

Employer Branding: Review and research agenda

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Abstract

Employer branding has gained significant importance for organizations aiming to attract and retain talent in a competitive labour market. This synthesizes the literature on employer branding and examines its conceptual foundations, key themes, and research gaps. A systematic search of peer-reviewed articles published between 2000 and 2024 yielded a total of 112 relevant studies. The review identifies four main themes: (1) the brand concept from a marketing perspective, (2) theoretical frameworks of employer branding, (3) antecedents and outcomes, and (4) contextual factors. Although research has extensively explored individual-level outcomes, organizational-level effects remain understudied. Additionally, there is a need for structured frameworks to develop and implement employer branding processes across different organizational contexts. Recent global disruptions have highlighted the importance of maintaining an employer brand during crises. This review proposes a research agenda focused on investigating the relationship between employer branding and organizational performance, developing comprehensive process models, and exploring crisis management strategies. This agenda aims to advance the understanding of the branding's role in organizational success and provide practical guidance for implementation across diverse business conditions.

Keywords: Employer Brand, Employer branding, Employee Value Proposition, Recruitment, Retention, and Thematic Analysis.

Introduction

Global crises, including international conflicts, the COVID-19 pandemic, the crude oil crisis, and financial downturns, have profoundly disrupted economies, leading to layoffs, cost reduction strategies, and challenges within supply chains (World Bank 2023). These disruptions have resulted in heightened unemployment, reduced consumer demand, and a labour market saturated with skilled workers, thereby intensifying job competition and potentially suppressing wages (Auer 2022). Layoffs disrupt organizational operations, create skill gaps, and incur significant severance costs (McKinsey 2023). Human resource (HR) departments encounter challenges in managing layoffs, maintaining employee morale, and adhering to legal and ethical standards (Kumar et al., 2023). Moreover, layoffs can tarnish an employer's reputation, deter potential talent, and diminish employee engagement because of job insecurity (SHRM, 2023). Despite the abundance of displaced talent, 75% of companies face difficulties in hiring for critical roles in the education, information technology, and technology

sectors, with talent scarcity worsening since 2015 (Yu et al., 2022).

The information technology sector has witnessed over 167,400 layoffs, including 121,978 from major technology firms such as Microsoft, Amazon, and Meta, reflecting financial strain (Statista, 2024; Manoharan et al., 2023). Concurrently, talent shortages for key roles impede efficiency, innovation, and growth (Universum, 2023; Styvén et al., 2022). The contradiction of having both an excess and a shortage of talent poses difficulties for companies in managing resources effectively while meeting essential staffing requirements (Sandeepanie et al., 2023; Mihalcea, 2017).

Robust employer branding is essential for addressing these issues. EB can restore an organization's reputation, facilitate layoff management, and enhance communication (Elving et al., 2013; Kucherov, 2022). A well-crafted employer value proposition (EVP) attracts and retains talent, aligning with organizational objectives (Theurer et al., 2018; Farooq, 2021). Effective EB strategies drive recruitment, engagement, and retention (Gupta et al., 2021;

Kashyap and Chaudhary, 2019 Gupta et al., 2014). To maintain competitiveness, HR must adapt EB and talent strategies to the current trends (Karkhanis et al., 2022).

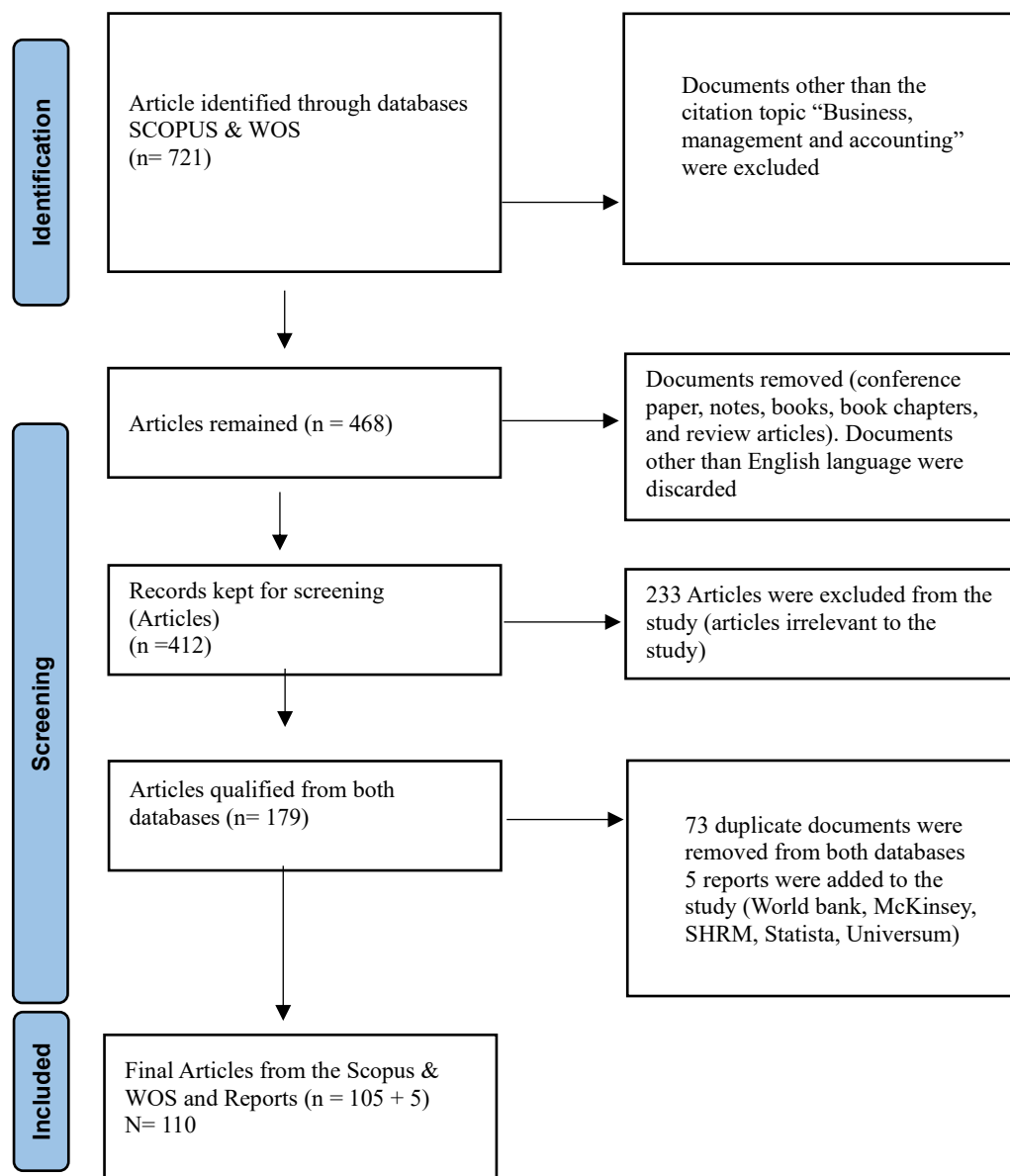
Search Strategy

This review was conducted in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The search strategy employed the keywords "Employer brand" OR "Employer Branding" OR "Internal Branding" AND "Employee Retention" OR "Recruitment." Systematic searches were performed using the Web of Science and Scopus databases for peer-reviewed articles published in English between

2000 and 2024. The inclusion criteria comprised empirical studies on employer branding and related concepts, research addressing talent management, employee retention, or recruitment, and studies examining the impact of employer branding on organizational outcomes. The exclusion criteria were non-peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings, book chapters, review papers, studies not published in English, and articles not directly related to the research objectives. The initial search yielded 412 articles, which were narrowed to 179 for full-text review after removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts. After assessing the quality of the journals, 105 articles were retrieved.

Figure 1: PRISMA Chart

Source: (Author's own)



Review of Literature

Employer branding distinguishes an organization as an employer, thereby securing a competitive edge in the labor market (Collins and Stevens, 2002; Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). Initially conceptualized by (Ambler and Barrow, 1996), EB is instrumental in attracting and retaining talent, as well as enhancing organizational performance (Rampl, 2014; Näppä et al., 2014; Mozhdé and Aryan, 2017). Its multidisciplinary origins in human resource management, marketing, and communication have led to diverse conceptualizations (Sarabdeen et al., 2023). A review of the literature reveals four primary themes: brand (from a marketing perspective), EB theoretical frameworks, antecedents, outcomes, and contexts.

Theme 1: Brand (Marketing Perspective)

In the realm of marketing, a brand is defined as a name, term, sign, symbol, or design that identifies and differentiates a seller's offerings (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Brands facilitate consumer decision making by conveying product attributes (Gardner et al., 2011). Brand equity models (Keller, 1993) elucidate the mechanisms by which brands generate value (Aaker, 1992) conceptualizes brand equity as comprising assets (e.g., loyalty and awareness) and liabilities that affect value for both customers and firms. (Keller, 1993) focuses on customer-based brand equity, which is driven by brand knowledge (awareness and image) and shapes consumer responses. A brand functions as an identifier and endows products with unique values (Kotler and Keller, 2016).

Theme 2: Employer Brand and Employer Branding

Employer branding, as introduced by (Ambler and Barrow, 1996), has garnered considerable scholarly attention, as evidenced by over 633,000 search results (Lievens, 2016). However, the concept of an employer brand lacks a singular definition, described as benefits (Ambler and Barrow, 1996), identity (Martin et al., 2011), image (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016), reputation (Dabirian et al., 2019), or as a tool for talent attraction (Saini, 2018). These disparate terms contribute to conceptual ambiguity

(Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). Employer branding is also defined in diverse ways, such as communication efforts (Itam, 2020), a strategy for enhancing job satisfaction (Bharadwaj et al., 2022), or a marketing-based approach to attract talent (Lievens, 2007; Kuchеров, 2022). Its multidisciplinary nature, encompassing human resource management, marketing, and communication, underlies these inconsistencies (Špoljarić et al., 2023). Theories such as brand equity (Aaker, 1992; Keller, 1993), social identity (Tajfel, 1972), and signaling (Spence, 1973) provide a theoretical foundation for EB, with brand equity serving as the primary framework (Theurer et al., 2018). We propose the following definitions:

Employer Brand: The collective perception of an organization's attractiveness as a workplace encompassing familiarity, reputation, and image.

Employer Branding: The process of constructing an employer brand that communicates distinctive employment benefits to attract and retain talent.

Theme 3: Antecedents, Enablers, and Outcomes of Employer Branding

Employee perceptions of a supportive organizational culture significantly influence attitudes toward the employer brand (Tanwar and Kumar, 2019). Personal values and expectations regarding career advancement and work-life balance are key drivers of engagement with employer branding (Ambler and Barrow, 1996). Trust in transparent and authentic leadership enhances connections to EB (Moroko and Uncles, 2008). Positive experiences with human resource practices such as equitable compensation and recognition further reinforce perceptions of EB (Itam et al., 2020).

A robust organizational culture characterized by clear values serves as the foundation for EB (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Leadership strategies that prioritize employee-centric approaches align organizational objectives with EB (Arefin et al., 2015). Industry reputation and market positioning leverage brand equity to support EB (Saini, 2018). Comprehensive HR policies, including benefits and career development opportunities, fortify employer brand (Lievens and Slaughter 2016).

Personalized communication of employee value proposition through feedback or career discussions fosters a connection between employees and EB (Lievens, 2007). Development opportunities such as training and mentorship align individual aspirations with EB (Theurer et al., 2018). Technological tools, such as engagement platforms, facilitate interactions with EB (Kuchеров, 2022). Supportive leadership through manager-employee interactions enables the adoption of EB (Moroko and Uncles, 2008).

Strategic communication ensures consistent delivery of EVP (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). Integrated HR practices include talent management and operationalizing EB (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Technology, including social media and recruitment platforms, enhances EB visibility (Urbancová and Hudáková, 2017; Malati, 2011; Wilden et al., 2010). Cross-departmental collaboration integrates HR, marketing, and communication perspectives (Špoljarić et al., 2023). Leadership commitment provides resources for EB initiatives (Dženopoljac et al., 2023).

EB enhances job satisfaction and engagement by aligning personal and organizational values (Aggerholm et al., 2011). This fosters loyalty, thereby reducing turnover intention (Silva and Dias, 2022; Yadav et al., 2020; Kashyap and Verma, 2018). Employees become brand advocates, thereby enhancing organizational attractiveness (Dabrien et al., 2018; Maxwell and Knox, 2009). EB improves individual performance, driving productivity and innovation (Tumasjan et al., 2020; Aldousari et al., 2017).

EB attracts high-caliber talent by positioning the organization as desirable (Maheswari et al., 2017; Collins and Stevens, 2002). It reduces turnover costs through retention and engagement (Tanwar and Kumar, 2019). EB enhances performance through a motivated workforce, thereby boosting productivity and innovation (Bharadwaj and Yameen, 2021). It strengthens organizational reputation and ensures competitiveness in the labor market (Kuchеров, 2022).

Theme 4: Context

The influential writings of (Ambler and Barrow, 1996) and (Cable and Turban, 2001) resulted in a stream of research worldwide. The literature review

offers an extensive global overview of employer branding research across different industries and nations. In the field of information technology, research conducted in India, the USA, and Portugal highlights the crucial role of employer branding in attracting and retaining talent in competitive markets (Chopra et al., 2022; Bharadwaj and Yameen, 2021; Dabirian et al., 2019). Studies conducted in Germany, Thailand, and Sweden within the hospitality sector and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) demonstrate that employer branding significantly boosts employee loyalty and decreases turnover by offering tailored employer value propositions. (Styvén et al., 2022; Hoppe, 2018). Multinational corporations in China, Belgium, the USA, Russia, and Portugal have focused on global EB strategies to address cross-cultural dynamics (Wang et al., 2022; Ghielen et al., 2020). In India, studies on EB within the power sector (Rai and Nandy, 2021), banking sector (Gupta et al., 2021; Kaur et al., 2020), and maritime industry (Rai, 2020) emphasize its role in employee retention and reputation enhancement. In Sweden's finance sector, Nappa et al., 2014 explored the competitive advantages conferred by EB. Research in South Africa's healthcare sector highlights the role of EB in mitigating talent shortages (Mouton and Bussin, 2019). Collectively, these global studies underscore the adaptability of EB to diverse industry and regional challenges.

Known and unknown aspects across four themes

Themes 1 and 4: Brand (Marketing Perspective) and Context

EB, situated at the intersection of human resource management and marketing (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016), utilizes the established marketing concepts of brand and branding, which are beyond the scope of this study. This context theme demonstrates a robust body of EB scholarship globally, with research in India encompassing the IT, healthcare, hospitality, education, and power sectors, indicating no significant gaps (Chopra et al., 2022; Rai and Nandy, 2021).

Theme 2: Employer Brand and Employer Branding: Theoretical Frameworks

Employer brand serves as an identifier, whereas employer branding refers to the process of creation

and maintenance. Despite variations from different theoretical perspectives, brand equity theory (Aaker, 1992; Keller, 1993) remains the predominant framework supported by key studies (Cable & Turban, 2001; Theurer et al., 2018). This theme is well-established and does not require further exploration.

Theme 3: Antecedents and Outcomes of Employer Branding

Antecedents such as HR practices and communication influence employer brand knowledge (familiarity, image, reputation), with origins in early studies (Ahmed et al., 2022; Bharadwaj and Yameen, 2021). While individual-level outcomes, such as attraction and retention, are well defined, organizational outcomes, particularly firm performance (Chhabra and Sharma, 2014; Ambler & Barrow, 1996), require further investigation. Although EB is associated with firm performance, akin to strategic HRM, its strategic implications warrant additional research.

Research Gaps

Through a critical appraisal of the literature, three notable research gaps in the domain of employer branding have been identified. The first gap pertains to the limited exploration of EB's impact at the organizational level. While extensive research has examined EB's effects at the individual level, there is a paucity of studies investigating its influence on organizations (Bharadwaj & Yameen, 2021; Kaur et al., 2020; Ghielen, 2020). Furthermore, additional research is warranted to elucidate how EB integrates into the broader human resource management system and organizational strategy. The second gap concerns the EB process of employer branding itself. There is a need for comprehensive research on the development and implementation of a structured EB process that encompasses objectives, scheduling, implementation format, and target groups (Sarabdeen et al., 2023; Lea Gregorka, 2020; Kaur et al., 2020). The third gap has emerged from recent business challenges, particularly during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This gap focuses on strategies for managing and maintaining employer brands in the context of negative organizational images resulting from non-employment-related factors, such as financial crises and job losses.

Future Research Agenda

The impact of employer branding on organizational performance and its integration into broader human resource management systems remains understudied, particularly in the context of recent global challenges. While the effects of EB on individual-level outcomes are well-documented, its organizational-level implications are not fully understood. Additionally, there is a lack of structured frameworks for developing and implementing EB processes that consider various organizational contexts and target groups. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the need for strategies to maintain positive employer brands during crises that negatively affect organizational image. This study aims to address these gaps by investigating the relationship between EB and organizational performance, developing a comprehensive EB process model, and exploring effective EB strategies for crisis management. The findings will contribute to a more holistic understanding of EB's role in organizational success and provide practical guidance for HR professionals in implementing and maintaining strong employer brands across various business conditions

Given the substantial research gap highlighted in Theme 3, characterized by a limited investigation into the overall organizational impact of Employer Branding and its integration into the broader framework of human resource management and organizational strategy, it is imperative to address this gap by examining the relationship between EB, HR management, and organizational strategy.

Additionally, considering recent disruptive events, particularly the impact of non-employment-related factors on employer brand image, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and financial distress, it is essential to explore strategies for managing and maintaining employer brands when confronted with a negative organizational image. Therefore, this research seeks to understand how employer brands can be strategically managed to mitigate the adverse effects of external events and enhance their alignment with broader organizational strategies, ultimately contributing to improved organizational performance and reputation. The study proposes the

following research agenda and potential research questions.

1. Organizational performance and Employer Branding: Investigate the direct and indirect effects of EB on organizational performance metrics. To examine the role of EB in enhancing organizational resilience and adaptability. - Explore the integration of EB strategies with other HR practices to improve organizational outcomes.

2. Comprehensive EB Process Model: Develop a structured framework for EB implementation across different organizational contexts. - Identify key factors influencing the effectiveness of EB processes in various industries and company sizes. - Analyze the impact of cultural differences on EB strategies in multinational corporations.

3. Crisis Management and EB: - Evaluate the effectiveness of EB strategies during and after organizational crises. - Investigate the role of internal communication in maintaining a positive employer brand during challenging times. - Explore the use of digital platforms in crisis-related EB management.

4. Target Group-Specific EB Strategies: - Examine the effectiveness of tailored EB approaches for different generational cohorts in the workforce. - Investigate EB strategies for attracting and retaining diverse talent pools. - Analyze the impact of EB on the recruitment and retention of remote and gig economy workers.

Potential research questions

1. How does the implementation of a structured EB process model affect organizational performance metrics over time?

2. What are the most effective EB strategies for maintaining a positive employer brand during and after organizational crises?

3. How do generational differences influence the perceptions and effectiveness of EB initiatives?

4. What are the key factors that determine the success of EB initiatives in attracting and retaining workers from remote and gig economies?

5. How do cultural differences influence the effectiveness of EB strategies in multinational corporations?

6. How can organizations effectively measure and quantify the return on investment (ROI) of their EB efforts?

Conclusion

The literature review and proposed research agenda underscore several pivotal aspects of employer branding research: 1. The importance of employer branding in addressing challenges related to talent attraction and retention, particularly considering recent global disruptions. 2. Identification of research gaps, specifically concerning the organizational-level impacts of employer branding and strategies for managing employer brands during crises. 3. A proposed research agenda that includes a) investigation of the relationship between employer branding and organizational performance, b) development of comprehensive models for the employer branding process, c) exploration of crisis management strategies for employer brands, and d) examination of target group-specific employer branding approaches 4. Potential research questions address these gaps, such as a) measuring the return on investment (ROI) of employer branding efforts, and b) evaluating the effectiveness of employer branding strategies during crises 5. The relevance of the research agenda is in light of recent business challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic and other global disruptions. The conclusion synthesizes the findings of the literature review with the proposed future research directions, providing a clear trajectory for advancing knowledge in the EB field of employer branding. It emphasizes the necessity for a more comprehensive understanding of the role of employer branding in organizational success and its practical applications across diverse business conditions.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no potential conflict of interest

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