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INTERNAL PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYER BRANDING: A REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Katie Sinclair, University of Dundee
Prof. Graeme Martin, University of Dundee
Dr. Stacey Bushfield, Edinburgh Napier University

This development paper looks at the employer branding process through an engagement perspective with a focus on the internal - existing employees, managers and processes/practices. It addresses this issue by building a conceptual framework, which involved looking inside the organisation to build more effective employer brands. Thus, it aims to provide a basis to better understand definitions and operationalizing of employer branding in practice.

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INTRODUCTION

There is a broad range of literature from a recruitment perspective on what makes up the employer brand as an organisational process and as a symbol of an attractive place to work (Baum, Schafer, & Kabst, 2016; Lievens, Van Hoye, & Schreurs, 2005). While most of the early literature acknowledges existing employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens, 2007); the focus has shifted to the employer brand as a symbol to attract and entice *potential* applicants (Edwards & Edwards, 2013; Van Hoye, Bas, Cromheecke, & Lievens, 2013). This focus is not only a concern for practitioners, who seek to engage and motivate existing employees, but also for academics looking to better understand the employer brand. In addition, most of the empirical literature takes a variance theory perspective in identifying the antecedents and effects of employer branding. While variance theory of this nature is helpful, few scholars actually explain the *process* of how employer brands are built or emerge, the agents involved, or in what business function(s) these practices take place. This development paper provides a review summary of the current state of the employer branding literature building a conceptual framework for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Employer Branding

Employer branding is a concept that is understood in the academic literature over the past thirty years as the intersection between human resource management and (brand) marketing creating a picture of '*a firm's efforts to promote, both inside and outside the firm, a clear view of what makes it different and desirable as an employer*' (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p. 501). Employer brands have gained attention in becoming a central element in organisations talent management, reputation and engagement strategies with a view to attract, recruit and retain top quality employees (Cascio & Graham, 2016). However, as the employer branding concept has been analysed through the academic literature, it has been subject to a myriad of interpretations from different management related disciplines providing a mix of theoretical, conceptual and empirical approaches (Edwards, 2009; Theurer, Tumasjan, Welpe, & Lievens, 2018). These include contributions from scholarly fields such as HRM-orientated brand equity theory (Theurer et al., 2018), core HR competences (Sparrow & Otaye, 2015), employer image and employer image management (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016) and organisational behaviour (Edwards, 2009), communications theory (Van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Whilst many of these studies provide a range of both original and relevant contributions, they are also problematic because of the difficulties in reviewing the literature and pinpointing specific employer branding studies, as well as providing construct clarity as other research disciplines have used employer branding for their own purposes.

Employer branding: a HR perspective

From a HR perspective and by drawing on brand equity theories, an instrumental symbolic framework can be used to explain how existing employees attribute symbolic meanings, such as subjective and intangible associations with their employers' image, '*to maintain their self-identity, to enhance their self-image or to express themselves*' (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003, p. 79). Furthermore, key texts such as Martin & Hetrick (2006) and Edwards (2009) conceptual analyses of how organisational behaviour theory underpins the employer branding concept both argue there needs to be more of a coherent integration of several underlying theories (engagement, organisational identity, social identity theory and, psychological contracts) to allow organisations to better understand the unique offerings their employees feel they receive

and identify with. Equally important is then how organisations 'signal' this understanding to potential applicants (Taj, 2016; Turban & Greening, 1996; Wayne & Casper, 2015), and how in turn this reinforces the brand internally. Several scholars have suggested that in order to promote an authentic, credible and 'honest' message of what it is like to work in an organisation (to potential recruits) organisations need to identify what it is that their own employees find most attractive (Maxwell & Knox, 2009) and how this can be replicated in their employer value proposition (EVP) to be signalled externally (Martin & Sinclair, 2018; Mosely, 2007).

Much of the early employer branding research presupposed that the employer brand, once up and running, can be operationalized as a static, stable, organisational practice (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Researchers have explored the impact of having a distinctive, recognisable employer brand as synonymous with good HRM practice (Edwards, 2010; Barrow & Mosely, 2005; Martin & Hetrick, 2006). To address some of these issues, HRM literature discusses employer branding specifically as a tool for human resource practice (Barrow & Mosely, 2005; Edwards, 2009; Martin, Gollan, & Grigg, 2011) which is able to 'engage employee loyalty and build organizational commitment' (Martin et al. 2005: 78).

Furthermore, this call has seen a wave of authors take note, and look deeper into the organisation, analysing the myriad of organisational, contextual and individual-level complexities (Martin & Sinclair, 2018) that overlap the corporate, employer and even product brands proving really to be a 'social phenomenon' in nature (Banerjee, Saini, & Kalyanaram, in press; Foster, Punjaisri, & Cheng, 2011; Molk & Auer, in press).

Employer branding: an internal employee perspective

From a practice-based perspective, key characteristics of these developments in the literature have raised questions over definitions of employer branding, which has been reconceptualised as a form of internal process. Martin et al. (2011) discuss the value of an employer brand that is recognised among key stakeholders '(...) *for providing a high-quality employment experience, and a distinctive organisational identity which employees value, engage with, and feel confident and happy to promote to others'* (p. 3619). In the same vein, others have described the process as a '[a] *communicative, relationship building and cross disciplinary processes, which create, negotiate and enact sustainable employer employee relationships*' (Aggerholm, Andersen, & Thomsen, 2011, p. 106).

These definitions provide a foundation for research looking at not only who is involved, but who decides what the organisations employer brand 'means' and to who it means something to (Edlinger, 2015; Golant, 2012) through engaging different types of employees across the organisation using segmentation practices (Davies, Mete, & Whelan, 2018; Edwards, 2017). This design of the employer brand signals build the picture of the package of functional and economic benefits on offer (Theurer et al., 2018) often created by senior managers in the organisation. However, as many authors have discussed, often the most 'authentic' signals about the employer brand are those voiced by existing employees to outsiders and new recruits (Dowling, 2016; Miles & Mangold, 2004).

These signals are further influenced by what researchers have identified as 'refracted identity' (Dowling, 2002; Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991) or construed perceptions explained as how current employees perceive external stakeholders views of their place of work. Examinations of this perceived organisational image has have been related to positive outcomes such as reduced absenteeism (De Stobbeleir et al., 2016) but also negative effects on well-being of employees who feel 'burdened' to live up to strong reputations of their place of work (Baer, Bundy, Garud, & Kim, 2018).

REVIEW STRATEGY

A more systematic approach to the literature review was applied in order to examine existing literature and identify future research avenues (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003) related to how we currently understand the employer brand building process internally, but also shortcomings in current research. Following guidance regarding multi-stage literature reviews (Theurer et al., 2018; Turner, Swart, & Maylor, 2013), the initial article search took place in late 2018 from September to December using the academic database Business Source Premier. Key criteria included academic articles that were published in peer review journals in the last thirty years, written in English and ranked 1-4* in the most recent CABS journal guide. Google scholar supplemented this search in order to identify key books/book chapters.

This initial search resulted in a total of 275 articles/book chapters. This search was then subject to a second screening process, considering the aim of the review: *to assess the current state of the employer branding literature, from an HR and (internal) engagement perspective.* Generally, papers were then further whittled down for relation to the employer branding concept, or which had strong associations to the theory underlying the concepts associated with employer branding.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The table below presents a summary of the literature review highlighting key concepts and a framework for better understanding employer branding from a HR/internal engagement perspective.

Insert Figure 1 about here

CONCLUSION/DEVELOPMENT FOR CONFERENCE

In these early stages of review, it is already evident that there remains a limited range of literature that looks at the employer brand building process from the perspective of existing employees. Although many articles mention 'existing' employees in part of general definitions, in terms of empirical analysis there remains further need for a contribution of the internal employer branding building process and existing employee involvement.

If accepted, this review summary and conceptual framework will be supplemented by preliminary empirical qualitative data.

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Figure 1: An internal engagement framework