Babeș-Bolyai University from Cluj-Napoca
College of Political, Administrative and Communication Sciences
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DOCTORAL THESIS

SUMMARY

ONLINE BRANDING – ONLINE BRANDING STRATEGIES IN THE IT SECTOR

The service and employer brand identities of the companies operating in the field of software and IT services in Cluj-Napoca based on the corporate data published on their websites

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the doctoral dissertation is to analyze the service and employer brand identities of the companies operating in the field of software and IT services in Cluj-Napoca, in order to highlight the communication opportunities and practices that ensure competitive advantage to the companies operating in the knowledge-based economy. The objectives of the dissertation are to present the constitutive components of the service and employer brand identities of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca; to provide a broad description of the general profile of service and employer brand identities; as well as to group the examined companies based on the strength of their service and employer brand identities.

The doctoral dissertation consists of six chapters. The introductory chapter includes the formulation of the aim and of the objectives of the doctoral dissertation, the theoretical background of the topic and the relevance and justification of its examination.

The second chapter provides a literature review of the topic of the dissertation. The second chapter consists of three subchapters. The first subchapter presents the definition of the brand, followed by a description of the assets and strength of the brand. The second subchapter reviews the concepts of brand hierarchy and brand portfolio within the company. The concepts of corporate, service and employer brands that make up the brand portfolio will be outlined, and the subchapter ends with mapping the development and interrelations of the brands within the company. The third subchapter provides insight into the process of brand management, illustrating in detail the features of identity-based brand management. The clarification of the concept of brand identity and the description of the most commonly used brand identity models in the literature are also included in the third subchapter. The third subchapter contains a summary of the characteristics of brand communication in the digital space.

The third chapter explains the methodology of the research on which the dissertation is based. The third chapter is divided into three subchapters. The first subchapter reviews the research design, the second subchapter discusses the process of operationalization and the development of the research tool, while the third subchapter focuses on the process and tools of analysing the data.

The fourth chapter includes the results of the research presented in the dissertation. The fourth chapter consists of five subchapters. The first subchapter introduces the situation of the software and IT sector in Romania within the knowledge-based economy. The second and third subchapters present the composition and general profile of the service and employer brand identities of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca. Moreover, the second and third subchapters also include the segmentation of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca, based on the strength of their service and employer brand identities. The fifth subchapter provides insight into the visual features of the brand communication of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca.

The fifth chapter of the dissertation interprets the peculiarities of the service and employer brand identities of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca in the light of the literature and in the Romanian context, while the sixth chapter summarizes the main conclusions of the research presented in the dissertation, including the limitations of the research and the possibilities for further research.

KEYWORDS

identity-based brand management, brand identity, service brand, employer brand, brand strength, combined content analysis, corporate website, software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca

1. INTRODUCTION

In the knowledge-based economy, the competition for the attention of different target groups has increased significantly, therefore, companies are forced to make constant operational and communication efforts to attract and maintain the attention of their target audience (Kapferer 2008: 11).

An effective tool for highlighting uniqueness and originality, as well as ensuring differentiation is to create the own brands of the company. The brand is a concept that can be connected to the products, services, employer quality of the company or to the company as a whole (Kapferer 2008: 12). The first step in creating a brand is to define the brand identity that will later affect the overall brand management and brand performance (Muhonen–Hirvonen–Laukkanen 2017: 2).

Appropriate use of digital technology in the enhanced economic competition is a competitive advantage for companies (Owoyele 2016: 8). In the digital space, the corporate website is a strategic communication channel for brand building (Kapferer 2008: 122; Owoyele 2016: 8), and the most important digital touchpoint with target groups (Papp-Váry 2019: 156). The companies present their brand identity on their websites, i.e. the concept of how they want to be perceived by their target groups (Kapferer 2008: 12).

The aim of the doctoral dissertation is to analyse the service and employer brand identities of the companies operating in the field of software and IT services in Cluj-Napoca, in order to highlight the communication opportunities and practices that ensure competitive advantage to the companies operating in the knowledge-based economy. The objectives of the dissertation are to present the constitutive elements of the service and employer brand identities of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca, to provide a broad description of the general profile of service and employer brand identities, as well as to group the examined companies based on the strength of their service and employer brand identities.

The relevance of the research is justified by the fact that the software and IT sector in Romania is the most developing knowledge-based industry, but the companies in the sector have so far been less visible. Romanian software and IT companies support themselves mainly from foreign demands (ANIS, 2017). Although there is no shortage of demands (ANIS, 2017), these companies are currently being hit by the difficulty of recruiting and retaining talented workforce, which forces them to introduce themselves to the Romanian labour market.

The analysis presented in the dissertation relies on the textual data published on the websites of the companies. In the course of the research we used the method of combined content analysis (Neuendorf 2002), the sample was constituted of companies operating in the field of software and IT services that have a website and a staff of at least ten employees in Cluj-Napoca.

The dissertation attempts to analyse the service and employer brand identities of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca on the basis of official data available on their corporate websites, but does not discuss other topics of brand management of these companies or the peculiarities of brand image development.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Basic concepts of brand

2.1.1 The definition of brand

In the dissertation, I present the brand definitions of the most cited authors in marketing literature (Kapferer 2008; Keller 2013; Aaker 2014), and then I specify the brand definition used in the dissertation.

Following these authors, I consider the brand to be a concept that can be linked to a product/service or company, and that is represented by the brand name. This concept is developed by the brand owners, which determines both the presentation of the brand and the way of experiencing the brand by the target groups. The brand concept includes the benefits that brand owners offer to brand consumers, which benefits may be functional or symbolic (emotional, self-expressive). The more similar the functional benefits of competing brands are, or the more abstract the subject of the brand is, the more important symbolic benefits become. Strong brands stand out from their competitors mostly because of their emotional benefits. At the same time, brand benefits are conditional (Keller 2013: 10), meaning that they imply a competitive advantage as long as they are valuable to users.

2.1.2. Brand components and brand strength

Kapferer (2008: 14) distinguishes the brand name and symbols, the brand concept (identity and positioning) and the brand experience (relation with target groups) within the construction of the brand.

In addition to brand components, Kapferer (2008: 14) distinguishes brand associations and brand strength. Brand associations are the characteristics and attributes associated with the brand that trigger positive thoughts, emotions and actions related to the brand on the behalf of the consumer, thereby determining the brand's ability to influence. The strength of the brand refers to the positive market result of brand assets, which apply in a competitive market situation characteristic of a specific moment.

According to Kay (2006: 745), similar brands have many similar attributes (*points of parity*), but strong brands differ significantly from other brands in essential respects (*points of difference*). Strong brands are unique in their own class, while they are of cultural importance and function as cultural symbols.

2.2. Brand hierarchy and brand portfolio

Brand hierarchy refers to the vertical relationship between brands within a company (Hatch–Schultz 2008: 8). Three levels of brands are distinguished within the company: the corporate-

level umbrella brand, which is the unifying brand of the company; family brands that combine groups of products or services produced by the company; and individual brands developed for specific products or services (Papp-Váry 2019: 52).

The brand portfolio resulted from the variety of brands is distinguished from brand hierarchy. There are many types of brands, and the criteria of distinction include, for instance, the purpose of the brand, the target group of the brand, the geographical area of the brand, the sectoral affiliation of the brand etc. (Kapferer 2008:96). The brand portfolio consists of the totality of the brands created within a company.

The brand portfolio is related to the brand hierarchy to some extent, since the creation of any brand type is preceded by locating the brand within the hierarchy. A well-functioning brand hierarchy ensures that while the core identity of all brands operating within the company is constant, the extended identity, the benefits and experiences of each brand type vary based on the nature of the relation between the company and its target groups (Mosley 2014: 38).

2.2.1. The corporate brand

The concept of corporate brand has been separated from the product and service brand since the 1990s; the concept was introduced by Stephan King (1991) in the article *Brand Building in the 1990s*, while Balmer summarized the benefits of the corporate brand in 1995. According to Balmer (1997: 27), a strong corporate brand will become the main distinctive feature of a company in an increasingly competitive situation, while strengthening the company's product and service brands, balancing the company's low level of awareness and improving the company's market position. According to Kapferer (2008: 28), compared to product and service brands, the corporate brand enhances the reputation of the company more effectively, as product and service brands are creations mainly based on imagination, while the corporate brand is based on the qualities of the company.

Often, the concepts of corporate identity and corporate brand are used as synonyms, but it should be noted that all companies have corporate identities, but only those companies have a corporate brand that consciously create it (Balmer–Gray 2003: 980). The corporate brand is needed mostly in a competitive environment. The corporate brand formulates a promise to its target groups, then the company fulfils this promise through its behaviour and activities (Balmer–Gray 2003: 981; Kapferer 2008: 51).

2.2.2. The service brand

The difficulty of creating a service brand is resulted from the fact that services are intangible. Therefore, as a specific feature of the service brand, the literature emphasizes its relationship orientation (Riley–de Chernatony 2000: 139), while providing quality services is considered a prerequisite for the success of the brand (Berry 2000: 132).

When evaluating a service brand, customers take into account two important factors: the technical quality of the service, which refers to the content of the service, and the operational quality of the service, which refers to the way the service operates (Morrison–Crane 2007: 414). The technical quality of the service is a necessary but not sufficient condition of customer satisfaction. The technical quality of the service can be supported by the service provider with various certificates, qualifications and prizes, which help gain the trust of the customers. The operational quality refers to the attitude, behaviour and cooperation characteristics of the

service provider, which the client can evaluate after using the service and which determines the customer satisfaction, ensuring the retention and loyalty of the customer (Morrison–Crane 2007: 413).

In the case of service brands, the constant maintenance of the quality of the brand experience represents a difficulty, because the service is in fact the interaction between the client and the company. The individual, social, cultural, professional characteristics of the company staff are very different, and their daily states also vary, while the quality of the service depends on the well-being of the employees. In the case of services, the perception of the brand is the result of the encounter and relationship between the client and the staff representing the brand (Riley– de Chernatony 2000: 137).

2.2.3. The employer brand

The first definition of the employer brand is linked to Ambler and Barrow (1996: 6). According to them, the employer brand is a set of functional (developmental and useful activities), economic (salary and other rewards) and psychological (sense of social affiliation, offering professional direction and objectives) benefits that are linked to employment, and benefits that can only be attributed to the company in question. Ambler and Barrow (1996: 197) considered the psychological benefits of the employer brand to be the core attractiveness of the employer brand.

According to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004: 502), the employer brand highlights the uniqueness of the job offer made by the company to motivate and retain its existing employees, and to attract prospective talent. According to these authors (Backhaus–Tikoo 2004: 502), during the process of constructing the employer brand, the company determines its employer identity, that can draw employees to them, and at the same time differentiates them from other employers.

The employer brand is a coherent framework that helps the management of the company, compliance with which contributes to the increase of corporate efficiency, the effectiveness of recruitment, and retention and commitment of existing employees (Barrow–Mosley 2005: xvi).

2.2.4. The development of brands and their relationship with each other

Creating a brand portfolio starts with developing the brand of products and services (Balmer 1995), but with the continuous expansion of supply, the maintenance of independent brands becomes costly and complicated (Balmer 1995: 24). Building a unified corporate brand is a strategic task during which companies harmonize their own brands developed for their specific target groups.

According to McDonald, de Chernatony and Harris (2001: 337), it is difficult to separate the corporate brand and the service brand, and their interconnection implies many benefits. Customers feel more confident about a service brand that is backed by a reputable company, as earlier results of the company immediately authenticate the service brand.

Schlager, Bodderas, Maas and Cachelin (2011: 499) highlight the importance of an employer brand for companies in the knowledge-based economy. The existence of a strong employer brand has a positive impact on the performance of the corporate and service brand, as the satisfied workforce identifies with the company and its activities, thus they become committed and achieve better performance. At the same time, strong corporate and service brands

operating on a long term attract excellent workforce and strengthen the authenticity of the employer brand (Schlager–Bodder–Maas–Cachelin 2011: 504).

2.3. Identity-based brand management

2.3.1. The process of brand management

Two approaches can be applied in the process of brand management, namely the market-based and the identity-based orientation. According to the market orientation, the brand should be tailored to customer needs. Identity-based brand management relies on the values and internal resources of the company in order to create the brand (Alsem–Kostelijk 2008: 911).

Keller (2013: 58) distinguishes four general steps of strategic brand management: brand identification and positioning, implementation of brand plans and programs, measurement of brand performance and brand development. In relation to the brand management process, several authors highlight the importance of brand identification and positioning, which later influences the entire brand management process. Aaker (2002: 241) considers the creation of the brand identity as the most important step in brand building. De Chernatony (2014: 99) also highlights the importance of establishing the brand vision, emphasizing that besides increasing market benefits, the brand also represents the value system of the company among internal and external target groups.

In a strong competitive position, Burmann et al. (2017) argue for identity-based brand management, since corporate values serve as the basis for the separation of brands with similar offers and promises. An important characteristic of identity-based brand management is that it emphasizes the role of the internal resources of the company in creating the brand.

2.3.2. Brand identity and its composition

The concept of brand identity was defined by several authors (Aaker 2014; de Chernatony 2014; Kapferer 2008). Brand identity summarizes the essence of the brand from the perspective of the brand owner. The identity of the brand is based on constant and characteristic attributes of the brand, therefore, its creation guides further brand activities (Kapferer 2008: 125; Aaker 2014: 25). The identity of the brand serves as a guide in developing brand strategy (Esch 2008: 58).

Brand identity has two parts, namely the core and the extended part. The core part of brand identity consists of the permanent elements of the brand, while the extended part of the brand identity is a combination of dynamic and variable elements that allow the brand to adapt to the environment (Aaker 2002; Buil–Catalan–Martinez 2016: 4).

For corporate executives and employees, brand identity is an orientation and defines the business attitude of the company, and the behaviour of the employees towards each other and the customers (Muhonen–Hirvonen–Laukkanen 2017: 6).

2.3.3. Brand identity models

Several authors developed conceptual models of marketing, the most frequently cited models being those by Aaker (1996) and Kapferer (2008). Among brand identity models, the corporate identity prism by Urde (2013), Esh's brand wheel (2008) and de Chernatony's brand identity model (2014) are also worth mentioning. These models were primarily designed for the B2C

area, and are therefore more difficult to apply to B2B contexts (Coleman–de Chernatony–Christodoulides 2011: 1064). The listed conceptual models were not verified in empirical studies (Coleman–de Chernatony–Christodoulides 2011: 1064).

2.3.4. The brand identity model by Burmann et al. (2017)

In the dissertation, I used the brand identity model by Burmann et al. (2017) as a conceptual model, in which the authors provide a socio-scientific approach to the construction of brand identity, relying on the results of personal identity research. The brand identity model by Burmann et al. meets the essential features of brand identity models in marketing.

According to Burmann et al. (2017: 43), the strong personal identity and strong brand identity manifest similarly, thus those elements of the identity have been incorporated into the brand identity that determine the strength of any identity.

TABLE. Characteristics of weak and strong identities in people and brands

Characteristics of a		Transfer to brand identities
Weak human identity	**Strong human identity**	
Many supposedly "specific" identity characteristics	Only a few distinguished identity characteristics	Brand offer
Risk aversion, anxious maintenance of the status quo	Role conflicts are used actively to advance one's own identity into new areas (innovative spirit)	Personality
Adoption of values from other identities	Shaping of one's own values	Values
Strong focus on the environment	Development of a clear vision	Mission and Vision
Low level of self-confidence	High level of self-confidence	Competences
Lack of consciousness of one's own achievements	Achievements and accomplishments of the past provide motivation for new projects	Origin

Source: Burmann et al. 2017: 43 (Table 2.4)

Based on the characteristics determining the strength of brand identity, Burmann et al. (2017: 44) distinguished six elements of brand identity: brand origin, brand mission and vision, brand competences, brand values, brand personality and brand offer.

The model by Burmann and et al. is of a general nature, which can be applied favourably for the empirical examination of any type of brand identity in the B2B field.

2.3.5. The characteristics of brand communication in the digital space

Brands are communicated to target groups through a variety of brand touch points, while beyond traditional interpersonal and mass communication channels, digital communication channels play an increasingly important role.

According to existing research, clients and job seekers first get in touch with companies and brands they are interested in via online channels, and only reach out for personal contact in case of positive experiences (Christodoulides 2009: 142; Ojasalo et al. 2008: 102). Customers get their knowledge on the brand partly from the official website of the brand or from other social media platforms, and partly from the digitally shared experiences of other customers.

According to the traditional view the brand management was an one-way process designed to create an attractive brand image. In digital branding, attention is shifted from the persuasion of target groups to a new perspective, namely to create and to commit to their satisfaction, in which context, the integration and consistency of the brand communication becomes more appreciated.

In the digital era, the process of establishing the brand architecture and portfolio is also changing, as the brands, services and employment of the company can be compared immediately, and they must be consistent with each other and with the mission, values and culture of the company.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

The research aims to examine the service and employer brand identities of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca based on the corporate data published on their websites, as well as to categorize the mentioned companies based on their characteristics related to the complexity of their brand identity.

The more detailed research questions were:

1. What are the elements that make the service brand identity of the companies examined?
2. How can the general profile of the service brand identity of the companies examined be summarized?
3. How can the examined companies be grouped based on the complexity of their service brand identity?
4. What are the elements that make the employer brand identity of the companies examined?
5. How can the general profile of the employer brand identity of the companies examined be summarized?
6. How can the examined companies be grouped based on the complexity of their employer brand identity?
7. How can the brand hierarchy and brand portfolio of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca be characterized?

The analysis of the constitutive elements and complexity of brand identity was based on the following criteria:

1. TABLE. The components of brand identity

The dimensions of brand identity	The definition of dimensions of brand identity
I. ORIGIN	Where do we come from? How did we come into being? Where can we be found?
II. MISSION	What role do we assume? Who is this role for? What is the basis of our existence, which are our general goals, strategic priorities, principles of our operation?
III. VALUES	What is our belief? What do we believe in? What do we fight for?
IV. PERSONALITY	How do we seem to be? How can the brand be characterized as a person?
V. COMPETENCES	What are we good at? How are we better than our competitors? Why are we better than others?
VI. OFFERS	What do we offer? Why should you choose us?

The population of the research consisted of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca, which had more than ten employees. The sample was designed as follows: I purchased the basic data on the companies with more than 10 employees based in Cluj-Napoca that were active in the field of software and IT, from the website of the registry of Romanian companies (https://www.listafirme.ro/). The database purchased listed 156 software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca, 119 of which had web links, 110 companies having operating websites.

The research was exploratory in nature, as I found no preliminary example from the literature or empirical research on the brand management of Romanian companies. I used mixed research method design (Creswell 2011), as I used both qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods of analysis in the collection and analysis of the research data.

During the research, the main data collection method was combined content analysis (Neuendorf 2002), which was used both in qualitative and quantitative terms. Content analysis coding categories were developed in two steps. As a first step, quality content analysis was performed on 10 percent of the sample, and an inductive coding category system was developed. As a second step, the content analysis criteria system was determined in a deductive way based on the literature, being complemented with previous coding categories determined inductively. The validity of the content analysis scheme was tested by conducting a pilot research. Thirteen of the largest software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca were involved in the pilot research, as large companies have established brands based on the literature.

The final research data collection took place in July and August 2018, during which time I downloaded the websites of the 110 companies making up the sample of the research, then copied the textual data of the companies and the first illustration (image or graphic element) on the homepage of the websites into Word documents. The overall text and image content that was copied made up the sample for content analysis. The websites of the companies are public, so no ethical issues related to data protection were encountered during data collection and processing.

3.2. Aspects of operationalization and content analysis (coding scheme)

Considering all Word documents related to the companies examined, I searched for the sections that can be categorized under the coding categories/subcategories of service and employer brand identity elements that are summarized in the dissertation.

3.3. Data analysis

The content was coded using the *Atlas.ti* quality data analysis program, which allowed the extraction of quantitative data and, at the same time, the compilation of an inventory of quotations for the relevant criteria of the analysis. The quantitative database generated with *Atlas.ti* was analysed using the *SPSS* program.

The reliability of the coding of content analysis was tested by the *Krippendorff Alpha* reliability test using the *SPSS* program. The analysis was performed on 10 percent of the sample. A sample of eleven companies was selected from the list of the companies examined using a simple random sampling method (using the random number generation function of the *Excel* spreadsheet program). The coding was checked using an independent encoder. The value of *Krippendorff Alpha* is 0.7672, which exceeds the minimum value of 0.67 and is statistically acceptable (De Swert 2012; Hayes–Krippendorff 2007). The correlation between the coding of the two encoders was checked with a simple correlation of 0.771. This value is very close to the 0.80 correlation coefficient, which can be considered statistically good.

4. RESULTS

4.1. The Romanian software and IT industry

The software and IT industry is one of the main sectors of knowledge-based economy. According to the 2017 ANIS report, the software and IT sector is the most dynamically developing sector of the knowledge-based economy in Romania. In Romania, more than 90,000 professionals worked in the software and IT sector in 2017, and the demand for IT and software professionals continued to grow (ANIS 2017).

According to the 2017 ANIS report, more than half of the companies present in the Romanian software and IT sector were owned by foreign entities, and the average wages of the employed professionals exceeded the national average wage.[1] Due to high wages, the sector has become greatly appreciated in the eyes of employees.

The main activities of the Romanian software and IT sector are foreign and domestic demands of software development, foreign demands being the dominant ones (ANIS 2017). Local demands do not ensure the sustainable development of the sector on their own, which is why taking over *outsourcing* activities from international large companies is typical. One of the disadvantages of the sector is that a substantial part of the activity of the Romanian software

[1] The Romanian Government provides a discount on the payment of personal income tax to professional employees working in the software and IT industry (Romanian Fiscal Code, section 60, 2018).

and IT sector is limited to performing executive tasks for foreign customers, while software development with a high added value is present in a smaller proportion (ANIS 2015, 2017).

Four big cities of the country constitute the major hubs of the sector. Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Timișoara and Iași (IT&C Talent Map, 2015). These cities are university centres where a great number of students graduate from IT or technical programs each year, and they provide a permanent supply to the software and IT sector.

4.2. Characteristics of the service brand identity in the case of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca

4.2.1. Constitutive elements of the service brand identity in the case of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca

The origin of the service and employer brand identity in the case of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca – The origin of service and employer brand of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca were considered to be identical. The origin of the identity of both brand types was based on corporate characteristics that differentiated companies from each other.

In the case of the examined software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca, two groups were distinguished: the companies founded by Romanian owners and the Romanian delivery centres of international companies. The majority of the companies founded in Romania (58 companies) had only Romanian founders, while 6 companies were co-founded with foreign partners. International companies were mainly based in the USA, Germany and the Netherlands.

14 of the 110 companies examined were digital companies. Digital companies used to belong to one of the traditional economic sectors, but due to the process of digitization, they have significantly transformed their production, business and contact processes. The remaining 96 companies were created as a result of the development of info-communication technology to provide on-demand software and IT services. Digital companies come from the fields of marketing and product development, banking and finance, public transport and public security, data archiving, business consulting, telecommunications, real estate management, translation and interpreting, and industrial automation.

International software and IT companies based in Cluj-Napoca differ from the companies founded in Romania in terms of their business strategy. All international companies set up premises for *outsourcing* purposes in Romania, while 53.5 percent of the companies founded in Romania work primarily for foreign orders, and 46.6 percent for the Romanian market alone.

Two-thirds of international companies provide global services, while one-third specialize in multinational and international services. None of the international software and IT company based in Cluj-Napoca work for the Romanian market. Less than one-tenth of the companies founded in Romania target the global market.

Of the 110 software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca, 36 companies are in a developing phase, 69 companies are already developed, and 5 companies are in the start-up phase. Each of the five newly launched companies specialize in *outsourcing*. Corporate development has generally been accompanied by an increase in the number of employees. Of the 110 software

and IT companies examined, 11.8 percent are large companies, 22.7 percent medium-sized companies, and 65.5 percent are small companies.

The mission of the service brand identity in the case of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca – The software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca have committed themselves to meeting the needs of their customers through their high-quality professional services, that is to help their business partners succeed and catch up with digital challenges.

For the 73.6 percent of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca, operational excellence and providing quality service are the primary service providing mission objectives. 70.9 percent of the companies examined consider customer service as their mission. More than half of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca (55.5 percent) have visioned a business environment impregnated with technology. At the same time, 37.3 percent of the companies examined offer a reliable partnership to their customers in implementing the digital switchover.

The values of the service brand identity in the case of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca – The outstanding value of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca is the innovative character of their services (53.6 percent), which provides their business partners a successful adaptation to the challenges of the new technological environment.

Another important value of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca is their success (44.5 percent), which applies to both their own business and the business results of their customers. An indicator of success is the excellent staff, which guarantees that quality services are provided, as well as the advantageous position in the market of software and IT services.

The personality of the service and employer brand identity in the case of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca – The personality of service and employer brand of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca were considered to be identical, as the harmony of brands operating within the company requires a unified manifestation towards all target groups.

Control over the mind and the sound of the heart were considered of particular importance by the companies examined. 76.4 percent of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca present themselves as competent. The software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca have often emphasized that they provide the highest quality services with strict adherence to the agreements made with customers. Skill is expected from employees as well, and the companies examined are primarily looking for employees with professional knowledge, committed to perform their undertakings.

66.4 percent of the companies specified the importance of passion in the attitude towards work and customers. Half of the companies (50.9 percent) also considered the creativity of their employees to be desirable. The personality traits of compassion and generosity were less characteristic of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca. However, 46.4 percent of the companies recognized the need for a cooperative attitude towards both internal and external target groups that is necessary for success.

The competences of the service brand identity in the case of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca – The software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca have recognized the importance of presenting and certifying competences in the process of building their corporate service brand identity.

The key competence element of the service brand identity in the case of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca was the presentation of earlier successful projects or satisfied customers (80.9 percent). Most of the companies simply list their previous clients, indicating that many customers have already found them worthy of trust. There is a greater need in the case of multinational companies to present diverse competencies. The second common competence of service brand identity was the reference to expert executives and prepared staff (45.5 percent), which referred to the reliability of the company and the high professional quality of its services. The third component of the service brand identity was the presentation of service provider awards and certifications (39.1 percent).

The offer of the service brand identity in the case of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca – The functional offers of the service brand identity of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca, are primarily concerned with providing quality services (88.2 percent) and customer satisfaction (82.7 percent). Functional benefits also include facilitating adaptation to the changes brought on by digital technology, as well as providing continuous support to customers (45.5 percent).

Among the emotional advantages, the offer of long-term partnership with customers made by the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca was a top priority (30.9 percent). The incorporation of digital technology into the process of operation and sales is a continuous challenge for customers, who need constant technological assistance to solve them.

4.2.2. The general profile of the service brand identity in the case of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca

The general profile of the service brand identity in the case of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca results from the combination of the statistically most common service brand identity elements.

The general profile of the service brand identity of the companies examined is characterized by the consistency of the service mission and service providing offers. The typical missions of the service brand identity in the case of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca are the provision of high-level professional services and adjustment to customer needs. The typical value assumed by the companies examined is innovation, which has shaped the nature of the services. The personality of the service brand identity can be characterized by skill, passion and creativity. The companies examined confirm the authenticity of their service brand identity by presenting successful projects, success stories or satisfied customers.

4.2.3. The classification of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca based on the strength of their service brand identity

The general profile of the service brand identity consisted of the brand identity characteristics that occurred in more than half of the examined companies. The general profile of the service brand identity captures the general type of the service brand identity of the companies from Cluj-Napoca, but in reality, companies group around this general type.

Three corporate groups could be differentiated among software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca based on the complexity of their service brand identity: 26.36 percent of the companies had medium strength service brand identity, while 42.72 percent of companies having a basic brand identity, and 30.9 percent of the companies having strong service brand identity. Among

the corporate groups developed on the basis of the complexity of their service brand identity, companies with medium strength service brand identity are the closest to the general profile of service brand identity.

The majority of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca with a *basic service brand identity* were small companies founded in Romania, both the service mission and offer of which were characterized by the priority to provide high-level professional service, followed by customer orientation. The core value of this type of service brand identity is innovation. The personality of the service brand from this group is characterized by proactivity, but most of the companies in the group did not present the brand personality. The authenticity of service offers was only supported by successful projects.

Companies with a *medium strength service brand identity* disposed the elements of the basic service brand identity, but their identity is more complex. Companies with a medium strength service identity were mainly founded in Romania, serving the Romanian market. These are mainly medium-sized companies that had been created from the beginning for software and IT services, and most of them have more than ten years of experience. Companies with a medium strength service brand identity have considered providing high-quality services and paying attention to customer needs as their most important mission, but their mission also included a new element, namely to encourage the digital transformation of customers. Their service providing offer corresponded with their mission as well. The main values of the medium strength service brand identity are innovation and success. These companies have focused on finding innovative solutions that provide effective support to digital transformation of customers. For this group of companies, it is important to gain market leadership and to assume responsibility for the quality of the services provided and their commitment to the customers. Their professional commitments are supported by the presentation of success stories. At the same time, the majority of the companies present the top executives of the company, thereby confirming the seriousness and reliability of the company. The personality of the company is characterized by skill, passion and creativity.

A significant number of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca with a *strong brand identity* are international companies based in Romania that follow an *outsourcing* business strategy. These are primarily medium-sized companies that were originally created for software and IT service companies. The software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca with a strong brand identity differ in the priority of their mission from software and IT companies with a general profile service brand identity, as these companies favour customer orientation, followed by the promotion of digital transformation, while providing highly professional services was only ranked third. Beyond the personality traits of skill, passion and creativity, these companies are characterized by the emphasis of collaboration, which is in line with the priority of customer orientation. In the case of service providing offers, the need to establish confidential relationships is present as a new offer. The extra identity elements that have appeared in companies with strong service brand identity have pointed to a strong service providing attitude, thus creating a symbolic advantage of their service brand identity.

4.3. Characteristics of the employer brand identity in the case of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca

4.3.1. Constitutive elements of the employer brand identity in the case of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca

The origin and personality of the employer brand identity of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca – The origin of service and employer brand identities is identical, as the origin of both brand identities is linked to the circumstances of the creation of the company and to the particularities of its construction. The situation is similar in the case of the identity personality element of both brand types, as the harmony of the brands operating within the company requires unified manifestation towards all target groups.

The mission of the employer brand identity of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca – The majority of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca (68.2 percent) emphasize one mission objective towards the internal target groups, namely the appreciation of the highly qualified workforce, as they are the key to providing quality services. For some companies, the creation of a unique corporate culture is also an employer mission objective (18.2 percent).

Values characteristic of the employer brand identity of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca – The dominant values characteristic of the employer brand identity of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca are teamwork (43.6%) and responsibility for the employees (34.5%).

Competences characteristic of the employer brand identity in the case of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca – The competence elements characteristic of the employer brand identity of the companies are less represented on the websites of the companies. In the case of 18.2 percent of the companies examined, employee testimonies are found on their websites that present the benefits of corporate life. 7.3 percent of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca list awards and recognitions received for employer quality.

The offer of the employer brand identity of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca – The software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca that recognized the risk of the lack of skilled workforce have made a comprehensive offer to draw the attention of future employees and convince current employees of the benefits of staying with the company.

The majority of the employer brand offers of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca are of a functional nature, including good salary (38.2 percent), professional work diversity (38.2 percent), comfortable working conditions (36.4 percent), opportunities for individual and professional development (33.6 percent) as well as for participation in training (32.7 percent).

Good workplace atmosphere (38.2 percent), ensuring the balance between work and life (36.4 percent), strong team spirit (30.9 percent) and the creation of a unique corporate culture (32.7 percent) can be pointed out as symbolic benefits.

4.3.2. The general profile of the employer brand identity in the case of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca

The general profile of employer brand identity is made up of the characteristics that have been most closely involved in the design of specific identity elements. The employer brand identity

of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca is more incomplete than their service brand identity. The shortcomings noted indicate that building the employer brand identity in the case of the companies examined is still an ongoing process, and that good practices related to employees have not yet solidified in the case of employers.

Three-quarters of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca have a mission (72.7 percent) or an offer (76.4 percent) related to workforce. Shortcomings were found in the list of values that determine the cooperation with employees (58.2 per cent), and in the presentation of the competences supporting the authenticity of employer offers (21.8 percent).

In the mission set out within the general profile of the employer brand identity, the intention to appreciate outstanding workforce can be recognized. The companies appreciate teamwork among employees. The personality of the employer brand identity can be characterized by skill and passion. In order to win and retain the workforce, the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca provide a wide range of employer offers. The offer of the general profile of the employer brand identity includes good salary and other compensations (51.8 percent).

4.3.3. The classification of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca based on the strength of their employer brand identity

The general profile of the employer brand identity summarizes the most common characteristics of the employer brand identity, but in reality, companies group around this general type. Based on the complexity of the employer brand identity, three corporate groups can be separated. 40 percent of the companies have a basic employer brand identity, 39 percent have a medium strength employer brand identity, while 21 percent of the companies could be considered strong in terms of their employer brand identity. Among the corporate groups developed on the basis of their employer brand identity, companies with basic employer brand identity have the general profile of employer brand identity.

Companies with a *basic employer brand identity* are mainly small companies that primarily provide services to the Romanian market. They are similar in their mission and values assumed to companies with a general profile employer brand identity, but are lagging far behind in terms of employer offers. In this group, companies had one employer offer, namely to provide comfortable working conditions. Their employer brand personality had two attributes: on the one hand, promptitude that is the readiness to adapt to customer expectations, and on the other hand, skill that is essential for the performance of service providing tasks.

Companies with a *medium strength employer brand identity* include small and medium Romanian companies that serve the Romanian market and have been established as software and IT service companies from the beginning. The mission of their employer brand identity emphasizes the appreciation of excellent workforce, and the main value of the cooperation with employees is the enforcement of teamwork. The personality of the employer brand identity can be characterized by skill and passion, but it is also characterized by promptitude and proactivity, which is a sign of receptiveness towards customer expectations. The offer of companies with a medium strength employer brand identity is a modest one, but they provide the functional and symbolic benefits that create effective working conditions. Functional benefits include good salary, opportunities for individual and professional development, a variety of professional tasks and comfortable work environment. A friendly workplace atmosphere, a strong team spirit and a balance between work and personal life can be mentioned as symbolic benefits. Companies with a medium strength employer brand identity do not support the credibility of

their offerings with competencies; this element is completely missing from the brand identity structure.

Companies with a *strong employer brand identity* differ significantly in terms of their origin from companies with a basic and even of a medium strength employer brand identity. In this group, medium-sized companies founded in Romania, Romanian premises of international companies and companies with *outsourcing* business strategies are in the majority, supplying global and international markets. Companies with strong employer brand identity have the same mission as companies with a basic employer brand identity, but brand values are complemented by the responsibility for employees, which indicates the importance of recognizing quality collaboration with employees. Another important difference is the presence of the competency element of the employer brand identity, meaning that the companies belonging to this group present the opinion of their employees about the internal life of the company, about the experience of working and belonging to the company. The personality of the brand identity is also more colourful, as there is a tendency for co-operation as a new attribute. The offer package of the employer brand identity is strikingly rich compared to companies with basic or medium strength employer brand identity. The functional benefits are complemented by five interrelated elements, and serve the professional development and excellence of the employees. This includes training courses, support for obtaining professional licenses, traineeships, providing career opportunities and creating an empowering environment. Symbolic benefits are complemented by two elements, namely the creation of a unique corporate culture and corporate social responsibility. Unique corporate culture enhances the psychological security of employees and contributes to a positive sense of professional identity through a sense of belonging. Corporate social responsibility increases the external positive perception of the company, which also has a positive impact on the experience of belonging to the company.

4.5. The visual brand communication of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca

In order to gain insight into the visual communication of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca, I analysed the first picture on the homepage of their websites with the method of content analysis. The first visual content that appears establishes the atmosphere of the home page, and thus influences the subjective impression of the user about the website, company and corporate brands.

The software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca aimed to capture the attention of the audience through the visual content published on their homepages. The visual contents were related to the field of activity or success of the companies. Most of the images depicted objects; most of the people appearing in the pictures were young men or young men and women shown together, the companies thus also indicated the peculiarities of their target group. The people in the pictures were wearing casual clothing, their facial expression was mostly cheerful, but serious facial expressions occurred as well. The mood of the people in the pictures imply the internal atmosphere of the companies; the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca have also indicated the importance of a good atmosphere within the company through their verbal communication, while also appreciating a serious and professional attitude.

Generally, two or three basic colours are present on the images found on the homepages. One third of the basic colours used in the images is blue, one third is white and one third is grey. On the homepages of the companies, three quarters of the letters were white, while in the other cases the colour of the letters was dark grey, rarely red or blue. By using different colours, the companies want to mostly suggest tranquillity, reliability, transparency and efficiency, but we

also came across some homepages that were based on burgundy, purple, magenta or neon green, which serves to raise awareness. Homepages preferred mostly the use of cold colours, following the canon for colour use of professional companies.

5. DISCUSSION

The companies presented their service and employer brand identities from their own perspective in the content published on their websites. In the matters examined, our results confirmed our expectations. Within the research, we did not analyse the service and employer brand management and the brand image of the examined companies.

The majority of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca have a clear service brand identity. The revealed results confirm Ojasalo's (2008) findings that, in the case of small and medium companies, digital channels are the appropriate intermediary for brand communication, as these companies do not have the resources to use highly expensive and wide-ranging PR campaigns. The 20 Finnish software companies examined by him focused on the excellent quality of their services during their branding process (Ojasalo 2008). The software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca have also set out to provide professional excellence as the main mission of their service brand identity.

Ritter and Germünden (2004) examined the branding activities of 308 German software and IT companies. The German software and IT companies examined listed technological competencies as their most important resources that gave them success in innovation. Technological competencies and customer orientation were also closely linked in the case of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca. The companies from Cluj-Napoca assumed responsibility for the quality of their services, while also taking on the role of advisor, partner and service provider. The focus on technological competence was also related to the fact that the leaders of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca themselves are excellent professionals from the field of software and IT (Coleman–de Chernatony–Christodoulides 2015: 17) who are passionate about technological innovations.

The results of the analysis of the employer brand identity in the case of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca were unexpected. The labour shortage in the sector justified the establishment of a strong employer brand identity among the examined companies. Worldwide and in Europe, companies in the software and IT sector have a leading role in creating employer brands (Randstad 2017). Big companies use the employer brand as a tool for recruitment (Randstad 2017), while small and medium companies are disadvantaged in this area. Most of the examined software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca were small and medium companies, being characterized by an incomplete or general profile employer brand identity.

The survey conducted by Randstad (2017) also registered the expectations of employees. The expectations of the majority of employees were: ensuring good salary and other incentives (58 percent), job security (46 percent), balance between work and personal life (45 percent), good workplace atmosphere (43 percent), providing opportunities for development and career prospects (35 percent). A pleasant workplace atmosphere was a priority for 18-24 year old staff, while the balance between work and personal was important for 25-44 year old employees. Offers with the mentioned attractiveness were all present in the offer of the software and IT

companies from Cluj-Napoca with strong employer brand identities, which proves the conscious attitude of some of the companies examined towards the employees.

According to the Universum (2017) survey, the most popular employers in the world place an emphasis on communicating with visual content in their employer brand communication, and primarily consider employee photos and employee videos as the most attractive content. Our results were consistent with the Universum survey, as 90 percent of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca start with visual content on their home page, but only half of the companies presented pictures of videos on the life within the company.

The software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca addressed two important target groups on their website, namely customers and employees. The majority of the companies examined had a clear and comprehensive idea of their own service providing quality, and listed the functional and symbolic benefits they offered to their customers. The examined companies also had an idea about their own employer quality, but the element of offer was developed primarily in their employer brand identity.

The identity-based approach has been prominent in determining the service and employer brand identity of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca. The incorporation of corporate values and competencies was characteristic for the construction of both service and employer brand identities. At the same time, the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca paid attention to the needs of customers and employees, and have matched the expectations of their respective target groups within their service and employer brand identity offer.

One of the limitations of the research presented in the dissertation is the small size of the sample, as well as the disproportionality of the operationalisation in some places. Possibilities for further improvement of the research presented in the dissertation include the extension of the research to a representative sample of software and IT companies in Romania, as well as the extension of the results obtained by content analysis with the own ideas of the brand builders on the development of the identity of the service and employer brand.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The research aims to examine the service and employer brand identities of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca based on the corporate data published on their websites, as well as to categorize the mentioned companies based on their characteristics related to brand identity.

Using the results of personal identity research, Burmann et al. (2017) developed an identity-based model of brand management. This conceptual model was the base used to measure the service and employer brand identity of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca. The novelty of the results presented in the dissertation is to be found in the empirical control of existing conceptual models. The measuring instrument for the studying of the service and employer brand identity of the companies examined was based on the conceptual model of brand identity developed by Burmann et al. (2017), the novelty of the research being the operationalization of the service and employer brand identity concepts. The study population is also unique, as there is no previous example of examining the brand identity of software and IT companies in Romania. The analysis can serve as the basis for any brand management activity of software and IT companies in Romania. At the same time, the software and IT sector is at

the forefront of brand building worldwide, but there is a lack of researches that would point out the identity building processes of companies in this well-performing sector decisive for the spirit and operation of the era.

The software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca have a well-established and neat service brand identity, although they are characterized by internal layering. Almost half of the companies surveyed have an incomplete service brand identity, nearly 30 percent have general profile brand identity, and over 30 percent have a strong service brand identity. The software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca base their service providing identity on quality services, customer orientation and the need for digital switchover. Companies with a strong and a general profile service brand are the Romanian premises of international companies and the medium-sized developed Romanian companies.

Compared to their service brand identity, the employer brand identity of most of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca is less strong. 20 percent of the companies examined have a strong employer brand identity. Almost 40 percent of the companies examined have a general profile employer brand identity, while 40 percent have an incomplete employer brand identity. The employer brand identity of the software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca is based on the appreciation of the workforce, the development of team spirit, the creation of a pleasant workplace atmosphere, the provision of financial incentives, as well as of opportunities for individual and professional development. These offers are designed to serve the well-being of employees as well as to attract excellent workforce. The essential interests of the companies involved are the good performance of the employees, therefore, their employer brand is primarily aimed at meeting the expectations of employees.

The strength of the two brand types in the case of software and IT companies from Cluj-Napoca highlights that these companies built their service-providing brand identity at first, focusing on attracting customers. The software and IT sector has successfully created the economic need to turn business into a more technological field, but the industry will face a new challenge very soon: there are fewer and fewer employees with competitive knowledge, and without them the success of the industry is at risk. Companies in the most dynamically developing economic sector, responding to the lack of a competitive workforce that can be recognized as a sign of a crisis in the knowledge economy, are attempting to attract and retain the most suitable employees by creating their own employer brand identity. The processes of globalization also affect the operation of software and IT companies in Romania, and only those companies remain competitive that are able to obtain the rarest resources.

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