**EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATIONS OF STUDENT’S PERCEPTION OF A PREFERRED EMPLOYER BRAND**

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**ABSTRACT**

To examine the employer brand attributes that attract students to various organizations. This paper studies the perceived importance levels of students in context to employer brand dimensions. This paper is based on a well-administered and structured questionnaire with survey results to test the effectiveness of the employer brand model. The study revealed significant differences regarding the perceptions of the students for various employer branding dimensions. Development value emerged as the most potent factor, whereas interest value emerged as the least favored characteristic of an employer brand. Further analyses revealed no significant differences regarding the perceived levels of importance for dimensions of employer brand in relation to gender. Distinct significance levels are associated with various dimensions of employer brand, so companies should carefully emphasize and facilitate those dimensions. The managers could design their job advertisements to attract skilled employees based on the essential values depicted in this study. The study contributes valuable suggestions for organizations to formulate an effective employer brand for successful recruitment strategies.

**Keywords**: Employer Brand, Employer Attractiveness, EmpAt Scale, University Students, Value Propositions

**I. Introduction**

The problem of unemployment has been steadily rising in India due to the availability of plentiful employees and the continuous efforts of employers to attract highly qualified job applicants. The VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) environment demands organizations hire agile leaders who can develop an organizational culture for attracting and retaining agile and innovative talent (Lawrence, 2013). Chambers *et al.* (1998), in an article “The War for Talent” explored the increasing demand for the executives with the deflating trend of the professional workforce, shrinking female workforce, stable immigration and stagnant executive career movements. Due to the rise in job mobility, employers continually battle to recruit highly qualified job applicants. It has been previously asserted that employees are attracted to an organization with a strong employer image, where organizations’ image captivates an applicants’ attraction just after a campus interview (Turban et al., 1998). Due to this, organizations could inflate the possibility to attract prospective applicants’ in the initial stages of recruitment. While making a strategic choice, job seekers recognize indications called as attraction factors that are tangible and intangible (Ahamad, 2019). Due to this, it is necessitated for organizations to implement an employer branding strategy and be responsible for delivering its promises to achieve maximum retention(Aldousari *et al.*, 2017; Arriscado, Quesado and Sousa, 2019; Khan *et al.*, 2021).

Employer brand is based on the psychological contract between an employer and employees, consisting of an instrumental-symbolic framework for examining the employee’s preferred brand (Khan et al., 2021; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). The instrumental attributes include pay, benefits, bonuses, flexible timings, location, etc., wherein the symbolic attributes include corporate values of loyalty, honesty and fairness. These instrumental and symbolic attributes have been studied as significant predictors of organizations attractiveness as a preferred employer (Van Hoye et al., 2013).

As a dynamic contract, employee preferences may change from recruitment through various life stages till retirement (Ito et al., 2013). For instance, a study by Lievens (2007) delineated that perceived attractiveness in the Belgian army differed between prospective candidates and employees. However, our focus related to employer branding is on potential employees. The research attempts to assess the role of branding in attracting students and analyzing how their expectations are set. During the early stages of recruitment, potential applicants give their best shot at finding a top-notch employer and form initial perceptions about an employer as a place to work (Dabirian et al., 2017). Thus, the study aims to supplement valuable information to the existing literature to understand the differences in the importance levels for various employer brand dimensions and give insights about the most and least preferred attributes among prospective employees.

**II. Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development**

**Employer Brand Perception**

Since time memorial, a product brand image was used to differentiate a product from its counterparts. However, organizations are also being differentiated based on their brands, commonly termed as employer brands. The concept of employer brand is defined as an amalgam of “the functional, economic and psychological benefits that are provided by employment and identified with the employing company” (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). According to the internal marketing concept, employees are the organisation's first customers. A level of organizational research and planning is required for an effective employer brand as incorporated by the companies during product planning and development (Kaliprasad, 2006).

The perception of a brand is closely associated with the employers’ reputation and is an important factor in recruitment. Employees assign different importance levels to various factors. Even employees’ perceptions differ from organization to organization due to their unique attributes (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). The authors highlighted the importance of a positive construed external image, where a favorable public perception might help promote a better picture of an organization, thus enhancing employee attraction and retention levels.

According to Bandura (1994), self-efficacy and outcome expectancy influence an individual’s reactions because they possess positive perceptions about the methods and techniques employed and how successful they are. The opinion of job seekers is also subjected to word of mouth as it can create a positive image among employees and customers (File et al., 1992). The employees generally assimilate information from a credible source, due to which organizations have started to engage the present employees as brand advocates to spread positive word of mouth (Ahamad, 2019; Chandler & Nemeth, 2020).

**Dimensional Approach to Employer Branding**

Previously, employers supplied very little information about the growth and development opportunities for the employees. Moreover, employees were not aware of what a company is doing for the betterment of employees and society as a whole, i.e., CSR (corporate social responsibility) (Bharadwaj & Yameen, 2020; Mičík & Mičudová, 2018). However, now, the firms have started to engage in CSR activities to attract, recruit and retain prospective and existing employees by synthesizing the concept of employer branding and CSR (Bharadwaj et al., 2021; Carlini et al., 2019; Tanwar & Kumar, 2019). According to a survey, 2/3rd of the companies incorporate employee health and wellness programs as a component of their employer brand to attract the millennial (*Corporate Wellness: Is Your Organization Focused on This Critical Business Need? — People Matters*, n.d.). Moreover, Dodd et al. (2009) demarcation of employee's generations as Baby Boomers, Gen X and Y identified Gen Y (younger generation) more attracted to companies incorporating career and social media websites for the recruitment process.

A study by Cafolla (2008) examined difficulties faced by the Chinese retailers in attracting the experienced staff. The findings connoted that although the high salary was once the main incentive but changed elements such as development aspects including training, congenial working environment, career development and social status have superseded salary as a key element to apply. Thus, the study clarifies that the preference for attributes changes at every stage of an employee’s career. Instrumental variables play an essential role at the entry-level, but the symbolic attributes can be a reason for employees’ exit. Reisenwitz and Iyer (2009) have stressed the need to implement mentoring programs to build a stronger relationship between supervisors and their subordinates.

Various researchers provide that candidates’ intention to apply may alter based on demographic factors such as age, educational background, gender etc. (Saini et al., 2014; Yameen et al., 2020). Alnıaçık and Alnıaçık (2012) adopted the validated scale with 25 items given by Berthon et al. (2005) to study the dimensions of employer branding for attracting the right talent. The authors reported that social value outweighed other values, where market value was the least preferred attribute among students. However, demographic factors such as gender and academic course have also been found not to affect employees’ perceptions regarding employer brand (Arachchige & Robertson, 2011; Yameen et al., 2020). Based on the above, it can be hypothesized that:

H1: There exists no significant difference in the perceived importance levels regarding the employer brand dimensions between male and female students.

**Students' Perceptions of an Employer Brand**

Studies provide that students with no prior working experience perceive the tangible attributes such as pay and compensation as attractive, whereas employees already working prefer intangible attributes such as innovativeness, trust, honesty and prestige (Ahamad, 2019). Arachchige and Robertson (2011), in their study, adopted the modified and revised version of the Australian EmpAt scale given by Berthon et al. (2005) to throw light on the preferred brand attributes among Sri Lankan graduates. The results revealed that gaining experience for a better career, future opportunities, and self-esteem were the most preferred attributes, whereas working in an exciting environment where customer-oriented organisations and innovative products were the least preferred attributes.

The ‘Must Have’ or ‘Necessary Factors’ preferred by the students in a study by Mahavir and Srimannarayana (2014) were salary, transparent organization, friendly and a participative environment. The ‘High Impact Factors’ consisted of the degree of independence, training and development programs, learning and a good stake in the market. Tanwar and Kumar (2019) identified the crucial dimensions of an attractive employer brand as work culture, salary, and incentives, ethics and CSR. Furthermore, in a comparative study between the perceptions of experienced graduates and postgraduates regarding employer attractiveness, it was reported that there exist significant differences in the perception regarding the employer brand attributes among them (Arachchige & Robertson, 2013). Thus, we can hypothesize that:

H2: Distinct dimensions of employer attractiveness have different perceived importance levels.

**III. Methodology**

**Population and Sampling Procedure**

The study is based on a survey method and approached graduate and postgraduate business students from two central universities in Uttar Pradesh. The questionnaires were distributed to those students who are currently looking for jobs or are interested in working in the near future. Hence, surveying these students would give insights into the urgency of various employer brand factors. The study deployed the pilot survey before targeting the entire sample size to check the reliability and correlation among the variables. The researcher, through appropriate results, carried the research further and received the convenience sample of 416 filled questionnaires out of the 550 distributed questionnaires. The response rate was 72.7% that is considered sufficient for social sciences research (Preito & Revilla, 2004).

**Research Instruments and Study Measures**

The survey instrument used was a questionnaire divided into two parts: Part-A consisted of demographic questions regarding students gender, course of study and year of study. Part B consisted of 25 questions adopted from the validated scale of employer attractiveness. To measure the ‘employer attractiveness’, this study adopted the scale developed and validated by Berthon et al. (2005), considered reliable and suitable for generalizing results for students.

The five major heads of the employer attractiveness scale, i.e., Social value, Economic value, Interest value, Development value and Application value consisted of 25 sub-items, corresponding to “functional, economic and psychological benefits” given by Ambler and Barrow (1996). The responses were taken on a seven-point Likert scale with anchor 1= “Not at all" and 7= “A lot”.

**IV. Analyses and Results**

The demographic profile of the students is illustrated in Table I. A total of 416 individuals participated in the survey, where 396 responses were collected in person and 20 from online mode. From the total, 16 questionnaires were eliminated after preliminary analyses, and we were left with a total of 400 respondents, where 55.8% were male and 44% were female. Majority of the students were enrolled in final year (41%) and were aged below 20 years (54%).

[Table 1 about here]

The KMO (Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin) and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity for measuring sample adequacy were used to examine the appropriateness of the factor analysis. The KMO value was .93 and the χ2 (Chi-Square) approximation test of Sphericity was significant at p<0.01, confirming that all variables were suitable for factor analysis (Table II). The means, standard deviation and intercorrelation among the five variables used to test the hypotheses are depicted in Table III. Table III shows the mean scores under each factor that created five composite variables of social value (SV), interest value (IV), economic value, (EV) development value (DV) and application value (AV) under principal component analysis.

[Table 2 about here]

[Table 3 about here]

Table IV shows the factor loadings of items, standard deviation and the Cronbach’s Alpha values. Factor 1, “Social value” assess to what extent individuals prefer an employer that gives supporting and encouraging colleagues, a better relationship with manager and colleagues, fun and happy place of work. Factor 2, “Interest value” assess to what extent individuals prefer an employer that gives innovative goods and services, superior-quality products, use of creativity, forward-thinking, and conducive workplace. Factor 3, “Economic value” assess to what extent individuals prefer an employer that gives a high salary, promotion opportunities, departmental experience, captivating compensation package, and a secured job. Factor 4, “Development value” assess to what extent individuals prefer an employer that gives future employment, self-confidence, career development, recognition/appreciation, and feeling great working in it. Factor 5, “Application value” assess to what extent individuals prefer an employer that provides an opportunity to use skills learned, learn and teach others, feeling of belongingness, an organization that is customer-oriented and humanitarian.

The values of Cronbach’s alpha for social value (α=. 827), interest value (α=. 838), economic value (α=. 848), development value (α=. 832), and application value (α=. 826) exhibited satisfactory reliabilities for internal consistency.

[Table 4 about here]

To find the difference in the perceived importance levels for gender regarding the employer attractiveness in relation to five values of “social value, interest value, economic value, development value and application value,” independent sample t-test was run as shown in Table V. The analyses indicated no significant differences in the perceived importance level between males and females regarding all the five dimensions of the employer attractiveness, and hence, supported our first null hypothesis.

[Table 5 about here]

To test our second hypothesis regarding students’ perceived levels of importance for various dimensions, paired sample t-test was run. Table VI depicts the mean, standard deviation and results of paired t-tests for each value of the EmpAt scale. Development value scored the highest mean (29.1250); hence, perceived as the most potent dimension for attracting students, while interest value scored the lowest mean (27.5625) perceived as the least important dimension to attract college students. Out of the 20 pairs mentioned above, 12 were statistically significant. Therefore, the second hypothesis was partially supported.

[Table 6 about here]

**V. Discussions and Conclusion**

The study aimed to examine students’ perceived levels of importance for various dimensions of the employer brand and make comparisons for the same in context to gender. The data was collected through a convenience sample of graduates and postgraduates from two central universities. The perceptions of students were assessed using a multi-item scale of Berthon et al. (2005). To determine the suitability of the five major dimensions of the EmpAt scale, “social value, interest value, economic value, development value, and application value,” factor analysis was used. Further, the principal component analysis (PCA) was used to analyze the structure and identify the broader factors of the EmpAt scale.

The study revealed a statistically significant difference in students’ perception of various dimensions of employer attractiveness. The students ascribed the highest importance to the development value (29.12) perceived as the most potent dimension and least to the interest value (27.56) perceived as the least attractive attribute depicting how the young generation has started to concentrate more on their overall development rather than aiming for economic benefits. The most preferred sub-dimensions among students were future employment opportunities, self-confidence, career-enhancing experience, recognition, high salary, departmental experience, captivating compensation package and a secured job.

Further analyses revealed no statistically significant differences in the importance level regarding the dimensions of the employer attractiveness concerning the gender of the students, and the results were alike to Arachchige and Robertson (2011).

**Managerial Implications**

To attract agile and innovative talent, organizations must differentiate themselves from their competitors. A distinct level of importance is ascribed to various dimensions of employer attractiveness, so companies should carefully emphasize and facilitate those dimensions. The practitioners in the field of human resource, marketing and communication will find it fruitful while building their strategies following the changing needs of the talent pool. The managers can design their job advertisements to attract skilled employees based on the important values depicted in this study. Furthermore, organizations could frame their employment contract covering the values found more important in the present study. They include future employment opportunities, self-confidence, career-enhancing experience, recognition, high salary, departmental experience, captivating compensation package and a secured job.

Additionally, organizations should ensure that employment contract should cover these benefits and focus on its implementation, facilitating an environment of organizational trust leading to better relations between employees and the employer.

**VI. Limitations and Future directions**

The study attempted to incorporate graduates and postgraduates of two central universities. Thus, future researchers could incorporate a large sample size for better generalization of results. The study is cross-sectional; thus, common method biasness could be an issue. Future work could focus on conducting a comparative survey of universities within India and outside India, among experienced employees, experienced employees and prospective employees. Empirical relationships with external and internal employer branding outcomes can also be assessed.

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**Table 1 Demographic Profile (n=400)**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Variables*** | ***Frequency*** | ***Percent*** |
| Gender | Male | 223 | 55.8 |
| Female | 176 | 44.0 |
| Prefer Not To Say |  1 |  .30 |
| YearAge | Final Year | 164 | 41.0 |
| Previous Year | 143 | 35.8 |
| OthersBelow 20 years20-30 years |  93216184 | 23.354.046.0 |
| **Total** | **400** | **400** |

**Table 2 Sample Sufficient**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *KMO and Bartlett's Test* |  |
| Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.  | .93 |
| Bartlett's Test of Sphericity | Approx. Chi-Square  |  4904.53 |
|  df |  300 |
| Sig. |  0.000 |

**Table 3 Intercorrelation among Variables**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Variables*  | *N* | *Mean*  | *SD* | *SV* | *IV* | *EV* | *DV* | *AV* |
| SV | 400 | 27.88 | 4.78 |  |  |  |  |  |
| IV | 400 | 27.56 | 4.64 | .582\*\* |  |  |  |  |
| EV | 400 | 28.79 | 4.45 | .567\*\* | .541\*\* |  |  |  |
| DV | 400 | 29.12 | 4.08 | .492\*\* | .588\*\* | .643\*\* |  |  |
| AV | 400 | 28.39 | 4.52 | .489\*\* | .585\*\* | .571\*\* | .638\*\* |  |
| \*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). |

**Table 4 Factor Loading and Reliability Statistics**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Scale items* | *Mean* | *SD* | *Factor Loading*  |  *Alpha*  |
| **Factor 1 SOCIAL VALUE** |  |  |  |  |
| Supportive and encouraging colleagues at your workplace | 5.44 | 1.31 | .674 |  |
| A good relationship with your superiors | 5.60 | 1.14 | .755 | .827 |
| A good relationship with your colleagues | 5.77 | 1.12 | .807 |  |
| A fun working environment | 5.35 | 1.39 | .600 |  |
| A happy working environment | 5.71 | 1.23 | .605 |  |
| **Factor 2 INTEREST VALUE** |  |  |  |  |
| Offer you innovative products and services | 5.43 | 1.18 | .718 |  |
| Produce high-quality products | 5.59 | 1.20 | .724 |  |
| Offer you both values and makes use of your creativity | 5.70 | 1.09 | .635 | .838 |
| Posses novel work practices/forward-thinking- Innovative employer | 5.38 | 1.28 | .703 |  |
| Offer to work in a conducive working environment | 5.45 | 1.21 | .622 |  |
| **Factor 3 ECONOMIC VALUE** |  |  |  |  |
| An above average basic salary | 5.60 | 1.17 | .739 |  |
| Good promotion opportunities within the organization | 5.83 | 1.05 | .666 |  |
| Inter-departmental experience | 5.52 | 1.21 | .654 |  |
| An attractive overall compensation package | 5.80 | 1.06 | .716 | .848 |
| Job security within the organization. | 6.03 | 1.13 | .619 |  |
| **Factor 4 DEVELOPMENT VALUE** |  |  |  |  |
| A platform for future employment to the employees | 5.66 | 1.06 | .625 |  |
| Feeling great about working in it | 5.72 | 1.03 | .631 |  |
| Feeling of self-confidence as a result of working in it. | 5.92 | 1.06 | .684 |  |
| For a career-enhancing experience to the employees | 5.92 | 1.02 | .667 | .832 |
| For recognition/appreciation from management | 5.88 | 1.11 | .674 |  |
| **Factor 5 APPLICATION VALUE** |  |  |  |  |
| The company has the duty to give back to the society/ Humanitarian organization | 5.64 | 1.19 | .686 |  |
| Opportunity to apply what was learned in the tertiary institution | 5.41 | 1.17 | .716 | .826 |
| Opportunity to teach others what was learned | 5.66 | 1.25 | .678 |  |
| A feeling of acceptance and belonging | 5.77 | 1.10 | .562 |  |
| An organization should be customer oriented | 5.90 | 1.15 | .679 |  |

**Table 5 Gender and perceived importance level of Employer**

**Attractiveness**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Employer Attraction Dimension* | *Gender* | *N* | *Mean* | *Std. Deviation* | *Std. Error* *Mean* |  *t* |  *df* | *Sig. (2- Tailed)* |
| SV | Male | 223 | 27.95 | 5.04 | .33 |  .35 | 397 | .725 |
| Female | 176 | 27.78 | 4.44 | .33 |
| IV | Male | 223 | 27.38 | 4.87 | .32 | -.92 | 397  | .358 |
| Female | 176 | 27.81 | 4.34 | .32 |
| EV | Male | 223 | 28.75 | 4.79 | .32 | -.21 | 397 | .834 |
| Female | 176 | 28.85 | 4.00 | .30 |
| DV | Male | 223 | 29.10 | 4.19 | .28 | -.11 | 397 | .912 |
| Female | 176 | 29.15 | 3.96 | .29 |
| AV | Male | 223 | 28.59 | 4.68 | .31 |  .99 | 397 | .319 |
| Female | 176 | 28.13 | 4.32 | .32 |

**Table 6 Paired Sample t test for Perceived Level of Importance**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Employer Attraction Dimension*  | *Mean* | *N* | *Std. Deviation* | *t* | *df* | *Sig. (2-tailed)* |
| Pair 1 | SV | 27.88 | 400 | 4.78 | 1.40 | 399 | .136 |
| IV | 27.56 | 400 | 4.64 |
| Pair 2 | SV | 27.88 | 400 | 4.78 | -4.20 | 399 | .000 |
| EV | 28.79 | 400 | 4.45 |
| Pair 3 | SV | 27.88 | 400 | 4.78 | -5.49 | 399 | .000 |
| DV | 29.12 | 400 | 4.08 |
| Pair 4 | SV | 27.88 | 400 | 4.78 | -2.17 | 399 | .030 |
| AV | 28.39 | 400 | 4.52 |
| Pair 5 | IV | 27.56 | 400 | 4.64 | -1.49 | 399 | .136 |
| SV | 27.88 | 400 | 4.78 |
| Pair 6 | IV | 27.56 | 400 | 4.64 | -5.66 | 399 | .000 |
| EV | 28.79 | 400 | 4.45 |
| Pair 7 | IV | 27.56 | 400 | 4.64 | -7.82 | 399 | .000 |
| DV | 29.12 | 400 | 4.08 |
| Pair 8 | IV | 27.56 | 400 | 4.64 | -3.99 | 399 | .000 |
| AV | 28.39 | 400 | 4.52 |
| Pair 9 | EV | 28.79 | 400 | 4.45 | 4.23 | 399 | .000 |
| SV | 27.88 | 400 | 4.78 |
| Pair 10 | EV | 28.79 | 400 | 4.45 | 5.66 | 399 | .000 |
| IV | 27.56 | 400 | 4.64 |
| Pair 11 | EV | 28.79 | 400 | 4.45 | -1.80 | 399 | .071 |
| DV | 29.12 | 400 | 4.08 |
| Pair 12 | EV | 28.79 | 400 | 4.45 | 1.92 | 399 | .055 |
| AV | 28.39 | 400 | 4.52 |
| Pair 13 | DV | 29.12 | 400 |  4.08 | 5.49 | 399 | .000 |
| SV | 27.88 | 400 | 4.78 |
| Pair 14 | DV | 29.12 | 400 | 4.08 | 7.82 | 399 | .000 |
| IV | 27.56 | 400 | 4.64 |
| Pair 15 | DV | 29.12 | 400 | 4.08 | 1.80 | 399 | .071 |
| EV | 28.79 | 400 | 4.45 |
| Pair 16 | DV | 29.12 | 400 | 4.08 | 3.94 | 399 | .000 |
| AV | 28.39 | 400 | 4.52 |
| Pair 17 | AV | 28.39 | 400 | 4.52 | 2.17 | 399 | .030 |
| SV | 27.88 | 400 | 4.78 |
| Pair 18 | AV | 28.39 | 400 | 4.52 | 3.99 | 399 | .000 |
| IV | 27.56 | 400 | 4.64 |
| Pair 19 | AV | 28.39 | 400 | 4.52 | -1.92 | 399 | .055 |
| EV | 28.79 | 400 | 4.45 |
| Pair 20 | AV | 28.39 | 400 | 4.52 | -3.94 | 399 | .000 |
| DV | 29.12 | 400 | 4.08 |

**Declaration:**

This article is an original work of author(s) and the same has not been published earlier in any other publication.