voluntary and anonymous. Additionally, we informed the participants about how the interview will be arranged and the collected data will be stored. One researcher took over the lead throughout the interviews while the other made notes. All interviews began with the verbal consent of each subject. The duration of the interviews varied between 27-85 minutes each.

We initially conducted one pilot interview to understand and test the method's suitability and quality of the interview guideline. In doing so, we gained experience in conducting interviews as well as testing if the structure of the interview guideline was appropriate for the study (Bryman, 2016).

Over the course of 28 days, 20 interviews were conducted. The number of interviews was determined through a combination of available resources, access to the target audience and the recognition of reaching the data saturation point (Bryman, 2016). The following table provides an overview of the participants, their nationality, study field, study level, study programme, and duration of the interviews.

**Table 2***Overview of the informants*

<b>Informant No.</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Study Field</b>	<b>Study level</b>	<b>Study Programme</b>	<b>Duration (min)</b>
1	International	Business	Master	Innovation Management	41:30
2	International	Business	Master	Communication	39:02
3	International	Business	Master	Marketing	43:54
4	International	Business	Master	Finance	33:00
5	International	Business	Bachelor	Economics	28:41
6	Swedish	Business	Master	Marketing	40:29
7	Swedish	Business	Master	Human Resources	37:28
8	Swedish	Business	Master	Human Resources	46:19
9	Swedish	Business	Master	Leadership and Organisation	38:47
10	Swedish	Business	Master	Leadership and Sustainability	76:01
11	International	Science	Master	Biology	31:39
12	International	Science	Master	Molecular Biology	29:41
13	International	Science	Master	Molecular Biology	33:53
14	International	Science	Master	Biomedicine	34:43
15	International	Science	Master	Chemical Engineering	42:06
16	Swedish	Science	Bachelor	Biotech	84:37
17	Swedish	Science	Master	Biomedicine	51:57
18	Swedish	Science	Master	Biology	27:03
19	Swedish	Science	Master	Chemistry	40:28
20	Swedish	Science	Bachelor	Biomedicine	41:27

***Interview guideline***

The interview guideline (see Appendix 1) consists of 18 main questions within the five categories; *origin questions, employer knowledge formation in general, context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the case of Company X and concluding questions*. The first three questions within the origin questions category serve as introductory questions and aim to facilitate the discussion (Esaiasson et al., 2012). The second category, employer knowledge formation in general, ranges from questions 3 to 7 and aims to identify what information sources were used by the interviewees to build up employer knowledge from a general,

holistic perspective. The following category consists of question 8, which concerns the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and examines if the pandemic impacted the general employer knowledge formation process. From questions 9 to 15, a particular focus lays on the case company and how the respective interviewee built existing employer knowledge about Company X. While questions 9 to 11 aim to investigate the level of employer familiarity, questions 12 to 13 gather the current employer image and questions 14 to 15 the perceived employer reputation of the case company. One substantial part of conducting the semi-structured interviews was that as soon as the interviewees mentioned different aspects of their employer knowledge, the researchers used follow-up questions to identify which information sources were used to form this specific part of their employer knowledge. This category uses the approach to first identify the existing employer knowledge and perception of organisational attractiveness to trace back which information source was used to form it. The final three questions, 16 to 18, within the closing questions category serve to round up the interview and gather the information that has not been previously addressed.

### ***The researcher's position and relation to Company X***

This study has been conducted with both researchers having a relation to Company X. This includes a thesis student contract with specific regulations, such as a non-disclosure agreement. One of the researchers had previously conducted an internship at the company and had some insight information about the working methods and values of the company, whilst the other researcher had no previous contact with the organisation. While the research subject and scope were developed in cooperation with Company X, the researchers made all other decisions concerning the thesis themselves. As we have conducted the study whilst being in correspondence with Company X, there is a risk of the researchers being positively biased towards the company. We have done our best to try and be neutral and true to the data.

Following this, we made it clear to the informants that we do not represent the organisation or will reveal any individual data to the company. Throughout the duration of the thesis project, we held four meetings with Company X and a limited number of email exchanges in order to inform the company supervisors about the progress.

## **Data analysis**

We used thematic analysis (TA) to analyse the collected data (c.f. Bryman, 2016). TA is a widely used analytical method to “*identify themes and patterns of meaning across a dataset in relation to the research question*” (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.175). This approach was selected due to its flexibility in terms of interpreting the data. In the analysis, we will be using an abductive thematic analysis approach. By having an abductive approach, we can construct some themes in reference to our framework while also identifying themes that might not align with the original theory (cf. Bryman, 2016).

Braun and Clarke (2013) provide a seven step guideline for carrying out TA in the context of a qualitative study. The first phase consists of transcribing the interview material. Upon the interviewee’s consent, the interviews were recorded via the record function of the used software Zoom. Transcribing is considered a very time-consuming activity, and due to time constraints, the transcribing tool from the software otter.ai was used. However, the results had to be manually revised due to errors made by the software. The second phase, reading and familiarisation, concerns becoming intimately familiar with the dataset. This involves reading and re-reading the transcripts to notice things of interest, such as overall impressions or first conceptual ideas (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Once we were familiar with the data, the coding process started. Codes are defined as “*the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be accessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon*” (Boyatzis,

1998, p. 63). In this stage, notions from the text are attributed to certain codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To keep an overview of the codes and sub-categories, we created a Microsoft Excel sheet that included all raw data. Every code was marked with the respective anonymised informant number. To identify if the code belonged to a business/science or International/Swedish student, we used the VLOOKUP function in Microsoft Excel. This function automatically copies the relevant information in the columns next to the single code. This enabled us to filter the different codes and sub-categories according to the contextual background of the students. Following these steps, the themes were reviewed, adjusted and named within the three theme categories: themes, sub-themes and basic themes (codes). Based on those steps, the final analysis was written.

### **The quality of qualitative analysis - The four criterions of trustworthiness**

To establish the quality of the qualitative research, we used the trustworthiness approach (Bryman, 2016). This approach is based on Lincoln and Guba's (1985, as cited in Bryman, 2016) belief that the criteria of reliability and validity standards premise that there is a single absolute account of reality. Instead, the need is to specify the quality of qualitative research. We aim to achieve this through *the four criterions of trustworthiness* which are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bryman, 2016).

#### ***Credibility***

As there can be several different accounts of social reality, the criterion of credibility looks at how credible the conclusions that we as researchers draw from an interview and how acceptable the interpretation is to others (cf. Bryman, 2016). To establish credibility, we must ensure that we practise research according to the established guidelines. Moreover, the

researcher must confirm the findings with the members of the social world that the researcher is studying (Bryman, 2016). The way we have approached this is through informant validation. To assure informant validation during the interviews, we summarised how we interpreted the students' answers. Following, we asked the informants if we had perceived the intent or core of the answers in the way they wanted to portray it. By having the participants validate whether our interpretation aligns with what they meant to portray, we believe that the data collected is credible.

### ***Transferability***

In the context of qualitative research, it is most common to go in depth rather than aiming at a wide variety of subjects. To achieve this, one can study individuals that share specific characteristics (such as being students about to enter the labour market). The findings are therefore often specified towards a significant aspect of the social world, making the results less transferable. To counteract this, the trustworthiness approach recommends describing the participants in detail in order to make the sampling group more accessible and easier for others to replicate or determine the trustworthiness (Bryman, 2016). We have therefore provided a thorough description of how we reached our interviews (see chapters *Sampling strategy and participants*), how the interviews were conducted (see chapter *Interview process*) and information about the participants themselves (as provided in Table 2 - *Overview of the informants*). This makes it easier for others to judge the transferability of our findings to other social contexts.

### ***Dependability***

To ensure the dependability of the qualitative analysis, Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Bryman, 2016) advise transparency. The purpose of this is to provide records of the selection process (see chapter *Sampling strategy and participants*) and data analysis decisions so that

readers can act as auditors to help establish how well procedures have been adhered to (Bryman, 2016). In order to achieve this, we have aspired to be as transparent as ethically possible in our description of the participants (see chapter *Sampling strategy and participants* and chapter *Interview process*), the data they provided, our data analysis decisions and the contextual environment that the study took place in.

### ***Confirmability***

The criterion of confirmability is pertained to the objectivity of the researchers (Bryman, 2016). Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Bryman, 2016) recognise that complete objectivity is impossible. Following this, the researchers shall not allow their subjective opinions, personal values, or theoretical biases to impact the study's results noticeably. Therefore, we have been careful not to engage in discussion or try to lead the interviews in a certain direction. We have done our best to be as neutral as possible regarding varying opinions and reassured the informants that any opinions are free to be expressed.

By adhering to *the four criterions of trustworthiness* presented by Lincoln and Guba (1985, as cited in Bryman, 2016), we can offer a study that respects rigorous qualitative measures and a result that genuinely reflect the perception of the participants at the time and date of the conducted interviews.

### **Ethical considerations**

One aspect that has always been at the forefront of the study is how to conduct the study in an ethical manner. This is important, not only to safeguard the participants of the study but also to ensure the quality of the study. In doing this, we have emphasised the four ethical principles stated by Diener and Crandall (1978, as cited in Bryman, 2016, p.125):

1. whether there is harm to participants;
2. whether there is a lack of informed consent;
3. whether there is an invasion of privacy;
4. whether deception is involved.

During the interviews, one of our main priorities was to ensure that the participants felt safe and comfortable and that their opinions were correctly understood. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study as well as the subject matter before and again during the interview. The students had the choice to conduct the interviews digital or face-to-face. Furthermore, Swedish or German speaking students were given the option to conduct the interview in Swedish, German or English in advance to ensure they felt comfortable (although all chose English). Unfortunately, the same could not be offered to others due to the limitations of the researcher's capabilities. The students were informed about their voluntary participation, their option not to answer one or several questions and their right to withdraw from participating during the study. We also ensured the participants that the study would be completely confidential and that names, locations or other clues that could complicate confidentiality would be changed into a fictitious or coded substitute.

## Empirical results

The following section presents the five themes and twelve sub-themes generated from the data analysis. Each theme and sub-theme will be presented in detail, including direct quotations that support the idea behind the theme.

The following five themes were identified: *A rise in visibility leads to attractiveness, exploring the appeal of working at Company X, viewing Company X through media in the context of Covid-19, and the opinions of others and the perception of the pharmaceutical industry*. Figure 3 presents a brief overview of the themes and subthemes. Additionally, Appendix 2 shows a more detailed overview of the themes, subthemes and basic themes (codes).

**Figure 3**

*Themes and sub-themes generated from the qualitative interviews*

Themes	Sub-themes	Themes	Sub-themes	Themes	Sub-themes
A rise in visibility leads to attractiveness	Becoming familiar with Company X	Viewing Company X through media in the context of Covid-19	Generating employer knowledge through media	The opinion of others	The importance of other opinions
	Establishing a household name		Clear separation of media output and Company X		Discrepancies of reputation within and outside of Sweden
Exploring the appeal of working at Company X	Perceived opportunities and the differences amongst business vs science		Frustration over Covid-19 media content	The perception of the pharmaceutical industry	Stereotyping the industry – shady, structured or big pharma?
	Organisational culture – assumption and interpersonal communication		The longevity of media attention at the later state of the pandemic		The status of academia vs. industry amongst science students

### **A rise in visibility leads to attractiveness**

This chapter explores how the students experienced the visibility and awareness of Company X prior to and during the pandemic. Hence, the first sub-theme explores the first interaction with Company X that facilitated the awareness of the company. Based on the development of the heightened visibility in the media, the second sub-theme emphasises organisational attractiveness in connection to media exposure.

### ***Becoming familiar with Company X***

All students were aware of the existence of Company X. However, only fourteen of them were aware of the company before the media exposure during the pandemic. To understand how the awareness of Company X started, the informants explained the circumstances of their first interaction with Company X.

The majority of students who were aware of Company X before the pandemic had their first interaction with the company due to the geographical location of the company sites. In most cases, the students either grew up next to one of the company sites or other people made them aware of the company's existence when moving to [City 1]. Another source of awareness of Company X was the academic education of science students. This includes guest lectures by representatives of Company X, university teachers that mention Company X as an example or students that searched for university internships and therefore got familiar with Company X. Other students stated that they first heard of the company through friends or relatives working for Company X.

My dad works at Company X and every Christmas, they used to throw a big Christmas party for all employees. So, I think that was the first time I really got to know them. But I was a kid, so my first impression was just like oh that's a huge building and an amazing Christmas party. (Informant No. 16 - Swedish, Science)

This statement was told by a science student whose father is working at Company X. Events such as the annual Christmas party made her first aware of the company and provided her with the first impression of Company X being a big company. According to that informant, events such as the Christmas party and the fact that the father works at Company X shaped the student's impression and perception of the company since childhood.

Six business students were unaware of Company X before the Covid-19 pandemic. The students expressed that they learned about the company through the media reporting in the middle of the pandemic. In most cases, the media outlets that made them aware of Company X were national online newspapers or news shows on TV.

### ***Establishing a household name***

The students expressed that the high media exposure during the pandemic led to increased global visibility of Company X. Some students only obtained an awareness of the company through the media reports. The students aware of the company expressed that they gained even more knowledge about the company through the media.

I don't know really, I guess I always recognized the name since I grew up here and it's within my field. But now with the media outburst and everything, everyone knows about it. I would say it's just common knowledge now. The media kind of made it a household name. (Informant No. 20 - Swedish, Science)

In the quote above, informant number 20 believes that the organisation is known enough to be considered common knowledge. Several participants vaguely remembered or had heard the name before but grew more conscious about the organisation in relation to the Covid-19 pandemic. That the organisation is viewed as a household name now affects the attraction that the students have towards the company. For example, informant number 7 (Swedish, Business) stated that she would "*love to*" work for the organisation. Several other students indicated that it would be an attractive company name on their CV. Another student expresses that the name "*counts for something. It's not just a nobody company, but it has a name and a network*" (Informant No. 5, International, Business).

I was looking for jobs at Company X's website like I didn't find the job advertisement on any other platform, I strictly went to their website and looked for jobs. Which I wouldn't have done pre-Covid because I wouldn't even have known that his company exists nor that it's located in [City 1]. (Informant No . 1 - International, Business)

In the statement above, the student expresses that the intention to apply emerged through getting to know the company due to the media exposure. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, the student was unaware of the company and would not have considered visiting the career webpage to view job opportunities. None of the students expressed that they would not apply due to the partly negative media attention.

### **Exploring the appeal of working at Company X**

The following section explores the organisational attractiveness of Company X and the factors that influenced the perception of wanting to work for Company X. The two topics that stood out were career opportunities and organisational culture. The first sub-theme presents how the students perceive their career opportunities at Company X and how the perception differs between business and science students. The second sub-theme about organisational culture covers how the students picture the working environment, the corporate values and the potential co-workers by exploring the information sources they use to gather the information.

#### ***Perceived opportunities and the differences between business vs science***

Most of the informants considered Company X a desirable employer. The students would consider applying for a position within the company. When asked about the factors contributing to Company X being viewed as an attractive employer, informants considered its international stature, size and possible career development. Moreover, the students pictured that the workplace is structured with clear job roles, appropriate equipment in the lab, clear

delegation of responsibility and a high level of workload. The informants based this information on factual knowledge, assumptions on industry or having learned it from employees currently working at Company X. Several of the informants recognised Company X to be one of the top employers within their field. They, therefore, assumed that the process of applying to the organisation would be very competitive among applicants. Some informants had first-hand knowledge of having applied to or knowing someone who had applied to the graduate programme of Company X. Others assumed it would be an intense application process based on the big company size and that “*it's usually like that in those big companies*” (Informant No. 11 – International, Science).

However, a pattern occurred with several business students assuming that there are no or limited career options for their profession at Company X. As Informant 1 explains below, Company X rather seems to target job seekers within the biopharmaceutical sector.

I don't really have lots of expectations regarding Company X as an employer, but still, I'd say that they're more into the medicine development and pharma people and, therefore, maybe not as much looking for more business-related people as I am. (Informant No. 1 – International, Business)

This pattern was found amongst several business students regardless of their Swedish or international background. The respective business students based this assumption on the pharmaceutical background of the company and the lacking visibility of career opportunities within Company X. One business student explained that Company X was never mentioned in any study related topics such as case studies or best practice examples. According to the informant, companies such as Ikea, Spotify or Volvo are frequently used as examples during their academic education, making them more visible as potential employers. Other business students pointed out that they had never experienced Company X's employer branding activities in their study occupation. In contrast, most science students mentioned study visits

or guest lectures from Company X and professors who had done research or previously worked for the company. The students reported that the education-related contacts with Company X made the company more visible and attractive as an employer.

### ***Organisational culture – assumption and interpersonal communication***

When looking at organisational attractiveness, one pattern is how the informants reflect upon the working culture of Company X. In general, the working environment at Company X is perceived as positive. There is a similarity among the students regarding their use of information sources in the context of organisational culture. When the students were asked to describe the perceived working culture of Company X, they based their statements either on pure assumptions or conversations with current employees (such as full and part-time employees, thesis workers or interns). Other information sources, such as media or conversations with non-employees, were hardly used to build an opinion about the organisational culture of Company X.

A further example that illustrates this pattern is that the informants described Company X as both a modern and traditional employer. On the one hand, the company is viewed as a not too old school and a relaxed firm that is "*not too strict about the dress code*" (Informant No. 14, Science – International). On the other hand, the history of Company X goes back many years and gives the informants the idea that the company is rather traditional and hierarchical. The students who perceive Company X as a relatively modern employer primarily received this information from employees of Company X. In contrast, informants who attribute Company X as traditional mostly assumed this based on past experience in other multinational companies. Other values that the informants associated with the company are scientific, respectful, proud and collaborative. When investigating where, for example, the value proud came from, the students expressed that employees seemed proud working for Company X. In

this case, the students who had no previous relation to Company X assumed that employees must be proud about Company X succeeding in developing a Covid vaccine. However, other informants observed that employees of Company X talk proudly about their job tasks and research projects. One example is described by informant 19, who attended a study visit of a representative of Company X.

And also during a study visit of Company X at our university, the employee representing the company presented their products very proudly. I think it was the inhaler from Company X that he referred to. You really saw that he was happy working there. (Informant No. 19 – Swedish, Science)

Most of the informants had no clear picture of the character traits, appearance or emotions of people working for the company. Those informants mainly had a science background and reported about employees that they personally knew. The employees were described as friendly, happy, international and intelligent. On top of that, a few comments were made about employees being "*the typical sort of chemistry nerd that works in that field*" (Informant No. 15 – International, Science).

### **Viewing Company X through media in the context of Covid-19**

The following section presents the sub-themes related to the increased media attention of Company X. The first sub-theme covers the positive and negative information about Company X that the students received from the media. The following sub-themes discuss how the students reacted to the media and reflected on the content. The last section deals with the longevity of media attention and how the students refer to the media exposure nowadays.

#### ***Generating employer knowledge through media***

The following section deals with the aspects of employer knowledge about Company X formed due to the increased media attention during the pandemic. All informants were aware

of the media coverage and had heard different information based on various media outlets.

According to the students, the tone of the reports changed based on the different media platforms. While an informant witnessed a rather respectful discussion about Company X and the vaccine on LinkedIn, other informants referred to a very rough and negative tone in mainstream online media.

The knowledge that the informants formed due to the pandemic mostly relates to the production and distribution of the vaccine. The perception of the vaccine could be divided into the two categories; positive attributes and negative attributes. The positive attributes relate to Company X being one of the first companies that successfully brought a Covid vaccine to the market and therefore tried to provide a way out of the pandemic. The negative attributes refer to the lower efficiency of the vaccine, possible side effects, the suspension of the vaccine in several countries and the introduction of an age restriction for patients. In general, the students expressed that they heard more negative than positive news about Company X in the media.

For the students who were unaware of the company before the pandemic, the media attention also provided basic information about the company, such as the locations and the industry field. For example, informant number 3 expressed that the media reports provided her with information about the countries in which Company X operates.

When they [the media] compared the vaccines, they sometimes put a flag next to the Company names to show from which country they are. That's when I realised that Company X is from [Country 1] and [Country 2]. (Informant No. 3 - International, Business)

The only Covid-related information that did not emerge from the media is the fact that Company X donates vaccines to financially weak countries. The information was provided by an employee of Company X and “*changed the view on this whole vaccination thing and the*

*negative media of Company X'* (Informant No. 3 – International, Business) for the respective student. Only one additional student heard about this fact in the media.

### ***Clear separation of media output and Company X***

The students tended to distinguish between the informational news about the singular product that Company X produced and the organisation's entirety and as an employer. All informants mentioned that they heard about the vaccine in the mass media and discussed the media information about the product or the Covid-19 outbreak with friends and family. However, the students expressed that Company X as an employer was not a topic in this context.

I was just like: Okay, I don't want to get that vaccine. But I wasn't like: Okay, now, I'm never going to buy any medicine from Company X again. So it was more like this one time didn't influence me that much. It was more like, okay, just make sure to not get that vaccine. (Informant No. 9 – Swedish, Business)

In this instance, informant number 9 separates one specific product from Company X's other products. Other informants shared a similar view. Several students emphasised that the media is not grasping the complexity of producing a new product in a rush.

But I would say the publicity at least in my mind, the publicity got around that. I would have rather maybe gotten Company X's publicity than the publicity that some of the other ones got for sort of raising vaccine prices or all that kind of stuff. Like okay, well, they tried to make a vaccine and they didn't get it perfectly right. Because coming from a chemistry background, you can kind of understand that. Well, chemistry, biology and vaccines are complex, you know. And so you can picture the researchers trying and maybe not getting there. (Informant No. 15 – International, Science)

Here informant number 15 acknowledges that perhaps other companies managed to produce a better vaccine. However, that didn't necessarily favour their media reporting or attraction as an employer, as their media reporting made them come off as more profit-driven.

### ***Frustration over Covid-19 media content***

A reoccurring view amongst the students was the frustration over the nature of media headlines and the way news about Company X were reported. This trend is seen especially amongst students within the science field, but the reactions were in no way limited to only one group. No prominent variance could be detected in relation to nationality. In the following quote, informant number 13 explains that they first heard of Company X in the media in relation to the Covid-19 vaccine being produced. The student observed that the development of the media reporting went from neutral to positive and then more negative over time as the reporting became more exaggerated.

The first time I was hearing about Company X, it was because they were discussing which companies were going to develop the Covid vaccine and then they [the media] were highlighting that Company X was the first nonprofit one. Their aim was not to develop a vaccine to get money, which is what they always say about the other ones. Then of course the side effects started to pop up and people started to freak out and the media exaggerated it a lot, for I don't know for what reason. I checked the numbers at WHO [World Health Organization] that they were publishing, and then I checked a couple of papers that were being published at the time. (Informant No. 13 – International, Science)

In the quote, we can identify a confusion in informant number 13's perception of how they believed the media should have reported about Covid-19 and Company X. The informant went as far as to double check the media content to find that the reporting was not in line with the results that scientific research indicated.

The students reported that they found the media representation of Company X to be sensationalising or even exaggerating. In the following quote, informant number 14 believes that this might result from different types of media businesses having different incentives for

their actions. According to the informant, the motivation for creating an intriguing ‘click-worthy’ headline is to gain a broader audience and earn a larger profit.

Yes and obviously the media is a business for itself and you want people to read your magazine. The most clicks and shocking stories. It sells more to say: Oh there was a 24 year old guy who died because of the vaccine from Company X.  
(Informant No.14 – International, Science)

Similar sentiments can be found in the responses of other participants as well. For example, other students realised that the media reporting was not in line with the scientific facts and that the media reporting did not affect their perception of Company X.

I read a lot that the media was blowing it a little bit out of proportion, how dangerous this vaccine was, or how less effective it was. So I don't think it [the media headlines] affected my general perception of Company X. I still respect... Have a high respect for the company. (Informant No. 6 – Swedish, Business)

We can especially see the confusion and frustration coming forward in the responses given by informant number 6 and in the following quote by informant number 16. The student compared the side effects of the vaccine with other medications. The student's view is that the side effects were not worse than other medications, which was especially prevalent amongst students within the scientific field.

Yeah like when it came to the side effects, it is reasonable to be a little bit sceptical towards it, but you also need to consider the context. Like you are not going to die of Company X's vaccine when birth control has exactly the same side effects and then, I don't know. I become a bit defensive. (Informant No. 16 – Swedish, Science)

### ***The longevity of media attention at the later stage of the pandemic***

When asking the students about media in general and how it affects their perception of other companies, most students believed that media could change their perception of that company to a great extent. This applied especially in situations when the media reporting had been of a more negative stature. However, when it came to answering the same type of question, after having discussed the negative media attention of Company X, no informant said that they could not entertain the thought of working for Company X. The students still believed the organisation to be attractive. A number of informants downplayed the media reporting of Covid-19, making it apparent that the media reporting about the Covid-19 vaccine had less of an effect on their perception of Company X as attractive than how they answered in regard to any general company.

Oh, you mean the little side effects or? Ah, okay. Yes, of course. I know that. I was like, was it someone being raped? Or, you know, I was thinking about bigger things. Yeah. Okay. To be honest, I haven't really thought about it since then. (Informant No. 9 – Swedish, Business)

In the above quotation, we had asked informant number 9 if the student had heard any positive or negative media about Company X. At first, the student could not recall any negative media reporting. However, it turned out that the student remembered the media about the side effects but did not perceive them as negative. Instead, the student defined negative media as reporting about severe offences such as reports about sexual misconduct.

Other informants made similar suggestions by mentioning offences such as discrimination or bribery.

The majority of the students had not thought about the negative media of Company X in a while. Being in the later stage of the pandemic, several informants had observed a decrease in media reporting about Company X.

I haven't really heard anything about Company X in a while. It feels like the attention is fading away and people forget about it all. In general, the media about the pandemic decreased and it feels... It's the same with Company X.  
(Informant No. 14 - International, Science).

As informant number 14 describes, the Covid-centred media attention appears to have declined and as a result, the informant hasn't thought about Company X in a while. This was the case with several informants who didn't make an immediate connection to Company X and the negative media reports, but rather that they were one among several companies producing a vaccine. Several participants were not sure what information it was they had heard in the media in connection to a particular pharmaceutical company.

### **The opinions of others**

The following sub-themes explore how the students perceived the opinions of others about Company X and how this impacts their own perception. Additionally, we discovered differences in reputation due to the informants' contextual backgrounds.

#### ***The importance of reputation***

The informants agreed that the opinion of others about a potential employer is important. They consider the opinion of others when making a job decision. The participants wanted to feel proud of working at a specific company. They wish for an employer that gives them "*an ego boost*" (Informant No. 4 – International, Business) as well as not making them "*lose face*

*due to bad behaviour of the employer*" (Informant No. 13 – International Business). This becomes especially visible when employers are in the media's spotlight due to corporate misconduct or acting irresponsibly. Common incidents that would impact the employer reputation and, therefore, the intention to apply are CSR scandals. Examples are purposely polluting the environment or exploiting employees. As explained by informant 6, the opinion of a close relative made the informant change their intention to work at a certain employer that was in the media spotlight due to misconduct.

And when I applied at Amazon, my mom actually judged me a little bit for it, like how dare you apply to a company like that? So no, it was definitely not on the top of my list of favourite employers. (Informant No. 6 - Swedish, Business)

It is noticeable that different people impact the opinion of an individual in different ways. For instance, informants agreed that they would listen to close family members or people with expertise. On top of that, some informants mentioned a certain number of people that could make them rethink an employer. Other informants expressed that they would not care about the opinion of a few friends. Still, if most of their friends have a negative reputation toward a potential employer, they would consider not applying.

The students had a wide-ranging opinion on how the public perceives Company X post the media attention. Around half of the informants believed that the public has a neutral opinion about the company. Other students thought that the public has a rather negative reputation of Company X since they assume that the public only relates the negative media with Company X. The majority of informants believed that the public thinks worse about Company X than themselves. According to them, the public perceives the company negatively or neutrally. At the same time, the informants ensured that the media did not affect them in the same way since they are able to reflect and think critically about mass media reporting. However, when the students talked about the influence of others on the intention to apply to Company X,

most of the students assumed that people would support their decision to apply to Company X. As informant 7 explains in the subsequent statement, they assume positive feedback from others when applying especially due to the pharmaceutical nature of Company X.

But if I told my friends, I'm applying for a job at Company X, I think they would be encouraging towards it. Because the view on the company, I think has changed that they're, they are doing a project that is so involved in people's lives today. So for me, I would say I would get a possible positive response from my friends and family by saying I'm applying for a job at Company X. (Informant No. 7 – Swedish, Business).

Informant number 3 (International, Business) even referred to it being “fun to apply there since everyone knows the company by now”. However, some science students assumed they had to explain to non-science persons why they would start a job at Company X and that the company “*is more than just the vaccine*” (Informant No. 12, International, Science).

Another notion occurred with the two students studying within the chemistry field. Both stated that the importance of a scandal-free employer does not apply to the chemistry industry since many chemical companies work in industries that are negatively perceived by the public.

It's different in the chemistry industry since you have a lot of companies that have a bad reputation due to being oil or petroleum companies. But if you study chemistry, this is obviously a potential employer due to the field. (Informant No. 15 – International, Science).

Here informant number 15 points out that many potential employers within the field of chemistry have negative connotations about the products they produce or the industry they operate within.

### ***Discrepancies of reputation within and outside Sweden***

With half of the informants growing up outside of Sweden, we got a unique insight into the informants' perception of Company X within and outside of Sweden. When comparing the presentation of Company X both in media and private conversations in Sweden versus their home country, the informants realised differences. According to the international students, Company X was mostly unknown in their home country before the pandemic. Therefore, their friends and family connect Company X exclusively with the vaccine. The informants perceived the media in their home countries as more harmful than the media in Sweden. According to the informants, the reason is the lack of awareness of Company X in their home country before the pandemic.

It feels like that in Germany they talked more negatively about the vaccine from Company X. So I assume that people there also have more negative thoughts about the company compared to Swedish people who already know the company and that they did other medical stuff before the Covid pandemic. It's because they are more familiar with the company. (Informant No. 1 – International, Business)

In the above quote, informant number 1 identifies that the media in their home country was relatively negative. Therefore, the student assumes that the company's reputation is more negative abroad compared to Sweden.

### **The perception of the pharmaceutical industry**

The following section explores the students' perception of the pharmaceutical industry and the connotations that come with working in the pharmaceutical industry, in comparison, with academia.

### ***Stereotyping the industry – shady, structured, or big pharma?***

During the interviews, the students shared their thoughts about the pharmaceutical industry and the preconceived ideas and assumptions that ensue by producing pharmaceutical products. All participants found that one of the effects of the Covid-19 reporting was increased reporting about different biotechnological and pharmaceutical organisations, raising new awareness of the major organisations operating within the field that was in a rush to produce a vaccine. However, not all informants knew particularly descriptive information about Company X. Instead, when asked about the organisation, the informants answered in relation to stereotypes or perceptions of the industry. These answers varied very high and low amongst informants, independent of their nationality or study field. Whilst the students, regardless of their familiarity with Company X, had assumptions about the industry, there was a distinction in the nuances of these perceptions and the informational sources used to learn more about or investigate the company. A majority of students within the field of business, in relation to very few of those studying science, perceived the industry as being financially driven, less scientific, or even nasty or shady.

I mean, they [the pharmaceutical industry] are pretty shady. Most of those companies, they're usually, if you go to their Wikipedia, there's always a section of like scandals, where they did a bunch of stuff, which is like, ufff okay that's weird. So, I mean, I haven't searched for Company X, but there are a lot of other companies like that. (Informant No. 4 – International, Bhads)

In the above quote, informant number 4 explains that they view the industry as unreliable. The student is aware of previous scandals relating to organisations operating within the field. However, a few business students had previously been in contact with Company X. This occurred either through knowing someone from the organisation or the medical field, by personally using their products or previously considered studying within the science field.

Those students had the perception of a structured, clinical and clean environment at Company X.

It's probably because it's in the healthcare industry. And because if they work with something that has to be regulated, I'm assuming the products are in high demand, like, so they have to make sure that no one... That their product doesn't get in the wrong hands. (Informant No. 6 – Swedish, Business)

In the above quote, informant number 6 explains their reasoning as to why the company probably is very regulated, namely because the healthcare industry is highly regulated and that the products are in high demand.

‘Big pharma’ was a reoccurring term that the participants used to describe the industry. Informant number 17 (Swedish, Science) expressed that the student views the company as “*hierarchical, powerful and big pharma*”. However, the connotation that the students had to the term big pharma varied from something positive to something negative. Once again, a discrepancy was found between business and science students. Overall, the latter group had a more positive view of the role and purpose of companies that would qualify as big pharma.

I think I have a very neutral to positive view of the company. And I would guess that most people also have the same. I can't imagine why people would necessarily dislike the company. Except for people that dislike big pharma.  
(Informant No.15 – International, Science)

Informant number 15 expressed how the perception of Company X had been affected by the ongoing pandemic and recognized that there is usually a positive or negative connotation to the classification of big pharma and that people are either for or against the term. There is, for example, a clear contrast in the differentiating line of thought of informant number 10, who believes that anything big pharma is negative. Informant number 10 has a clear disdain for anything associated with big pharma. Throughout the interview, the student mentions several

negative aspects associated with the industry and the power that comes with having leverage and working in an environment where monetary incentives are big at play.

They are like big pharma. I'm sceptical to like people who make money from people being in pain and stuff like that. It is kind of like they have a lot of leverage, which they can misuse in certain times and during the course of history. They probably have but it might not have been too bad or like, others might have done it much worse, like, but it's like also dangerous how much power can you get, when you have the cure, like when you have the things that make people feel better when they're sick so you can very easily misuse it or like, yeah, we're gonna increase the price on this specific drug, because we will make a lot of money of it. (Informant No. 10 – Swedish, Business)

### ***The status of academia vs industry amongst science students***

A trend amongst science students was how they imagine job tasks at Company X within their field and if those match their idea of the ideal job. Many of the science students highlighted the importance of research being in line with their personal interests. Half of them pointed out the belief that they could only find that freedom of research choice within academia.

Informant 13 highlights the benefits and disadvantages of industry and academia in the following statement.

Well, this is always the big debate if you go into academia or the industry. Academia allows you to do whatever you want within logic. Like you can develop your own project whereas in pharmaceutical companies you enter a project and then there's not a lot of deviation from there. For example, if you have to develop a drug against this one specific antibody, there's not a lot else that you can do. So that's the main attractive thing about academia. Industry, of course, is way more stable and way better paid. (Informant No. 13 – International, Science)

The benefits of academia mentioned by the students are the intellectual freedom to choose the direction of research, more flexibility to conduct the research and the opportunity to publish the work. In comparison, pursuing a career in the industry was associated with less research

freedom and a financial-driven culture with tight deadlines. However, the science students acknowledged the benefits of working in the industry, such as a higher salary and a stable working environment.

It's actually quite interesting. During my time here at the university, we had some guest lectures from the faculty and other scientists that often like to present this narrative that the academic world is better than working for companies. They say that companies have a financial interest and that the academic world is kind of more striving for the scientific evolution. (Informant No. 16 – Swedish, Science)

In the above quote, informant number 16 shared how they've been presented by the idea that academia is superior to an industry job. These thoughts were influenced by university teachings and the capitalist nature of society. Other informants shared similar lines of thought. Further reasons to believe that the students can only find the freedom of choice in academia were the financial obligations towards the stakeholders in the industry and the pre-determined and set way to research medication.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of the thesis has been to investigate how students on the verge of entering the labour market use different information sources for forming employer knowledge using the example of the biotechnological and pharmaceutical Company X. Furthermore, we aimed to discover how organisational attractiveness in the pharmaceutical industry has been influenced by the increased media attention due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In the following section, we will analyse our results within the concept of employer knowledge as introduced by Cable and Turban (2001) and further developed by us. We further expand the analysis with the help of previous research, the previously presented empirical material and by addressing the study's research questions.

### **Employer knowledge formation during the Covid-19 pandemic**

The following section answers the first research question: How did students form employer knowledge during the Covid-19 crisis? Hence, we connect the three dimensions of employer knowledge, employer familiarity, employer image and employer reputation, and link them with the different information sources that the students were exposed to before and during the pandemic. Furthermore, the perception of the pharmaceutical industry is described at the end of the section.

#### ***Employer familiarity***

Our results show that the media attention of Company X during the Covid-19 pandemic resulted in a heightened awareness of Company X. To understand the extent of employer knowledge that the students obtained, we categorised the informants to their employer familiarity levels based on the theoretical framework of Cable and Turban (2001).

**Table 3**

*Employer familiarity levels by Cable and Turban (2001) adapted for Company X*

<b>Unawareness</b>		The students never heard of Company X
<b>Recognition</b>		The students recognize the name of Company X
<b>Recall</b>	<i>Covid-related knowledge</i>	The students have a limited knowledge about the vaccine and pharmaceutical background
	<i>Basic knowledge</i>	The students show a basic knowledge (includes information about location, pharmaceutical background, specific medications, etc)
	<i>Detailed knowledge</i>	The students present a fundamental knowledge (includes detailed information about location, pharmaceutical background, business units, career opportunities, medication, industry, etc)
<b>Top of the mind awareness</b>		The students recall Company X as one of the first organisations and show in-depth knowledge about the organisation

Table 3 presents the employer familiarity levels we used for the analysis. To adjust the existing familiarity levels by Cable and Turban (2001), we further developed the third employer familiarity level recall to distinguish the different awareness levels better and include the aspect of the Covid-19 related knowledge.

**Figure 4**

*Informant's employer familiarity levels*

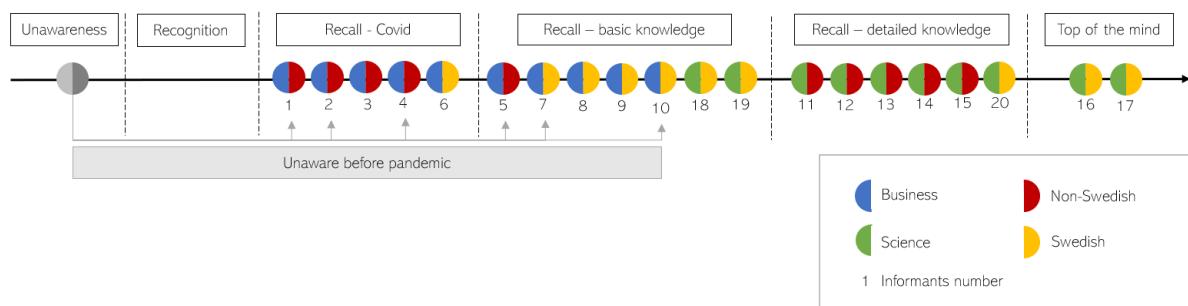


Figure 4 visualises the current employer familiarity levels of the students. No informants can be classified within the categories Unawareness or Recognition since the increased media attention resulted in awareness for the five informants who were unaware of the company

before the pandemic. The three informants within Recall – Covid-related knowledge were primarily international students with a business background. The category Recall – basic knowledge was filled with mostly Swedish business students. The category Recall – detailed knowledge consisted mainly of science students with a Swedish background who gained awareness of Company X through their academic education. The informants who expressed an explicit familiarity with Company X can be associated with the Top of the mind category. These were two Swedish students with a science background who knew several people working for the company, which provided in-depth knowledge. Both refer to Company X as one of the most attractive employers for their professional future. The results show that international business students tend to have a lower employer familiarity level than Swedish business students. This phenomenon can be explained by Swedish people being more exposed to Company X during their everyday life in their childhood and education. The fact that science students have a higher familiarity level can be based on their study field and their general interest in the biopharmaceutical industry. Since five students were unaware of Company X before the pandemic, we can state that the media attention enabled employer familiarity for them. According to Cable and Turban (2001), employer familiarity is strongly connected to employer image and employer reputation, which will be discussed in the following section.

### ***Employer image***

The employer image can be described as a set of beliefs held by individuals about an employer (Cable & Turban, 2001). When applying the concept of employer image to Company X, the students perceive the organisation as an attractive, structured, international and well-established company. The students classify the company as a multinational big pharma corporation with finance-driven goals. Working at Company X is associated with a

high workload, a high level of responsibility and a wide range of development opportunities. Moreover, the students connected Company X with the Covid-19 vaccine and the media attention it caused. Using the example of the case Company X, it becomes clear that numerous information sources are used to build and shape that employer knowledge. These include the three information sources presented by Dowling (1986); personal experience, interpersonal communication, and mass media communication. Our results show that the sources are used to different extents and extract different information sets. We also found that interpersonal communication (Dowling, 1986) with employees was mostly used as an information source to evaluate different intangible aspects of the company, such as organisational culture, corporate values or development opportunities (cf. Deephouse, 2000; Panico et al., 2014). Personal experience through guest lectures or study visits also contributed to the knowledge about Company X's tangible and intangible aspects (cf. Ader, 1995). Tangible elements about the company, such as factual information about the location, size or products, are primarily generated through personal experience (e.g., growing up next to the company or guest lectures at university) and media. An apparent pattern emerged that showed that when the informants experienced a knowledge gap, they filled it with assumptions based on the industry, media, or companies perceived as similar (cf. Rynes, 1991; Younis & Hammad, 2021).

Media as an information source appeared to be rather irrelevant for the informants to build up employer knowledge about Company X before the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the increased media attention due to the pandemic served as a source of employer knowledge about Company X. The results indicate that the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic had a tremendous impact on how familiar the participants were with the organisation (cf. Cable & Turban, 2001). The media reporting of the organisation guided the company to become a 'household' name. The increased awareness of Company X resulted in the informants

expanding their perception of Company X, both in relation to the employer image and employer reputation. In doing so, we can add further emphasis to Lievens et al. (2005), indicating that different factors contribute to the formulation of organisational attractiveness. The results indicate that the familiarity with the organisation affects the perception of the tasks and job positions associated with the organisation and the overall perception of Company X as an employer. Moreover, we found that the interaction between organisational attractiveness and how individuals pertain information is affected by how familiar the individual is or has been with the organisation.

### ***Employer reputation***

The results show that the employer reputation of Company X, which can be defined as the public's evaluation of Company X (Cable & Turban, 2001), was perceived as neutral or rather negative by the students. According to previous research, Kanar et al. (2015) and Cable and Turban (2001) found that an unfavourable corporate reputation negatively affects an organisation's ability to attract job seekers. However, the students stated that the opinion of others would not influence their intention to apply to Company X. This stands in contrast to previous research (Cable & Turban, 2001) that states that a negative perception of others decreases an individual's intention to apply. A possible explanation is that the increased employer awareness of Company X overshadows the assumed public's negative perception of Company X. Moreover, Cable and Turban (2001) found that the organisation's reputation directly affects the organisational attractiveness of a company. Other reasons for the agreeable perceptions of Company X are the students' source-critical stance toward media content amid the Covid-19 pandemic and the fact that the majority of the students already held some established employer knowledge prior to the crisis (cf. Georgeevski & AlQudah, 2016). The fact that the students were source critical of the media content can be based on

their ability to distinguish between the credibility of different sources. Furthermore, some science students are aware of the fact that some information can better pertain through more credible sources, such as WHO (World Health Organization) which can be deemed more expert and trustworthy than the general mass media (cf. Fischer et al., 1979, Ilgen et al., 1979; Petty & Cacioppo, 1981; Tuppen, 1974).

### ***Perception of the pharmaceutical industry***

The research showed that the students had different opinions about the pharmaceutical industry. Some students viewed the industry as very medical and restrictive, assuming that the workplace is very clean, structured or clinical. Other students associated the industry with being ‘shady’, profit-driven and not centred around people’s health and well-being. Especially the term big pharma was associated with two different connotations for the students. Science students tended to view big pharma as powerful and attractive, while business students described it as rather power-driven, shady and influential. This type of varying associations and assumptions reflects that the organisational attributes or industry aspects that an individual is attracted to are subjective and complex. The aspects vary depending on several factors, such as the level of employer familiarity (Cable & Turban, 2001), view of the industry and the contextual settings. Our research shows that students filled their knowledge gap about Company X with assumptions about the pharmaceutical industry. Following this, we discovered an industry spill-over effect (Boehmer & Harrison, 2021) from the perception of the pharmaceutical industry on the individual perception of Company X as an employer.

### **Organisational attractiveness amid the pandemic**

As indicated in the previous section, one of the findings attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic was how visible the company became in the media. According to the results, the heightened

awareness made the company more attractive as a potential employer. Based on this development, the following section aims to answer the second research question: In what way did the Covid-19 pandemic influence students' perception of organisational attractiveness?

The public's perception of a company is never fully controllable. While some companies can never fully recover from an increase in negative media (Seo et al., 2014), Company X does not seem to be affected in that way. Our results show that the primarily negative media exposure did not harm but rather benefited the perception of organisational attractiveness. This contradicts previous research (Jonkman et al., 2020; Baumeister et al., 2001) that indicates that negative media output would harm an organisation's attractiveness. Instead, we view an apparent rebound effect where the increase in adverse media reports leads to an initial negative perception of Company X with the favourable attitude returning after a relatively short time (Vassilikopoulou & Stavroulakis, 2013). The informants mentioned various conversations with peers, friends or family during the time of the media peak where the vaccine and Company X were negatively attributed. However, at the time of the interviews, it had been about a year since the media attention of Company X peaked. Nowadays, those conversations seem not to happen anymore. If Company X is still a conversation topic, the discussion has shifted towards possible career opportunities. Previous research indicates that this rebound effect is especially strong when a company has a strong reputation before receiving increased media attention (Boehmer & Harrison, 2021). In relation to the current case, we identified a strong rebound effect and recovery after the media attention of Company X decreased. We suggest that this can be linked to its strong position in the market and the previously established familiarity, such as informants knowing factual information like company size, historical attributes and possible job tasks. It is plausible that the results would differ if the study had been conducted at an earlier stage of the pandemic.

Similar to the Adidas rent scandal (Boehmer & Harrison, 2021), the Covid-19 crisis created and amplified the media attention, but the crisis also reached its peak, and the media attention slowly faded away. The Covid-19 outbreak interrupted everyday life and triggered an emotional and behavioural response such as fear and uncertainty, amplified by the public's interest in the vaccine and media relating to that topic. The rapid development of the pandemic initiated the public's attention to shift, which caused a decrease in media coverage of Company X over time. The public's attention toward Company X faded away in the later stages of the pandemic. Google Trends (2022) shows a substantial increase in interest in the keyword 'Company X' in the summer of 2021, followed by an equally significant decrease after a few months. Therefore, our results illustrate the same results as previous research by Vassilikopoulou et al. (2009) that show that individuals tend to forget about a crisis over time, primarily if the company handles the media attention in a socially responsible manner. The results show that informants do not seem to have found Company X to have acted wrongfully. This is indicated by the informants' frustration over media representation and the clear separation that the informants made over media headlines and the company's procedures, with for example the students looking up other sources to verify or deny the information given through mainstream media.

### **The impact of the contextual background of the students**

We found differences between the contextual backgrounds of the target groups, with variations amongst either Swedish or International students and business or science students or with both factors interlacing. One of the differences was that science students were more exposed to information sources controlled by Company X, such as guest lectures or independently looking up job opportunities on the career webpage. Business students, however, mostly gathered information from sources that the company cannot control, such as

media or conversations with others. This relates to previous research (Deephouse, 2000; Panico et al., 2014), where some stakeholders did not gather any information directly from the company and therefore relied on other information sources. In this case, media or word of mouth advertisements are particularly powerful sources of influence (Deephouse, 2000; Panico et al., 2014). Furthermore, the results show that several business students assumed that there are limited career options within their profession at Company X. Since previous research (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Van Hoye & Lievens, 2005; Sutherland et al., 2002) show that employer branding activities positively relate to organisational attractiveness, the lack of perceived employer branding activities amongst business students could be the reason for their lower perception of organisational attractiveness.

A heightened awareness could be identified in relation to employer familiarity, which grew more robust when viewing the informants on a scale from International to Swedish and business to science students in relation to Company X. One of the reasons appears to be the geographical closeness as well as the occupational proximity to Company X, with Swedish science students being the most aware of the company and International business students the least aware.

The results showed a pattern of frustration amongst several students, especially within the science field, although also prevalent amongst business students. The reasons behind the frustration about the media content were exaggerated headlines about the company or wrongful portrayals of scientific facts in the media. Amongst students in science, this frustration could be connected to defending their own occupational field. The sense of pride towards their occupational field indicates a scepticism towards framing different media information sources and the mass hysteria prevalent in society at the time. On top of that, science students reflected the media reporting differently by double checking with official

reports or their science network (cf. Kanar et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2013). It is noticeable that some of the science students got very protective of the vaccine by immediately mentioning counterarguments and other reasons why the media content was exaggerated. As many of the students are active within the science field, their interpretation of media can be biased by their previous perception of both industry and company, as well as deeper knowledge about scientific conduct (cf. Barnidge et al., 2020; Katz, 1987). One of the consequences of this seems to be an increase in organisational attractiveness and respect towards the company.

## **Conclusion**

This section presents a brief summary of the study, the limitations of the research, the study's contributions to the scientific research field and suggestions of practical implications for the case company.

### **Research summary**

The Covid-19 pandemic brought unprecedented times for individuals, organisations and the economy. Due to developing and producing a vaccine to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus, Company X was repeatedly in the spotlight of international mass media. The tone of the media covering the crisis differed, ranging from negative articles about side effects, age restrictions, and the vaccine's suspension to positive news about low production costs and donations to economically underdeveloped countries. Previous research confirms that increased media exposure can lead to a change in corporate reputation and organisational attractiveness. This thesis provides knowledge about the conditions for organisational attractiveness that companies have to navigate in times of crisis. The purpose of the thesis was to investigate how the employer knowledge of Company X was formed amongst university students and in what way the Covid-19 crisis influenced students' perceived organisational attractiveness. The study emphasised the different contextual backgrounds of the students. On top of that, the thesis investigated how increased media exposure based on the Covid-19 pandemic influences the students' perception of organisational attractiveness and employer knowledge.

The results clearly show that all three dimensions of employer knowledge of Company X were affected by the increased media attention during the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to the increased media exposure, Company X is considered a household name which strongly

affected the employer familiarity levels of the students. The increased visibility positively influenced the perception of organisational attractiveness for the students. Company X is considered an attractive, big and global employer within the biopharmaceutical industry that offers various career opportunities. The informants used different types of information sources to form their employer knowledge, such as personal experience, interpersonal communication and mass media communication (Dowling, 1986). Media, as an information source, was mostly used to build Covid-19 related knowledge about the vaccine. However, for students unaware of the company before the pandemic, the media served as a first interaction with the company. Those students gathered basic information about the locations or industry from the media.

Furthermore, we discovered a spill-over effect of the stereotypical perception of the pharmaceutical industry on how the students perceived Company X as an employer. A lack of knowledge about Company X was filled by the students' general perception of the pharmaceutical industry.

The study included the contextual background of the students regarding their study group (business/science) and their nationality (Swedish/International). Especially the employer familiarity varied among the informants, with Swedish science students being most aware of the company and International business students being least aware. Furthermore, science students perceived the pharmaceutical industry as more favourable than business students. This relates to business students assuming that there are limited career opportunities for their profession at Company X. Additionally, science students were more exposed to information sources controlled by the company, such as guest lectures or further recruitment activities. Instead, Business students gathered their information from sources outside of Company X's control, such as the media.

## **Limitations of our research**

Due to the unique circumstances that Company X found itself in, the findings are limited to the case of Company X and cannot necessarily be transferred to other cases of increased media attention. Following, the specific company, country, industry, target group and particular type and state of the crisis (May 2022) need to be considered when interpreting the results and transferring the knowledge to other cases or studies. Furthermore, the small sample size and the qualitative nature of this study make the results less generalisable. However, generalising was not the primary intention of this study. One of the benefits of the research choice is that the study has managed to capture small-scale aspects of social reality, such as the perceptions and employer knowledge within the social group of students. Therefore, different results would be possible using a purposive sampling strategy with other sampling strategy criteria. If we had more time and resources when conducting the study, we would also have chosen other prerequisites for conducting a more in-depth study with a larger number of participants.

Our study focuses on the influence of employer knowledge on organisational attractiveness. However, organisational attractiveness may be influenced by factors not explored in our research, such as the company's financial performance. We instead view the results as one piece of a puzzle of how companies' organisational attractiveness may be affected by an outside crisis.

## **Contributions to the scientific field and suggestions for further research**

This thesis adds value to several scientific research fields by being relevant for marketing, human resources, and employer branding. First of all, the exploratory research addresses the gap in the conditions for organisational attractiveness that companies have to navigate during a crisis. The research results can be used to understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

and the negative media attention the crisis brought to the pharmaceutical industry. More specifically, the implications that primarily negative media have on employer knowledge and the perception of organisational attractiveness. In comparison to other studies, our findings show that negative media exposure can positively influence the perception of a company's organisational attractiveness. Although contextual settings would have to be carefully considered when looking at the results in relation to other crises, they could serve as inspiration for approaching future research.

The study has also helped to broaden the understanding of employer knowledge (Cable & Turban, 2001) by combining the framework with the dimension of a crisis, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the use of information sources as presented by Dowling (1986). Moreover, the study supports the findings of Lievens et al. (2005), indicating that the dimensions between employer familiarity and employer image and employer reputation are interactive. By approaching the research with sensitivity to the different contextual backgrounds of the students and the Covid-19 crisis, the study has added further insight to employer knowledge. One suggestion for future research is to further explore the theory in the context of other types of crises. It would be interesting to see future research use the same theoretical framework concerning a broader perspective on the labour market.

### **The practical implications of the research**

As the research was conducted with reference to a particular company, the results indicate practical implications for Company X. One of the main practical implications are possible suggestions on how to approach employer branding strategies in a time of crisis. First of all, the results provide Company X with a detailed overview of how students perceive the organisation as a potential employer. Positive employer knowledge, such as a positively perceived working culture or interesting career opportunities, can be used to foster an

attractive and authentic employer brand. Being aware of the more negative employer knowledge, such as an unfavourable perception of the pharmaceutical industry and a perceived high workload, can serve as a basis for employer branding activities to further improve the organisational attractiveness. Especially the fact that the negative media exposure did not harm, but rather benefit the perception of organisational attractiveness, is valuable information when assessing the external employer brand of Company X. Hence, our research suggests that Company X is likely not losing out on potential future talent due to taking a risk of developing a vaccine against Covid-19.

The fact that business and science students are exposed to different information sources provides a further key takeaway for Company X. Many science students recalled guest lectures or study visits organised by Company X where the company presented their product development processes or best practice methods. In contrast, most business students highlighted the lack of employer branding activities they received from Company X. Following, many of the business students showcased an inability to envision a role for themselves in the organisation, stressing the importance of early presence for organisations that wish to become an employer of choice among several occupational fields. Therefore, a practical implication for Company X is to take the contextual nuances of the students they wish to address into consideration when designing future employer branding activities to attract freshly baked academics in different occupational fields. A concrete suggestion would be to further develop their campus recruiting efforts by offering guest lectures for the business study field.

## References

- Aaker, D. A. (1991). *Managing brand equity: Capitalizing on the value of a brand name*. The Free Press. ISBN:0029001013
- Aaker, D. A. (1996). *Building strong brands*. The Free Press. ISBN : 9780029001516
- Adelua, M., Oyedepo, T., & Odiboh, O. (2021). Twitter usage during global pandemic and corporate reputation in Nigeria. *Heliyon*, 7(5), e06920-e06920.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e06920>
- Ader, C. R. (1995). A longitudinal study of agenda setting for the issue of environmental pollution. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 72(2), 300–311.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/107769909507200204>
- Alba, J. W., & Hutchinson, J. W. (1987). Dimensions of consumer expertise. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 13(4), 411-454. <https://doi.org/10.1086/209080>
- Ambler, T., & Barrow, S. (1996). The employer brand. *The Journal of Brand Management*, 4(3), 185-206. <https://doi.org/10.1057/bm.1996.42>
- Baumeister, R., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(4), 323-370.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037//1089-2680.5.4.323>
- Barber, A. E. (1998). *Recruiting Employees: Individual and Organizational Perspectives*. Sage Publications. ISBN:9781452250892

- Barnidge, M., Gunther, A., Kim, J., Hong, Y., Perryman, M., Tay, S., & Knisely, S. (2020). Politically Motivated Selective Exposure and Perceived Media Bias. *Communication Research*, 47(1), 82-103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650217713066>
- Boehmer, J., & Harrison, V. (2022). No long-term consequences for social irresponsibility? Adidas' rent incident during the COVID-19 pandemic in Germany. *European Sport Management Quarterly*, 22(1), 11-34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16184742.2021.1926526>
- Boyatzis, R. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information : Thematic analysis and code development*. SAGE Publications. ISBN:0761909605
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. SAGE Publications. ISBN:9781847875815
- Bryman, A. (2016). *Social research methods* (5th ed.). Oxford University Press. ISBN:9780199689453
- Byrne, D. (1969). Attitudes and attraction. *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, 4, 35-89. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601\(08\)60076-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0065-2601(08)60076-3)
- Cable, D. M., & Turban, D. B. (2001). Establishing the Dimensions, Sources and Value of Job Seekers' Employer Knowledge during Recruitment. *Research Personal and Human Resources Management*, 20, 115-163. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0742-7301\(01\)20002-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0742-7301(01)20002-4)
- Cable, D., & Turban, D. (2003). The Value of Organizational Reputation in the Recruitment Context: A Brand-Equity Perspective. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 33(11), 2244-2266. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2003.tb01883.x>

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2021, November 4). *Basics of Covid-19*.

<https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/your-health/about-Covid-19/basics-Covid-19.html>

Clemente, M., & Gabbioneta, C. (2017). How does the media frame corporate scandals? The case of German newspapers and the Volkswagen diesel scandal. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 26(3), 287-302. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1056492616689304>

Collins, C. J. (2007). The interactive effects of recruitment practices and product awareness on job seekers' employer knowledge and application behaviors. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(1), 180–190. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.1.180>

Collins, C. J., & Stevens, C. K. (2002). The relationship between early recruitment-related activities and the application decisions of new labor-market entrants: A brand equity approach to recruitment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87(6), 1121–1133.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.87.6.1121>

Deephouse, D. L. (2000). Media reputation as a strategic resource: An integration of mass-communication and resource-based theories. *Journal of Management*, 26(6),  
[https://doi.org/1091-1112.10.1016/S0149-2063\(00\)00075-1](https://doi.org/1091-1112.10.1016/S0149-2063(00)00075-1)

Dinnie, K. (2003). Creating Corporate Reputations: Identity, Image and Performance. *European Journal of Marketing*, 37(7/8), 1144-1147.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/03090560310477726>

Dowling, G. (1986). Managing your corporate images. *Industrial Marketing Management*, 15(2), 109-115. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0019-8501\(86\)90051-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0019-8501(86)90051-9)

Esaïasson, P., Gilljam, M., Oscarsson, H., & Wängnerud, L. (2012). *Metodpraktikan: Konsten att studera samhälle, individ och marknad* (4th ed.). Nordstedts juridik. ISBN:9789139112174

Fisher, C. D., Ilgen, D. R., & Hoyer, W. D. (1979). Source credibility, information favorability, and job offer acceptance. *Academy of Management Journal*, 22(1), 94-103. <https://doi.org/10.2307/255481>

Fombrun, C., & Shanley, M. (1990). What's in a name? Reputation building and corporate strategy. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(2), 233-258.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/256324>

Georgievski, B., & Al Qudah, A. (2016). The effect of the Volkswagen scandal (a comparative case study). *Research Journal of Finance and Accounting*, 7(2), 54-57.

Germain, J., Harris, J., Mackay, S., & Maxwell, C. (2018). Why Should We Use Online Research Methods? Four Doctoral Health Student Perspectives. *Qualitative Health Research*, 28(10), 1650-1657. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732317721698>

Google Trends (2022). *Ta reda på vad resten av världen söker på*. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from <https://trends.google.com/trends/?geo=SE>

Ilgen, D. R., Fisher, C. D., & Taylor, M. S. (1979). Consequences of individual feedback on behavior in organizations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 64(4), 349-371.  
<https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.64.4.349>

Jonkman, J., Boukes, M., & Vliegenthart, R. (2020). When Do Media Matter Most? A Study on the Relationship between Negative Economic News and Consumer Confidence

across the Twenty-Eight EU States. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 25(1), 76-95. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161219858704>

Jurgensen, C. E. (1978). Job preferences (What makes a job good or bad?). *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 63(3), 267-276. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.63.3.267>

Kanar, A., Collins, C., & Bell, B. (2015). Changing an unfavorable employer reputation: The roles of recruitment message-type and familiarity with employer. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 45(9), 509-521. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12316>

Kashyap, A., & Raghuvanshi, J. (2020). A preliminary study on exploring the critical success factors for developing COVID-19 preventive strategy with an economy centric approach. *Management Research*, 18(4), 357-377.  
<https://doi.org/10.1108/MRJIAM-06-2020-1046>

Katz, E. (1987). Communications Research Since Lazarsfeld. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, 51(4), S25–S45. [https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/51.4\\_PART\\_2.S25](https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/51.4_PART_2.S25)

Keller, K. L. (1993). Conceptualizing, measuring, and managing customer-based brand equity. *Journal of Marketing*, 57(1), 1-22.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/002224299305700101>

Kreps, D. M. (1990). Corporate Culture and Economic Theory. In J. E. Alt, & K. A. Shepsle (Eds.), *Perspectives on positive political economy* (p.90-143). Cambridge Universisty Press.

Lacy, W. B., Bokemeier, J. L., & Shepard, J. M. (1983). Job attribute preferences and work commitment of men and women in the United States. *Personnel Psychology*, 36(2), 315-329. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1983.tb01440.x>

Lazarsfeld, P. (1957). Public Opinion and the Classical Tradition. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 21(1), 39-53. <https://doi.org/10.1086/266685>

Lee, C.-H., Hwang, F.-M., & Yeh, Y.-C. (2013). The impact of publicity and subsequent intervention in recruitment advertising on job searching freshmen's attraction to an organization and job pursuit intention. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 43(1), 1–13. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1559-1816.2012.00975.x>

Lemmink, J., Schuijf, A., & Streukens, S. (2003). The Role of Corporate Image and Company Employment Image in Explaining Application Intentions. *Journal of Economic Psychology*, 24(1), 1–15. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-4870\(02\)00151-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0167-4870(02)00151-4)

Lievens, F., Van Hoye, G., & Schreurs, B. (2005). Examining the relationship between employer knowledge dimensions and organizational attractiveness: An application in a military context. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 78(4), 553-572. <https://doi.org/10.1348/09631790X26688>

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic Inquiry*. Sage Publications.  
ISBN:9780803924314

Mačaitytė, I., & Virbašiūtė, G. (2018). Volkswagen Emission Scandal and Corporate Social Responsibility – A Case Study. *Business Ethics and Leadership*, 2(1), 6-13.  
[https://doi.org/10.21272/bel.2\(1\).6-13.2018](https://doi.org/10.21272/bel.2(1).6-13.2018)

Merchant, R., & Lurie, N. (2020). Social Media and Emergency Preparedness in Response to Novel Coronavirus. *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 323(20), 2011-2012. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2020.4469>

Mogaji, E. (2021). Marketing the COVID-19 vaccine and the implications for public health. *Vaccine*, 39(34), 4766-4768. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.vaccine.2021.07.015>

Panico, M., Raithel, S., & Michel, E. (2014). The Effect of Media Coverage on Employer Reputation. *Journal of Media Economics*, 27(4), 181-198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08997764.2014.963228>

Petty, R. E., & Cacioppo, J. T. (1981). *Attitudes and persuasion: Classic and contemporary approaches*. Routledge.

Reputation Institute. (2022). *Volkswagen Group*. Retrieved March 31, 2022, from <https://www.reptrak.com/rankings/company/vw/>

Rubin, H. J., & Rubin, I. S. (2012). *Qualitative Interviewing - The Art of Hearing Data* (3rd ed). SAGE Publications.

Rynes, S. L. (1991). Recruitment, job choice, and post-hire consequences. In M. D. Dunnette & L. M. Hough (Eds.), *Handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 399 – 444). Consulting Psychologists Press.

Statistiska centralbyrån. (2021, March 04). *Coronapandemin slog hårt mot arbetsmarknaden 2020*.

[https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/arbetsmarknad/arbetskraftsunder\\_sokningar/arbetskraftsundersokningarna-aku/pong/statistiknyhet/arbetskraftsundersokningarna-aku-arsmedeltal-2020/](https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/statistik-efter-amne/arbetsmarknad/arbetskraftsunder_sokningar/arbetskraftsundersokningarna-aku/pong/statistiknyhet/arbetskraftsundersokningarna-aku-arsmedeltal-2020/)

Seo, H., Houston, J., Knight, L., Kennedy, E., & Inglish, A. (2014). Teens' social media use and collective action. *New Media & Society*, 16(6), 883-902. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813495162>

Sutherland, M., Torricelli, D., & Karg, R. (2002). Employer-of-choice branding for knowledge workers. *South African Journal of Business Management*, 33(4), 13-20.  
<https://doi.org/10.4102/sajbm.v33i4.707>

Swait, J., Erdem, T., Louviere, J., & Dubelaar, C. (1993). The equalization price: A measure of consumer-perceived brand equity. *International Journal of Research in Marketing*, 10(1), 23-45. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0167-8116\(93\)90031-S](https://doi.org/10.1016/0167-8116(93)90031-S)

Tadelis, S. (1999). What's in a Name? Reputation as a Tradeable Asset. *The American Economic Review*, 89(3), 548-563. <https://doi.org/10.1257/aer.89.3.548>

Tuppen, C. J. S. (1974). Dimensions of communicator credibility. *Speech Monographs*, 41(3), 253-260. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637757409375844>

Turban, D., Forret, M., & Hendrickson, C. (1998). Applicant Attraction to Firms: Influences of Organization Reputation, Job and Organizational Attributes, and Recruiter Behaviors. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 52(1), 24-44.  
<https://doi.org/10.1006/jvbe.1996.1555>

Van Hoye, G., & Lievens, F. (2005). Recruitment-Related Information Sources and Organizational Attractiveness: Can Something Be Done About Negative Publicity? *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 13(3), 179-187.  
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2389.2005.00313.x>

Vassilikopoulou, A., Siomkos, G., Chatzipanagiotou, K., & Pantouvakis, A. (2009). Product-harm crisis management: Time heals all wounds? *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, 16(3), 174-180. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jretconser.2008.11.011>

Vassilikopoulou, A., & Stavroulakis, P. J. (2013). The impact of time on product-harm crises in the food industry: The case of IKEA's meatballs. *Recent Techniques in Educational Science*, 1(1), 135–140.

Verick, S., Schmidt-Klau, D., & Lee, S. (2021). Is this time “really” different? How the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on labour markets contrasts to the global financial crisis of 2008-9. *International Labour Review*, 161(1), 125-148.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/ilr.12230>

Wartick, S. (1992). The Relationship between Intense Media Exposure and Change in Corporate Reputation. *Business & Society*, 31(1), 33-49.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/000765039203100104>

World Health Organization. (June 29, 2020). *Listings of WHO's response to COVID-19*.

<https://www.who.int/news/item/29-06-2020-Covidtimeline>

Younis, R., & Hammad, R. (2021). Employer image, corporate image and organizational attractiveness: The moderating role of social identity consciousness. *Personnel Review*, 50(1), 244-263. <https://doi.org/10.1108/PR-02-2019-0058>

## **Appendix**

### **Appendix 1: Interview guideline**

#### *Introduction and background of the study:*

Hi XY, we are Fanny and Nadine and we are currently working on our master thesis at the University of Gothenburg. The purpose of this thesis is to investigate the concept of employer knowledge formation during a global crisis. Today's interview will focus on the information sources used to form employer knowledge during the Covid-19 pandemic using the example of Company X. The interview is structured in two main sections. The first part is about employer knowledge formation in general and the second part investigates the same concept using the example of our case Company X. It is important for you to note that we are in no way affiliated with Company X and nothing you say will be able to be traced back to you by Company X.

#### *Ethical considerations:*

The interview is completely voluntary and your answers will be treated with utmost discretion. The collected material will be edited to be unidentifiable and will solely be used for the purpose of the master thesis. With your permission, the interview will be recorded and transcribed for our further analysis. After completing the thesis, the recording will be deleted.

Do you have any questions before we start?

Before we start with the topic of 'employer knowledge formation in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic', we want to ask you some questions about your background.

## **Origin questions**

- 1) Could you please begin by introducing yourself? (age, nationality, University programme, residency)
- 2) Have you ever or are you currently looking for a job?
- 3) What would you say makes an employer attractive?

## **Employer knowledge formation in general**

- 4) What kind of information do you use to make up your mind about a potential employer?
- 5) What kind of information sources would you trust to correctly represent the organisation?
- 6) Is the representation in the media of a potential employee of interest to you, in what way?
- 7) How important is what others think about a company that you're interested in?

## **Context of the Covid-19 pandemic**

- 8) Do you think the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted any of the things we discussed so far? (how you perceive employers, information sources used, what makes an employer attractive, media exposure etc.)

## **The case of Company X**

*Employer familiarity* (=level of awareness of specific organisation)

- 9) Are you aware of Company X?
- 10) What comes to your mind when you hear Company X?
- 11) Can you recall when you first heard of Company X?

*Employer image* (=an individual's perceptions of organisational attitudes)

12) How do you perceive Company X (as an employer)?

- a) What attributes/values do you associate with Company X (as an employer)?

Where did you get the information from?

- b) Is Company X an attractive employer in your opinion? Would you imagine working at Company X?

- a) What makes Company X an attractive / unattractive employer?

13) Company X was repeatedly in the spotlight of international mass media within the last few years. Did you hear something about Company X in the media?

- a) What did you hear about Company X in the media?

- b) Did the media reports affect how you perceive Company X (as an employer)?

If so, how?

*Employer reputation* (=an individual's perception on how the public evaluates a specific organisation)

14) Do you think the thoughts you've shared so far are in line with the general public's perception of Company X?

- i) If yes, why?

- ii) If not, what do you think the general public thinks about Company X in general / as an employer?

15) Have you ever discussed Company X with other people, what was the context of these discussions?

## **Concluding questions**

To conclude, we really want to thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview.

16) Based on the topics that we have discussed today, is there anything in particular that you believe should be highlighted?

17) Is there anything that I have forgotten to ask about or something that you believe is of importance in relation to the current study that you would like to bring up?

Thank you once again for your participation.

18) If any further questions arise, is it okay for me to contact you again?

## Appendix 2: Themes, sub-themes and basic themes

Themes	Sub-themes	Basic themes (codes)
<b>A rise in visibility leads to attractiveness</b>	Becoming familiar with Company X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First interaction based on the location</li> <li>• First interaction based on the network</li> <li>• First interaction based on the Covid-19 pandemic</li> </ul>
	Establishing a household name	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obtaining awareness through media</li> <li>• Reaching household name status</li> <li>• Attractiveness of being a household name</li> <li>• Influence on organisational attractiveness</li> </ul>
<b>Exploring the appeal of working at Company X</b>	Perceived opportunities and the differences amongst business vs science	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived career opportunities at Company X</li> <li>• Used information sources to assess career opportunities</li> <li>• Limited career opportunities for business students</li> </ul>
	Organisational culture – assumption and interpersonal communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perceived organisational culture at Company X</li> <li>• Potential co-workers at Company X</li> <li>• Used information sources to assess organisational culture</li> </ul>
<b>Viewing Company X through media in the context of Covid-19</b>	Generating employer knowledge through media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tone and visibility of media exposure of Company X</li> <li>• Perceived content of media coverage</li> <li>• Positive employer knowledge due to media</li> <li>• Negative employer knowledge due to media</li> </ul>
	Clear separation of media output and Company X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Separating the vaccine and other products</li> <li>• Separating the vaccine and Company X</li> <li>• Defending Company X</li> </ul>
	Frustration over Covid-19 media content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confusion about Covid-19 media content</li> <li>• Exaggerating mass media</li> <li>• Double-checking content</li> </ul>
	The longevity of media attention at the later state of the pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Declining media reporting</li> <li>• Shift of media focus</li> <li>• Mixing up information about Company X</li> </ul>
<b>The opinions of others</b>	The importance of reputation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influence of other opinions</li> <li>• Media scandals of other companies</li> <li>• Intention to apply after media exposure</li> <li>• Public's reputation of Company X</li> </ul>
	Discrepancies of reputation within and outside of Sweden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Media reporting abroad</li> <li>• Differences in media reporting in Sweden</li> <li>• Reasons for discrepancies</li> </ul>
<b>The perception of the pharmaceutical industry</b>	Stereotyping the industry – shady, structured or big pharma?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The pandemic put a spotlight on the pharmaceutical industry</li> <li>• Positive attributes of the pharmaceutical industry</li> <li>• Negative attributes of the pharmaceutical industry</li> <li>• Opinions of big pharma</li> </ul>
	The status of academia vs. industry amongst science students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Preferences academia vs. industry</li> <li>• Advantages and disadvantages of academia</li> <li>• Advantages and disadvantages of the industry</li> <li>• Information sources about academia vs. industry</li> </ul>