
The Perceived Value of Church, Independent, and State Schools' Employer Brands Among School Teachers in Malta

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Abstract

The local situation regarding the engagement and retention of teachers is somewhat under-researched. As elicited in the literature review, the employer branding concept is considered as a positive move towards attracting and retaining employees. Thus, this study investigates the dimensions of perceived value as projected by employer brands that may attract human resources to a particular school – whether church, independent, or state. The components and features of perceived value were explored by means of semi-structured interviews. Listening to teachers' voices enables the employers to understand their perception. Hence, such practice will contribute to establishing the Employee Value Proposition, which is an integral part of the employer branding concept. The Employee Value Proposition communicates what teachers wish to see in their employer, as well as their intentions of either staying or leaving their job or employer type. Subsequently, the employer can strategically develop and convey their image as the employer of choice to both current and prospective teachers. The findings and discussion that emerge from this qualitative study demonstrate the multifaceted dimensions of perceived value ranging between family-like work environment, networking between schools, and market outreach. Such findings and discussion are intended to contribute towards a change in the employers' mindset by inviting teachers to build and shape the Employee Value Proposition based on their perceived value.

Keywords

Church Schools, Independent Schools, State Schools, Teachers, Perceived Value, Employee Value Proposition, Employer Branding Process, Employer Brands, Thematic Analysis

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Introduction

Understanding Perceived Value and Employer Brands

Based on Zeithaml's (1988) definition, which is widely referred to by researchers, perceived value is an individual's evaluation on the worthiness of the product or service. In other words, perceived value is all about the consumer's general perception and interpretation of understanding the level of importance of the product or service in terms of utility, interaction, personal pleasure and experience. Perception, unlike reality, is a sensory and subjective experience that is made up of intangible components of value in relation to consumer benefits (Ramos, 2020). In this case, the employees, particularly local school teachers, would be regarded as the consumers by understanding their individual perceptions and experiences. Like most traditional profit-generating business markets, for schools it is crucial that teachers are able to communicate their perception of value to attract and retain teachers. The Employee Value Proposition (EVP) stage comes into play since communicating is an inherent part of understanding teachers' perceived value. It is in the employer's interest to ensure that the school attracts and retains teachers by fostering an employee-centric culture in schools. School teachers will potentially engage themselves in a more open and transparent dialogue with employers by communicating the elements that have the most impact on them working at the schools (Edwards, 2010; Bartels et al., 2007). This communication process is conducive to building robust school employer brand. By adopting a qualitatively informed framework, the multidimensional characteristics of perceived value in relation to the schools' employer brands are identified.

Rationale & Aims

Teacher shortages are a significant problem in most developed countries. This study tries to address this challenge by looking at the local schools' context through the marketing lens. The teacher shortage phenomenon needs to be solved since "the high turnover may have adverse effects on teacher collaboration and student outcomes" (European Commission, 2019, p. 5). Backed by the literature, employer branding is identified as a plausible solution to this perennial problem. Hence, the aims of the study are twofold. Firstly, it is aimed at identifying the perceived value dimensions that construct the employer's brand as seen by teachers. Employer branding, if exercised as

a pro-active and ongoing process, potentially leads to job attractiveness and retention in local church, independent, and state schools. Secondly, the study aims to contribute towards providing an initial understanding of what attracts and maximises the retention of teachers working in church, independent, and state schools in Malta. Thus, the study researches the groundwork to establishing the concept of employer branding in schools. To the researchers' knowledge, no local research has so far been conducted regarding schools' employer brands and their impact on schools as a work environment, which emphasises the relevance of this present study.

Research Question

The research question directing this study is: What is the perceived value of church, independent, and state schools' employer brands among school teachers? Answering this research question requires an empirical study which, to the researchers' knowledge, has never been conducted before in Malta. This study draws from Dukerich's social identity framework (Dukerich et al., 2002), which is the theoretical foundation of employer branding. As a result, this study is intended to extend existing understanding about the employer branding process into the context of local schools.

Relevance of the Study

The study is intended not only to contribute towards a change in the employer's mindset but to ultimately invest significantly in instituting employer branding within the local school context. The need to address a more robust employer branding strategy should be considered not only on the microcosmic level of the individual school but also on a national level. The study can therefore assist pertinent stakeholders to prepare the groundwork for the institution of employer branding. Lastly, the study will hopefully contribute to the literature, particularly in the areas of local schools' human resources management, communication and marketing.

This paper proceeds with featuring the review of literature selected with a focus on understanding the correlation between the teachers' multidimensional elements of their perceived value and how these will contribute to the schools' employer brands. The paper will also provide an overview of another important component of the study, namely the employer branding process. Specific

reference will also be made to the co-creation of value procedure through which values are exchanged by employees, the stakeholders in a modern social context (Lusch & Vargo, 2006; Normann & Ramírez, 1993). The research methodology employed in the study is also outlined. The findings emanating from the interviews and a critical discussion on the various themes in the light of the literature review will be presented. Consequently, a final overview of the recommendations that emerged from the study will be delineated.

Review of Literature

The Relationship Between Teachers' Multidimensional Nature of Perceived Value and Schools' Employer Brands

Early marketing literature focused on the functional role of value, which was intrinsically linked to the quality, utility, and price of products or services (Said Camilleri, 2018). Set in the specific context of commercial and industrial sectors, value was considered to be a cognitive "trade-off" between "benefits" and costs (Monroe, 1979, as cited in Woodruff, 1997, p. 141). Eventually, researchers started taking into account other factors of higher level of abstractions, such as perception of prestige and convenience (Holbrook, 1999). Consequently, there was a paradigm shift from 'value' to 'perceived values' pertaining to consumers, suppliers and services offered (Fernández & Bonillo, 2007). Following the '90s market shift, the introduction of the EVP can be considered as the point of departure of the creation of a significant relationship between consumers and organisations. Such relationship was based on dialogue, access and openness, and in it stakeholders gave further attention to consumer attitudes and behaviours (Sinha & DeSarbo, 1998). Organisations started acknowledging and appreciating their employees as internal consumers (Lusch et al., 1996). Subsequently, considering that the concept of branding is consumer-oriented, organisations focused further on employees' tight collaboration and contribution (Pralhad & Ramaswamy, 2002; Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004) by giving maximum importance to employees' perceived value (Zeithaml et al., 2020).

Although diverse variables and ambiguities characterise the constructs of perceived value, this developmental process led researchers, particularly Holbrook's typology of perceived value (1994, 1999), Hartman's axiology or value theory (1967), and Sheth's consumption value theory (1991a, 1991b), to

reach the conclusion that the perception of value is indeed of multidimensional nature. Despite the lack of a linear, standard definition of perceived value, Holbrook's statement encapsulates all the elements which form the multidimensional construct of perceived value: "I define consumer value as an interactive relativistic preference experience" (1999, p. 5). This statement should also serve as a framework for employers trying to attract potential workers by providing them with what they seek in employment. Holbrook emphasises that the six elements outlined below are all interrelated and interconnected to form one holistic system that constitutes the "emergent phenomenon" of customer value (1999, p. 5). Holbrook's typology of consumer value (1994, 1999) is considered to be the broadest approach, which defines more sources of value than other studies, given that it encapsulates all the economic, social, hedonic, and altruistic components of perceived value.

According to Holbrook's definition, perceived value involves:

- i. **Interactivity:** it "entails an interaction between a subject (a customer or consumer) and some object (a product or service)" (Holbrook, 1999, p. 5).
- ii. **Relativism:** it involves preferences when comparing objects; it is "personal", subjective and "specific" in time, place and circumstances to "the context" (Holbrook, 1999, p. 6).
- iii. **Preference:** it is preferential, possibly an innate sentiment driving individuals to opt for a preferred choice (Holbrook, 1999).
- iv. **Experience:** it is the feeling of self-fulfilment, having reached the desired goal (Holbrook, 1999).
- v. **Utilitarian Value:** it is "instrumental, task-related, rational, functional, cognitive, and a means to an end" (Holbrook, 1999 as cited in Fernández & Bonillo, 2007, p. 436).
- vi. **Hedonic Value:** it is "reflecting the entertainment and emotional worth of shopping; non-instrumental, experiential, and affective" (Holbrook, 1999, as cited in Fernández & Bonillo, 2007, p. 436).

The above-mentioned six facets are not only constructs of perceived value but also complement each other. In other words, the six branches of perceived value overlap and merge to create the need-/want-satisfying experience. Holbrook (1999, p. 9) states that all elements ultimately "lie at the heart of the consumption experience".

The axiology or value theory of Hartman (1967) is another multidimensional construct which defines the value realm in the following three dimensions: extrinsic, intrinsic and systemic value. Hartman's (1967) extrinsic value refers to the utilitarian or instrumental use of a particular service as a means to a specific end, while intrinsic value represents the emotional appreciation of the service.

Sheth's consumption value theory (1991a, 1991b) claims that the multifaceted determinants of consumer choice are a variety of forms of consumption values and not purchase criteria. The forms of value are categorised as functional, social, emotional, epistemic and conditional (Sheth et al., 1991a, 1991b). A fundamental premise on which this theory rests is that these forms of value act independently and differently according to the circumstances, the time, the place, and consumption. These forms of value are illustrated below:

- i. **Functional value** pertains to whether a product or service "is able to perform its functional, utilitarian, or physical purposes" (Sheth et al., 1991a; Sheth et al., 1991b, as cited in Fernández & Bonillo, 2007, p. 438).
- ii. **Social value** refers the social image the consumer wishes to project or to an image that is acknowledged by the consumer's circle of friends, family, acquaintances, and society at large (Sheth et al., 1991a, 1991b).
- iii. **Emotional value** is related to one's feelings, which may be positive or negative (Sheth et al., 1991a, 1991b).
- iv. **Epistemic value** "is concerned with the consumer's desire for knowledge, whether driven by intellectual curiosity or for the sake of seeking of novelty". (Sheth et al., 1991a; Sheth et al., 1991b, as cited in, Fernández & Bonillo, 2007, p. 438).
- v. **Conditional value** reflects a person's preceding physical or social factors or circumstances that increase the product's functional or social worth (Sheth et al., 1991a, 1991b).

Identifying and determining the multifaceted sources of employees' perceived value should be seen as a holistic and ongoing assessment within an ever-changing consumer relationship to function in a beneficial manner. Organisations need to ensure that employees' perceptions are consistent with other prevailing factors, and that these perceptions ultimately become the determining, reliable factors of the EVP (Zeithaml et al., 2020; Fernández & Bonillo, 2007). If the EVP is diligently managed, it informs recruiting campaigns, engagement, and communication (Pawar & Charak, 2014).

The employer branding strategy's communicative and interactive stage, which is the EVP, encourages consumers to express and share their perceptions on the importance of individual and professional objectives for success, profitability, and fulfilment (Pawar, 2016). The organisation subsequently builds consumer awareness and understanding of the desired employer brand image by regularly conveying messages regarding the organisation's value, systems, and policies. In doing so, the employer brand depicting the firm's identity externally is communicated to stakeholders and potential candidates who need to match the organisation to their needs (Wilden et al., 2010).

Nevertheless, it is when the external employer brand image truly projects the internal one that the communication process is complete (Pawar, 2016). In other words, the organisation has to openly manifest that it is loyal to the brand image shaped by consumers and depicted in the EVP.

This interactive process of engaging consumers in the EVP yields the co-creation of value. The co-creation of value is built on pooling all the resources and stakeholders to build the mutual exchange of knowledge and competences (Payne et al., 2008). Both the employer and employees participate in deciding on the methods and structure of the value creation procedure to ultimately create value for the benefit of both consumer and work organisation (Hughes & Brooks, 2019). With particular reference to this study, within the local school context, value is co-created between administration, teachers, students, auxiliary personnel and parents. Nurturing such an approach among all these stakeholders produces positive psychological closeness with all its advantages, and intangible wealth of knowledge for the organisation, which will provide rich information for the employer-branding concept.

Employer branding is the process of creating and conveying positive images of a "first-class employer" and an "exceptional work environment" in the eyes of current as well as prospective employees (Ewing et al., 2002). Research shows that employees' perceived value does not only yield satisfied consumers, but also conveys a positive image of long-lasting loyalty and retention (Yang &

Peterson, 2004). Keeping in mind that the organisation has to build and maintain a good reputation, the EVP must aim to manifest long-standing organisational excellence. Nevertheless, creating objective and essential information in the work organisation is necessary to produce a consistently appealing image of the work environment. This can be achieved by objectively acknowledging the baggage of expertise, experience, knowledge, and loyalty of consumers. Driven by the latter's perceived value of the organisation, the experts in the field are ideal for the shaping of EVP.

Consistent with Dukerich's social identity theory (Dukerich et al., 2002), employer branding has two goals:

- i. To excel the image of the employer as "the employer of choice" (Armstrong, 2007, p. 40).
- ii. To maintain "employee commitment to the organisation through a sense of oneness with the brand" (Backhaus, 2016, p. 3).

The employer branding is implemented properly if the process is instituted as a long-term strategy which focuses on the ongoing flow of operational, creative, and managerial capabilities in the business and not merely the short-term recruiting programmes. The process should be initiated in a systematic manner by:

- i. Identifying and creating an appealing value proposition that contains the advantages that will be delivered to the future and current employees (Lievens, 2007).
- ii. Communicating the value proposition created in the first step (Lievens, 2007).
- iii. Putting the EVP into action (Lievens, 2007).

The literature shows that most of the research studies focus on the implementation of employer branding in the traditional business markets or corporate firm companies in which profit and sales are generated. Notwithstanding that, one notes that such research has also been conducted in the education sector, this being the sector of interest in this study. However, a thorough search in the local literature results in no study having been conducted locally. This study will provide the opportunity for teachers to grasp the idea of communicating their key perceptions of employer branding. The key elements arising from the present study would positively provide a better understanding of what is considered beneficial to teachers and ultimately to the entire school community. Those same key elements could be further enhanced by drawing up a long-term marketing strategy of the education sector to promote attractiveness and retention of teachers locally.

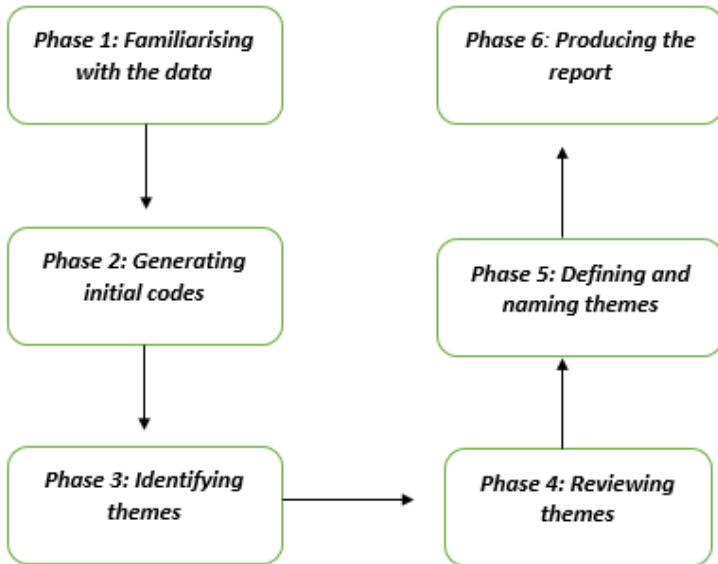
Methodology

This study involved qualitative, in-depth interviews with 11 local teachers employed in Maltese church, independent, and state schools. Ethical considerations were taken into account from the beginning, when the researchers embarked on the research project, to protect the interests of individuals directly and indirectly participating in the research. The sample was selected through purposive sampling by the relative Head of School. A pilot interview (purposely conducted beforehand) assessed participants' understanding and response to questions asked during the interviews. All interviews were conducted online, largely in response to prevailing COVID-19 pandemic conditions that rendered physical interviews difficult to organise and conduct. Each participant was reassured that their personal information and that of the school would remain anonymous and strictly confidential. All recorded interviews were duly destroyed after being transcribed, and all material was only used for the purpose of this study.

Applying probes and spontaneous questions whilst conducting interviews enabled the participants' answers to remain relevant to the aim of the study, clarified responses to queries, and expanded on participants' arguments (Wilson, 2014). All recorded interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis. The themes derived from the participants' responses were matched to the components of perceived value addressed in the literature review by following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase criteria (See Figure 1).

Figure 1

Six-phase guidelines



Source: Braun & Clarke, 2006

Limitations of the Study

As far as limitations of the study are concerned, values are elusive, fluid, situation-specific and subjective. The major goal of the study was to ultimately extract in-depth data which explores the components and features that potentially shape the perceived value of teachers about schools' employer brands.

The nature of the study is qualitative and could not be projected to the entire population of local school teachers. Nevertheless, the small sample,

as recommended by the literature, yields data that can be understood, investigated, and researched, but not generalised (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Participant Characteristics

Table 1 summarises the characteristics of the study participants (who are referred to through their aliases to safeguard their anonymity).

Table 1

School and participant information

Participant Code Number	School Code Number	Years of Teaching Experience
Participant 1	State school 1	1–10 years
Participant 2	State school 1	1–10 years
Participant 3	State school 1	1–10 years
Participant 4	State school 1	1–10 years
Participant 5	State school 2	11–20 years
Participant 6	State school 2	11–20 years
Participant 7	Church school 1	21–30 years
Participant 8	Church school 1	21–30 years
Participant 9	Church school 2	1–10 years
Participant 10	Church school 2	1–10 years
Participant 11	Independent school 5	1–10 years

Findings and Discussion

Most participants felt that such studies rarely relate to the local school scenario. Nevertheless, participants claimed that they found the concepts “perceived value” and “employer branding” clearly defined in layperson’s terms as helpful to be able to provide the necessary data. Indeed, by employing this technique, participants shared clearly their understanding of value and what an employer brand is. The results emerging from such research would help employers

better understand what presently attracts and engages teachers to continue working at their particular school and what such teachers would wish to see implemented in the future.

Interconnection Between the Five Main Themes

The study sought to explore those characteristics teachers consider most valuable regarding the schools' employer brands. The 5 main themes that emerged revealed how crucial it is for employers to maintain a healthy and optimal balance of both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators to attract and retain teachers. Essentially, the unifying element that connected all the five themes is the need to foster a supportive work environment that encourages personal growth and professional development. Participants working in church, independent, and state schools shared the same value theme that they search for in relation to their schools' employer brands. Since the study explores perceived value, the prevalent multidimensional themes that emerged are set out below in Table 2.

Table 2

The 5 main themes and the 40 subthemes of the study

THEMES	NUMBER OF SUBTHEMES
1. Family-like work environment and appreciation – intrinsic motivators	11
2. Autonomy/Freedom – creativity and innovation	7
3. Career advancement and CPD	6
4. Good work conditions – extrinsic motivators	12
5. Networking, further market outreach and awareness	4

Main Theme 1: A Family-Like Work Environment and Appreciation – Intrinsic Motivators

Most of the participants from all types of schools mentioned the importance of feeling that they “are not just a number” (Participant 1, Participant 8, and Participant 11) and that they “work as a team” (Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 5, Participant 6, Participant 7, Participant 8, Participant 10, and Participant 11), the need to feel “appreciated for the work” they do (Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 5, Participant 6, Participant 7, Participant 8, Participant 10, and Participant 11), and that they are supported by their employer. The subthemes (see Figure 2) which have been categorised under this main theme are keywords which were repeatedly mentioned by most participants during the interviews:

As teachers, we feel we are quite a valuable asset to the school. The thing that affects me the most is the strong teamwork between teachers. It is one of the strongest pillars to me: good teamwork between School Management Team (SMT), teachers, full year group of Learning Support Educators (LSEs). That’s something both me and my colleagues try to encourage a lot. (Participant 3)

To me feeling welcomed and becoming part of a second family is very important. I will never change that school. Also, another thing is that the SMT sometimes pays a visit to the classroom to follow [the teachers’] lessons. The visits are not intended to judge us but rather to know what we are teaching. For me that is appreciating [the teachers’] work. (Participant 4)

[...] I feel so lucky that I have found an atmosphere of family, friendliness and well-behaved students at the school. You don’t feel like just a number, you know. (Participant 8)

I like a lot that sense of community within the school. One staff room. We are very close, and I find that very valuable [small pause]. More togetherness. (Participant 10)

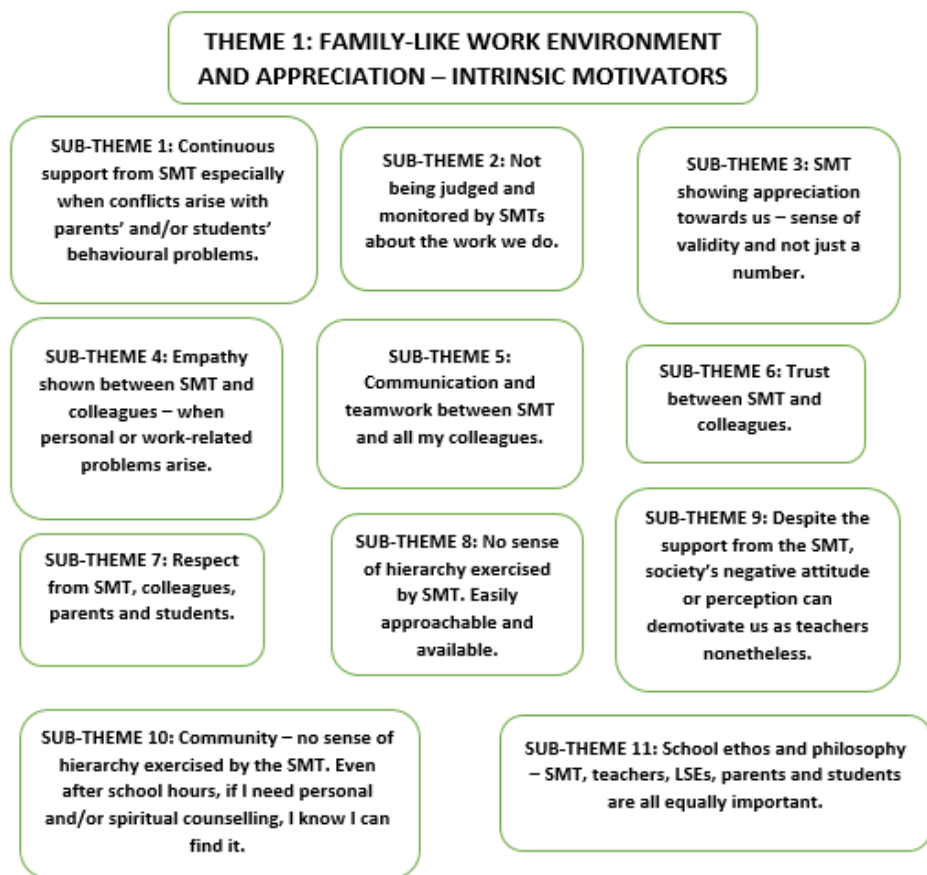
[...] I perceive myself as a valuable member of the school [...]. I feel that sense of unity, a family environment where everyone is valid and being listened to, which is what attracted me to teach at the school. (Participant 11)

Hartman's (1967) value theory exposing intrinsic (emotional) values, Holbrook's typology of perceived value (1994, 1999), specifically intrinsic motivation, as well as Sheth's social and emotional values (1991a, 1991b) take into account both the intrinsic component and the element of subjectivity. The first main theme and subthemes that emerged from the interviews were the need to have a family-like work environment and appreciation. Literature suggests consumption activities offer both utilitarian and hedonic outcomes (Holbrook, 1999).

Demonstrated Appreciation. Participants claimed regretfully that the lack of demonstrated appreciation demotivates them, whereas demonstrated appreciation helps ensure that they remain in their job. In terms of Holbrook's typology of perceived value with Sheth's social component of the consumption value theory (1991a, 1991b), teachers feel that sense of validation and are extrinsically motivated to keep nurturing and sharing the image that is acknowledged by their superiors, parents, stakeholders, and society at large.

Figure 2

Thematic map presenting Theme 1: Family-like work environment and appreciation – intrinsic motivators, and the 11 subthemes that emerged



Main Theme 2: Autonomy/Freedom – for Creativity and Innovation

The majority of participants from church, independent, and state schools, particularly Participant 1, Participant 3, Participant 9, Participant 10, and Participant 11, mentioned that they are able to have autonomy and freedom when it comes to creating teaching and learning material and resources for students at the schools:

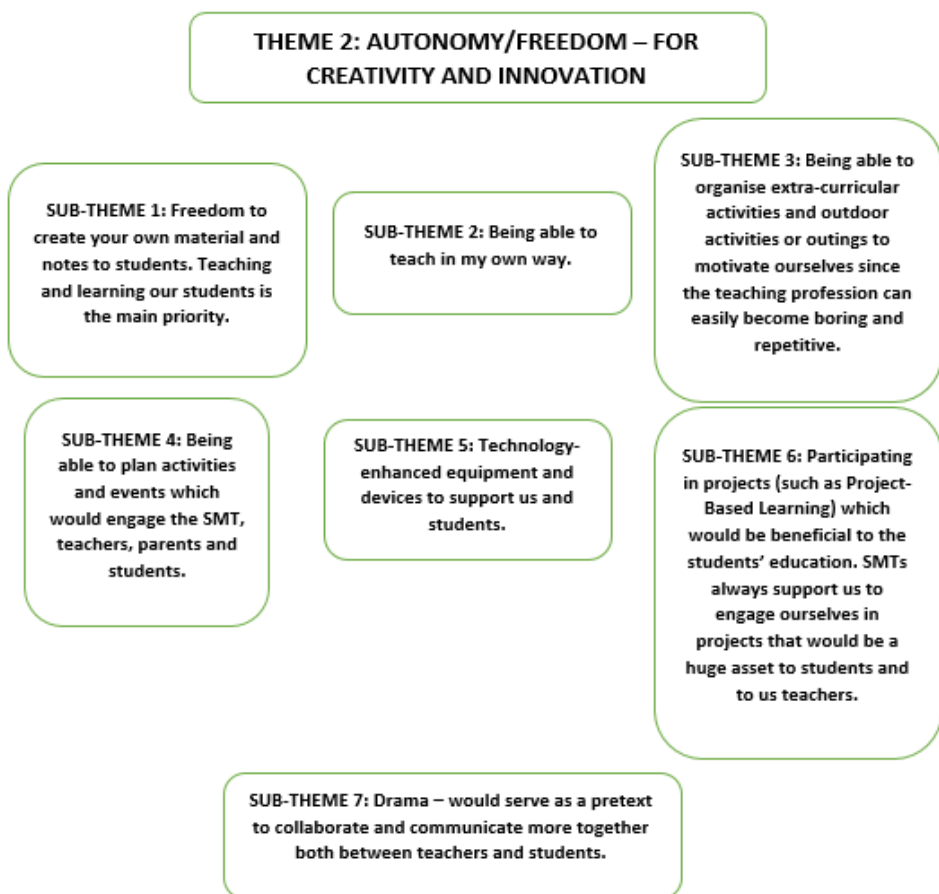
Being able to organise outings for our students is important to me. The SMT never imposed any restrictions on it [...] which is very important. (Participant 1)

The SMT gives space to [teachers] to try out or experience new things. [...] We, as teachers, feel at ease to put forward new proposals. Being able to contribute in this manner helps me stay motivated since a teacher's job can easily become monotonous or repetitive. I love seeing and try out new things from a different perspective since my motivation is stimulated. (Participant 3)

I think maybe that I can be autonomous in my work [small pause] – freedom to create your own material, to create your own notes. I heard of schools where they have [small pause] booklet and they have to follow that booklet. Whereas I can create whatever I want, my own PowerPoints and notes. I can even take the children now too and do a lesson in the yard. It helps me being more flexible and creative in my work. (Participant 10)

Figure 3

Thematic map presenting Theme 2: Autonomy/Freedom – for creativity and innovation, and the 7 subthemes that emerged



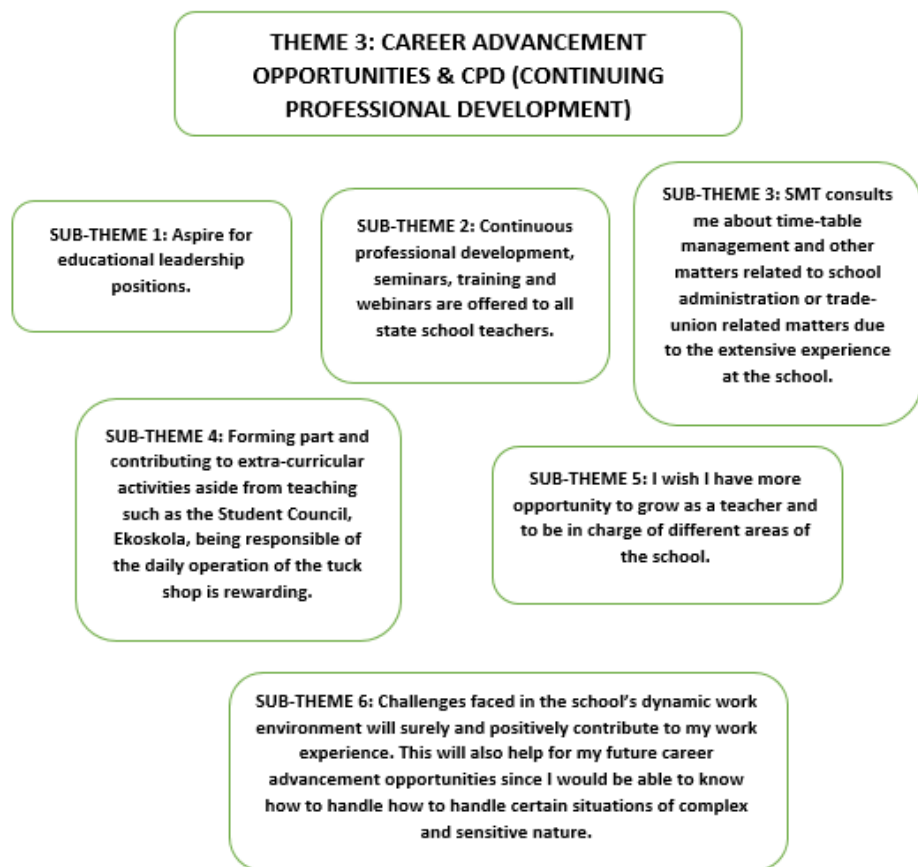
Hartman's extrinsic and intrinsic values (1967) and Holbrook's utilitarian value (1994, 1999) can be heavily associated with the second theme that emerged, since the need for participants to exercise autonomy for creative purposes in their work is instrumental, task-related, functional, cognitive, and a means to an end. Ultimately, this process enables participants to perform their tasks with excellence and, in doing so, experience a feeling of self-fulfilment. Also, in a school context, the co-creation of value process (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Ramírez, 1999; Vargo & Lusch, 2004), which is backed by the service science (Spohrer et al., 2007), typically focuses on the teaming up of individuals to create a project, resources or programme considered of value. The latter is apparent in Figure 3 above, which sets out the subthemes that emerged.

Main Theme 3: Career Advancement and Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

The third key theme that emerges from these interviews is career advancement and CPD (see Figure 4). Participant 11 expressed the wish to seek more opportunity to progress as a teacher by tapping into different, important operations within the various areas of the school. Participant 4 emphasised the importance of SMTs being pro-active by carrying out "classroom observations during their lessons" with the aim of appreciating the work involved and ultimately providing "feedback on how to improve".

Figure 4

Thematic map presenting Theme 3: Career advancement opportunities & CPD, and the 6 subthemes that emerged



This aspect is linked to Holbrook's theoretical framework of experience value since it involves the feeling of self-fulfilment and the desire to reach a goal. The epistemic value in Sheth's (1991a, 199b) consumption theory is concerned with the consumer's aspiration for knowledge driven by "intellectual curiosity" or a need for "novelty" (Fernández & Bonillo, 2007, p. 437). Participant 1's claim, as well the subthemes presented in Figure 4 above, embody the need for that epistemic value:

I am up for new challenges. [...]. We have a lot of students with different multicultural backgrounds which may be challenging but also interesting. [...] Having such challenges will help for my future career development and advancement opportunities. (Participant 1)

Main Theme 4: Good Work Conditions – Extrinsic Motivators

The need to have good work conditions at the school emerged as the penultimate theme, consistent with Holbrook's utilitarian value (Holbrook, 1999). Good work conditions is an umbrella term that encompasses several factors ranging from working hours and workload to the physical work environment, rights and responsibilities (see Figure 5). We discuss three main subthemes within this dimension.

Safeguarding a Healthy Work-Life Balance. The aspects most mentioned by participants were the need to have a healthy work-life balance and, somewhat related, in the case of secondary schools to be given the lessons timetable before the summer holidays. (In primary schools, teachers could be informed about which class they will be teaching the following scholastic year.) Considering that teachers have no possibility of choosing any day they wish to be off from work, most participants from all the schools (Participant 4, Participant 5, Participant 6, Participant 7, Participant 8, Participant 10, and Participant 11) mentioned that such information would "relieve them from stress" and help them "pre-plan the workload and organise their personal commitments".

Financial Support. Another common subtheme came from Participant 2, Participant 4, Participant 10, and Participant 11, who emphasised the importance of having a competitive salary and job security at work. Participant 2 values the economic importance of doing extra duties as morning and mid-day supervision

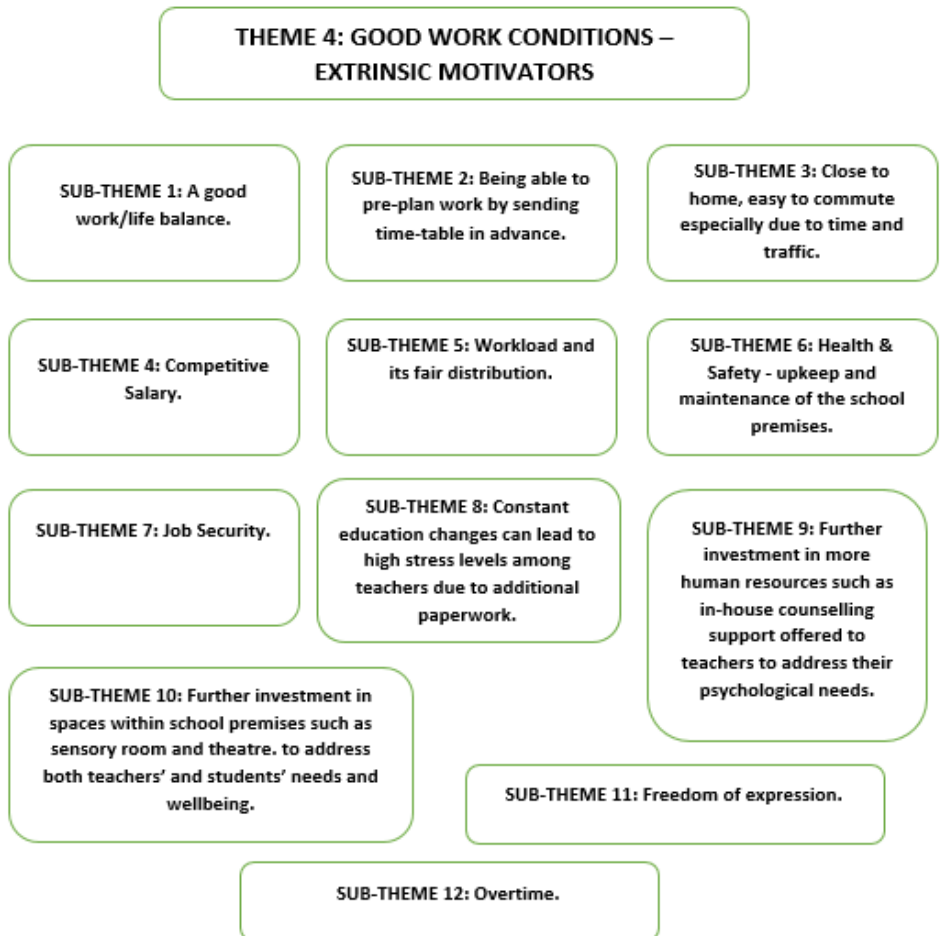
to earn more money and address personal financial commitments. According to Sheth's consumption value theory, the conditional value reflects a person's perception based on experience and previous factors or circumstances that add worth to the product's function or work. Participant 2's line of thought can also be categorised under Holbrook's relativistic value since it is personal and subjective and specific in time, place and circumstances to the context:

Personally, I am more interested in for example work and money. It's important to me that I work as much as possible in view of financial commitments. I am involved in breakfast, mid-day supervision as well as tutoring [...]. (Participant 2)

Upholding a Health and Safety Culture. A third important subtheme that emerged from these interviews related to the importance of upholding a health and safety culture at the school. Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 5 emphasised the "necessity of having a safe and well-maintained physical work environment for the workforce, parents, students and visitors", ensuring that all "precautions regarding safety procedures and actions are taken". The theme of safeguarding a health and safety culture within the school is also consistent with Holbrook's utilitarian and Sheth's functional theoretical frameworks (Sheth et al., 1991a, 1991b).

Figure 5

Thematic map presenting Theme 4: Good work conditions – extrinsic motivators, and the 12 subthemes that emerged



Main Theme 5: Networking and Further Market Outreach and Awareness

The fifth key theme emerging from this study's interviews echoes the co-creation of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Ramírez, 1999; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Here participants talk about the need for more networking with other schools, both on a national and international level, and further market outreach and awareness.

Social Media Outreach. One of the participants mentioned the importance of updating and using all the school's communication media, such as the school's website, on a regular basis. Such behaviour is consistent with Hartman's extrinsic, utilitarian value (1967), Holbrook's preferential experience (1999), and the co-creation of value (Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004; Ramírez, 1999; Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Sheth's functional and social value (1991a, 1991b) can also be linked with the subthemes of social media outreach, as the updating of school's online web content serves as a testimony of teachers' work contributed towards students. Updating the schools' media periodically by showcasing the teachers' work has a positive impact on teachers' motivation. Furthermore, social media can be the marketing medium through which employers can attract future teachers by creating further awareness of the teachers' job. Furthermore, participants claim that it is essential to ultimately reach out to society at large and attract prospective employees and parents to send their children to a specific school:

A good school needs to have a good website where I can access [...]. I don't need to send emails and awaiting responses. I want to see and read everything about the school. Website is the way a school presents itself. A school can lose some customers and potentially some good employees as well because of [not having a duly updated website and content]. A school needs to make well known and advertised how things are taught, techniques used and how amazing teachers are. (Participant 11)

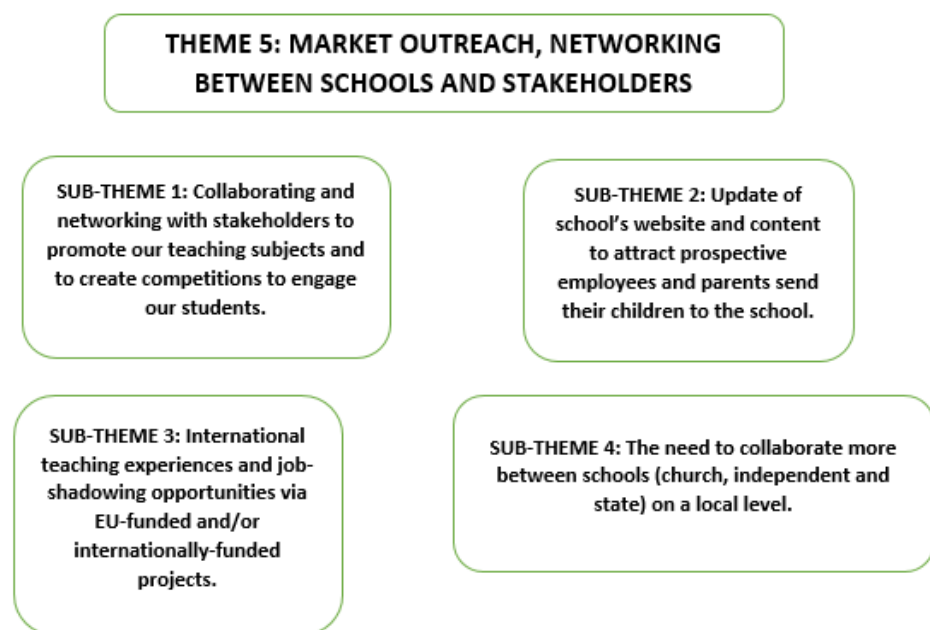
Positive Collaboration Among Teachers. Study participants claim that collaborating and networking with teachers from other schools to promote their teaching subjects increases their self-fulfilment of contributing positively to the student's learning process. Positive contribution happens more effectively when teachers are encouraged to create projects that go beyond the conventional lesson plan. Indeed, students engage themselves more when lessons include some gamification element such as creating competitions related to the subject. Participant 7 and Participant 8 see the networking and market outreach to the learning environment and beyond as the perfect opportunity to showcase their hard work and effort towards their teaching profession. Interactive and experience values (Holbrook, 1999) are evident for Participant 7 and Participant 8 when they "collaborate and network with other local schools". However, participant discourse tends to indicate that teachers are dismayed that all schools appear to function as separate entities:

I feel that the school needs to open up in terms of experiences for teachers and should take place beyond the traditional school classroom environment. We need to network more with other local schools. (Participant 7)

By introducing formal communication networks among church, independent, and state schools, schools can potentially learn from each other through knowledge-sharing experiences regardless of the diverse educational establishments. All participants' discourse, including the emergent subthemes (see Figure 6 below), can be paralleled with Sheth et al.'s epistemic value (1991a), which is concerned with the consumer's aspiration to acquire knowledge, even when this knowledge is communicated by colleagues.

Figure 6

Thematic map presenting Theme 5: Market outreach, networking between schools and stakeholders, and the 4 subthemes that emerged



Further Observations

Following the semi-structured interviews, various factors emerged which, according to the researchers, give further insight into the study. After examining and categorising carefully all the themes and subthemes, the researchers conclude that all the multidimensional characteristics of perceived value emphasised by participants feature in Hartman's value theory (1967), Holbrook's typology of perceived value (1994, 1999) and Sheth's consumption value theory (1991a, 1991b). In fact, Holbrook's typology (1994, 1999) encompassed all the elements mentioned in the participants' responses. Participants also confirmed that the co-creation of value is also an important component in their teaching profession. Hence, the findings answered the research question and sustained the literature review.

The dimensions of teachers' perceived value of employer brand are unsurprisingly many and varied, reflecting the several "interrelated questions" [which] "form a complex phenomenon known as perceived value" (Fernández & Bonillo, 2007, p. 431; Babin et al., 1994; Holbrook, 1994, 1999; Huber et al., 2000; Mattsson, 1991; Sheth et al., 1991a; Sweeney & Soutar, 2001; Williams & Soutar, 2000). The themes and subthemes mentioned are the result of consumers' past experiences, expectations and needs, related to the time, circumstance and situation in which they were experienced. This set of subjective attributes is unique and dynamic, helping marketers and schools build the school's EVP and subsequently the associated employer brand. The subjective and dynamic nature of attributes specifically require to be revisited, adapted and reviewed over time. This review process calls for all stakeholders to keep an open line of communication to focus on any alteration or updating of the employer brand to keep it appealing and capable of engaging and retaining employees.

The study relates to the review of literature, particularly the definition of employer branding as a collection of functional, economic, and psychological advantages (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). It follows that participants mentioned the same features in their interviews. Therefore, the literature significantly informs the study. The researchers considered this premise as confirming the correct choice of conducting a qualitative research study that adopts an epistemological interpretivist approach. To establish a well-informed, standard interpretation of the terms "perceived value" and "employer brand", the researchers included a definition of terms in the Participant's Information Sheet

and Consent Form sent to participants and relative Heads of School prior to the interview. Moreover, before beginning each interview, the researchers reiterated in layperson's words the meaning of both terms.

As outlined in the review of literature, despite the value being elusive, fluid and situation-specific, a genuine richness of content emerged from the responses. It can be concluded that having participants give similar responses guarantees the reliability of answers and validity of adopting semi-structured interviews as a research tool.

Conclusions

This study finds that employer branding is crucial for attracting and retaining employees. Employer branding is an ongoing process that involves listening to teachers' voice to express their perceived value of their employer (the school) to the employee. Teachers' perception is pivotal for the formulation of the EVP. The EVP is the statement that provides a comprehensive as well as a holistic understanding of what the employees are searching for in their employer. For the latter, the EVP serves to understand the school's differentiating factor/s in attracting and retaining teachers. Moreover, the drawing up of the EVP provides a clear picture of whether employees wish to stay or leave their job, which is every employer's crucial question.

This study also explores the dimensions of perceived value which teachers perceive regarding schools' employer brands. Our literature review suggests that, due to the subjective and dynamic nature of perceived value, the employer needs to ensure that an open channel of communication is maintained with the employees to focus on any alterations or updating that should be made. In this manner, the employer's brand remains appealing in engaging and retaining employees.

Participants' discourse in this study suggests several implications. The positive attitude of study participants and their informed responses demonstrate that local teachers are well-prepared to participate in the employer branding process should this be introduced by local school authorities, both at school and national levels. Along with previous studies in employer branding, this study can assist relevant stakeholders to prepare the groundwork for any institution's employer branding. However, employers must ensure that the level of employer branding is well-maintained throughout the entire process of the EVP within

the school community. For the EVP to function appropriately, employers should instil a sense of ownership of the EVP in the school community (including teachers) and associated stakeholders (such as parents). In this manner, the school community would be able to express itself freely when it comes to contributing to the shaping and retention process of the EVP. Employers could further acknowledge that the EVP might be significantly complex to implement due to the interrelationship aspect of the teaching profession between the student on one side and the school community, superiors, parents, and society at large on the other.

This study is also aimed at contributing to the local literature in schools' human resources management and communication and marketing. The employers could potentially work in a collaborative manner with the relevant schools' administrative departments apart from the pertinent stakeholders, in order to discuss how their teachers can be trained and further engaged in the employer branding process. This need of togetherness is necessary to ensure that the teachers' voice does indeed matter to ultimately attract and retain them at the schools. Having all employers working collectively could positively impact the schools' employer brands by cultivating a collegial image and by establishing a formal communication network among all SMTs. However, employers need to organise regular teacher training to be equipped with all the knowledge and skills to become the schools' brand ambassadors. This training could form part of a national strategy of teachers' attractiveness and retention at schools and instituted by the respective responsible entities.

Recommendations

This paper offers key recommendations for future research related to this study that contribute to extending existing understanding on employer branding in the specific context of local schools. Primarily, the researchers suggest an in-depth case study of teachers' perceived value of the employer brand of a particular school (be it church, independent, or state school) to discover the determining factors which particularly impact the specific school's employer branding process. Future studies can also research different variables, such as other stakeholders' perspectives (that of parents or school management),

and to study how and to what extent these can influence schools' employer brands. Potential future research can be conducted by identifying the potential outcomes of school networking related to employer branding in view of future implementation and involvement of stakeholders. It is crucial to engage the relevant stakeholders' expertise for the development of a systematic, well-informed strategy on employer brand and to provide the employer with the necessary tools to grasp and instil the employer-branding concept among employees (in this case, teachers). The researchers stress the need for future research on exploring the importance of cultivating a family-like work environment and a good support system vis-à-vis employer branding. The researchers suggest that the latter can be explored by conducting interviews with both employees and employers to understand both their views regarding the nurturing of a family-like work environment in a school setting. Finally, prospective future research can be carried out from a different angle by investigating a teachers' training programme that encourages their participation in the ongoing process of building the EVP.

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