

KNOWLEDGE DOMAINS AND RESEARCH FRONTIERS IN EMPLOYER BRANDING: A BIBLIOMETRIC INVESTIGATION

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Abstract:

The overriding aim of this study is to explore the patterns of thematic evolution, research gap, and the intellectual structure of employer branding using bibliometric techniques. The study utilises journal articles indexed in the Scopus database. The study employs publication metadata and analyses it using keyword co-occurrence and network analysis to determine the dominant themes in the employer branding literature and the various knowledge clusters. The results show that employer branding has emerged as a significant, central cross-field concept for integrating human resource management, marketing, organisational behaviour, and strategic management. However, it further illustrates persistent theoretical fragmentation and excessive focus on the recruitment and attraction outcomes. The four main thematic clusters are: employer branding and organisational attractiveness; HRM and talent management; employee-centric outcomes and organisational profile; and digital platforms and co-creation of the employer brand. The research also shows a plethora of underdeveloped areas in sustainability, employee experience, ethics, and contextual diversity. This study shows that there is a need for multi-level theoretical integration and longitudinal, contextual research. The rediscovery of employer branding as a dynamic, multi-level, and holistically relevant concept in the study of sustainable and meaningful employment relationships is the value-add to the current literature on the human resource management employer branding phenomenon.

Keywords: *Employer branding, bibliometric research, human resource management, organisational behaviour, strategic management*

1. Introduction

In today's business world, employer branding, which combines marketing concepts with human resource management (henceforth HRM), has become a vital strategy closely connected to a firm's capacity to attract and retain top-tier employees (Saini et al., 2022; Tran et al., 2023; Mathushan & Shantha, 2024). As the competition for skilled workers intensifies, firms increasingly focus on their employer brand to distinguish themselves as attractive workplaces (Reis et al., 2021). Moreover, as the labour market becomes more competitive, organisations must focus on attracting talent while balancing their employees' need for transparency, sustainability, and excellent employee experience (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016; Backhaus, 2016; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Sengupta et al., 2015). Given the pressures on organisations, employer branding helps shape an organisation's brand as an 'employer', considering the functional, economic, and psychological aspects of employment (Theurer et al., 2018; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). While employer branding originated as a marketing practice, it has transformed across the multiple disciplines of human resource management (HRM), organisational behaviour, communications, strategic management, etc (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Chernatony et al., 2008; Tran et al., 2024; Saini et al., 2014; Sengupta et al., 2015).

Over the years, both academic and practical interest in this field has expanded, resulting in a substantial body of research that explores various aspects of employer branding; notwithstanding, initial research aimed to define this concept and grasp its core elements and advantages (Nanjundeswaraswamy et al., 2022; Verčič, 2021).

Research consistently shows that the past two decades have seen a rise in scholarly work on employer branding, focusing on developing organisational attractiveness for recruitment, employee commitment, and retention (Leekha Chhabra & Sharma, 2014; Edwards, 2009; Backhaus, 2016). A strong employer brand enhances organisational attractiveness and benefits employee attitudes and behaviours, thereby enabling economical recruitment (Edwards, 2009; Tran et al., 2024; Sengupta et al., 2015). The digital age has impacted employer branding as communication has shifted from being organisation-controlled to an employee, stakeholder, and internet pitch (Backhaus, 2016; Sengupta et al., 2015). The growing body of scholarship reflects the division and dispersion of the employer branding literature across numerous fields, theoretical lenses, and methods (Moroko and Uncles, 2008; Chernatony et al., 2008; Edwards, 2009).

While there have been narrative and systematic reviews trying to synthesise employer branding (Siem et al, 2025), these reviews have been critiqued for having unsophisticated selection criteria, small sample sizes, and for analysing only specific themes like recruitment, organisational attractiveness, and employee outcomes (Saini et al., 2022; Siem et al, 2025). As a result, there's a lack of an objective and robust overview of the field's intellectual structure and the evolution of its themes (Saini et al., 2014; Sengupta et al., 2015). The field also lacks detail on the intersections of branding theory, strategic HRM, organisational behaviour, and signalling theory, the rise and fall of specific research trends, and why certain topics remain unaddressed. Given the increasing intricacy of employer branding as a phenomenon operating at the individual, organisational and institutional levels (Tran et al., 2024; Kele and Cassell, 2023), this lack of detail is concerning.

By utilising analytical techniques such as citation analysis, co-citation analysis, and keyword co-occurrence, bibliometric studies can address certain limitations and provide systematic mapping of extensive literature (Donthu et al., 2021; Alsharif and Salleh, Baharun, 2020). While literature reviews are often criticised for bias, bibliometric studies enable the identification of empirically derived influential articles, thematic groupings, and research pathways (Ellegaard and Wallin, 2015; Alsharif and Salleh, Baharun, 2020). However, Ellegaard and Wallin (2015) point out that there is no bibliometric study of employer branding, a gap likely due to the lack of empirical studies within the field to support such an analysis.

In response to the identified gap, the study at hand employs a bibliometric method to systematically analyse the employer branding literature, elucidate its intellectual roots, map dominant and emergent themes, and pinpoint theoretical, methodological, and contextual omissions. The analysis will provide a solid basis for advancing research on employer branding toward a more integrated, multi-level, and anticipatory approach.

2. Methodology

Bibliometric research provides a systematic and objective approach to examining the intellectual structure and evolution of a scholarly field by quantitatively analysing published academic literature (Khan et al., 2022). Some of the techniques in bibliometrics include citations and citations per publication, author keywords, publication abstracts, and index records to determine the thematic evolution, influential records, and partnerships over the timeline of a given domain (Mukherjee et al., 2022; Öztürk et al., 2024). Because of the empirical nature of mathematics and statistics, bibliometrics offers more reproducible results than traditional literature reviews and is less prone to bias.

The current study's approach is bibliometric, and, given the outlined strengths, it aimed to extend the frontier of understanding in the employer branding domain. Specifically, the study attempted to review the structural components, the patterns of themes and their evolution, and the possible research paths in the field. Given the bibliometric scope and depth, as well as the reliability of the bibliometric data, the Scopus database was chosen as the primary data source. Scopus is considered one of the best, if not the best, databases for obtaining bibliometric data in management, business, and social science-related peer-reviewed journals.

The literature search was conducted using the research keyword 'employer branding' in the article titles, abstracts, and the authors' keywords. This method ensured the study did not miss any research that has challenged the employer branding construct, thereby ensuring the dataset is relevant and conceptually focused. To ensure quality and that research was conducted using peer-reviewed English-language articles that fell within the defined time period. Lastly, the studies had to be screened to ensure they pertain to and are directly aimed at employer branding, based on their thematic congruence with the research construct.

After data extraction, the bibliometric method of keyword co-occurrence revealed prominent patterns of research, conceptual groupings, and intellectual relations in the area of interest. This method offers the opportunity to explore more complex associative thinking and illustrates how research themes have developed and become interrelated over a specific timeframe. Such analyses are especially

useful for identifying research themes, their theoretical basis, and underdeveloped areas in the literature.

The bibliometric data were processed and visualised in the Scimago Graphica tool, designed for network analysis, cluster construction, and other visualisations. The software can be used to represent the relationships among keywords, researchers, and themes, aiding the interpretation and analysis of the data. The visual and quantitative techniques described allowed the authors to identify significant themes, structures, and underdeveloped areas in the literature on employer branding (Chen et al., 2025; Li, 2024) and to construct a more comprehensive picture of the field's development and the research opportunities it offers.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 The intellectual structure of the employer branding research field

Employer branding, as a knowledge structure, exemplifies bibliometric network analysis as both a central and anchor theoretical and empirical construct of the field. As a result, the literature has shifted from a peripheral human resource management (HRM) concept to an integral cross-disciplinary framework of HRM, marketing, organisational behaviour, and strategic management, as evidenced by the high node weight and link density of employer branding (Cascio, 2014; Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). The network structure exemplifies a mature and evolving research domain; intense conceptual consolidation in employer branding, coupled with the evolution of outcome-based, employee-centric, and technology-augmented research streams, further consolidates the research domain's pluralism, owing to the presence of multiple, closely connected clusters. The research domain encompasses multiple interconnected streams, including signalling theory, social identity theory, organisational attractiveness theory, human capital theory, and employer brand research (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). The value proposition of employer branding has traditionally been narrowly focused on potential employees, emphasising differentiation, reputation, and brand equity. The research dominantly utilised consumer branding and presumed job seekers to be rational evaluators of employers, similar to how consumers assess the value of a product.

Although this framework brought conceptual clarity and consistency to measures, bibliometric data indicate that early theorisation was further constrained because the external focus was prioritised over the internal employee experience.

3.2 Thematic analysis at the cluster level of employer branding literature

Cluster 1: Employer branding, corporate branding and organisational attractiveness

Cluster 1 centres on employer branding, corporate branding, employer attractiveness, brand equity and employer brand image, and outlines the primary and foundational role of branding logic in positioning the discipline. This cluster evidences the employer branding conceptual fundamentals being in the marketing and corporate identity literature (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Maheshwari et al., 2017; Love and Singh, 2011). This stream of literature consistently shows that both symbolic attributes, such as prestige, innovation, and social responsibility, and instrumental attributes, such as pay, career advancement, and job security, influence employer attractiveness. The prevalence of factor and conjoint analysis

indicates a preference for focusing on the defining configurations of attributes that would lead to optimal levels of attraction for potential applicants (Cascio and Graham, 2016).

The close link between employer branding and organisational attractiveness, as well as employer brand image, indicates that much of the early and ongoing literature has mainly viewed employer branding as a value proposition directed at the external labour market, particularly potential employees (Maheshwari et al., 2017; Love and Singh, 2011; Kargas and Tsokos, 2020). The continued reference to brand personality, brand commitment, and brand equity reinforces the use of consumer branding concepts in the employment context. While this cluster shows excellent theoretical robustness, it also shows a weakness in the literature: an over-reliance on external branding concepts and, in most cases, a neglect of the internal employee experience. The literature has called for internal branding and employee sensemaking to be incorporated into this theorising, a request that later research clusters address only in part.

Most of the research focused on potential applicants communicates a theoretical imbalance. The bibliometric map shows a strange lack of connection between organisational attractiveness and post-entry employee outcomes, suggesting that many studies assume that attraction, retention, and, by extension, performance are closely linked (Yasin et al., 2023; Love and Singh, 2011). This assumption has been challenged and continues to be. A misalignment between the promised employer brand and the actual employment experience often results in discontent and subsequent turnover.

Cluster 2: Human Resource Management, Recruitment, and Talent Management

Cluster 2 encapsulates the HRM operationalisation of employer branding, integrating the same with branding and recruitment, talent management, personnel recruitment, organisational recruitment, and human resource support. The strong linkages between employer branding and the HRM constructs point to a shift from the conceptual to the operational level, integrating employer branding as an operationalisation of strategic HRM (Love and Singh, 2011). The focal point of this cluster is to operationalise employer branding for talent management, reduce recruitment loss, and position the organisation as an employer of choice and a competitive organisation.

In this stream, employer branding is predominantly understood as a mediating role in which HR activities impact an organisation's outcomes. The pillars of high-performance HR systems, developmental opportunities, and inclusive practices are presented as internal signals that legitimise the employer brand. This cluster signals the institutionalisation of employer branding within talent acquisition and retention systems, reinforcing the strategic imperative for HR. The co-occurrence with organisational commitment and attractiveness suggests that employer branding is not merely a recruitment signal but also a tool for managing the gap between the organisation's anticipated and delivered value to the employer.

Although the network analysis indicates that this integration is mainly instrumental and driven by outcomes focused on efficiency and performance metrics, such as the effectiveness of hiring and the rate of retention, the analysis reveals that there is considerably less focus on the subjective responses of employees to the various HR initiatives or the impact of employer branding on the construction of meaning by employees (Chunping and Xi, 2011; Kargas and

Tsokos, 2020). In this context, employer branding is often viewed as a managerial tool rather than a socially constructive process strategically situated within a particular organisational culture and its associated power structures.

Cluster 3: Employee-centric perspectives—identification, attitudes, retention, and organisational culture

Cluster 3 encompasses the internal outcomes of employer branding, including employee retention, organisational culture, organisational identification, job satisfaction, and job performance. This cluster illustrates a significant degree of theoretical sophistication, in that employer branding is increasingly being considered an internal organisational phenomenon rather than solely an external communication tool.

The growing body of analyses on organisational identification and employee attitudes points to an emerging understanding of the effects of employer branding on employees, particularly through the lens of social identity and psychological contract theories. Based on social identity (Hoppe, 2018) and psychological contract theories (Sandeepanie et al., 2023), the literature suggests that employer branding strategies impact employees' sense of belonging, self-concept, and organisational support. When the promises of an employer brand are perceived as authentic and consistently acted upon, employees are likely to internalise the organisation's values, thereby increasing identification and satisfaction, as well as discretionary effort (Hoppe, 2018; Sandeepanie et al., 2023; Pimentel et al., 2021).

To date, this literature is relatively sparse compared to that relating to recruitment, although it is arguably the most important. The bibliometric analysis demonstrates that the employee-outcome and branding strategy streams are poorly integrated, suggesting the literature is fragmented around the attraction-experience duality. This shows a clear gap in the literature: an evident need for more longitudinal studies that track the evolution of perceptions of employer branding from pre-entry expectations to post-entry experiences.

Cluster 4: Digital platforms, co-creation of employer branding, social media, gamification and signalling theory

Cluster 4 includes social media, Glassdoor, e-Recruitment, Electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM), Organisational Fit, and Signalling Theory, an emerging, fast-growing research area. This cluster focuses on the digital transformation of employer branding, where the employer brand is co-created by employees, job candidates, and the digital ecosystems that surround them (Mihalcea, 2017).

The creation of a new cluster focused on gamification, social media, Glassdoor, eWOM, and e-Recruitment reflects the digital transformation of employer branding. This research area represents a significant departure from the employer branding practice of managerial, unilateral control of the employer brand message (Mihalcea, 2017; Arriscado et al., 2018). The use of Signalling Theory in conjunction with social media and review sites represents a departure from organisational control of employer brand narratives. Instead, it focuses on the co-created brand outcomes resulting from interactive, open, and often irrevocable digital signals. The primary consequence of this shift is a deteriorating brand narrative, characterised by reputation risks, a lack of authenticity, and a divergence between the intended and perceived brands (Arriscado et al., 2018). This cluster is indicative of a recent preference for a quantitative, data analytics-driven methodology using large-scale data from digital websites. While these approaches

offer greater external validity, they provide little context, fail to account for cultural factors, and raise questions about research ethics.

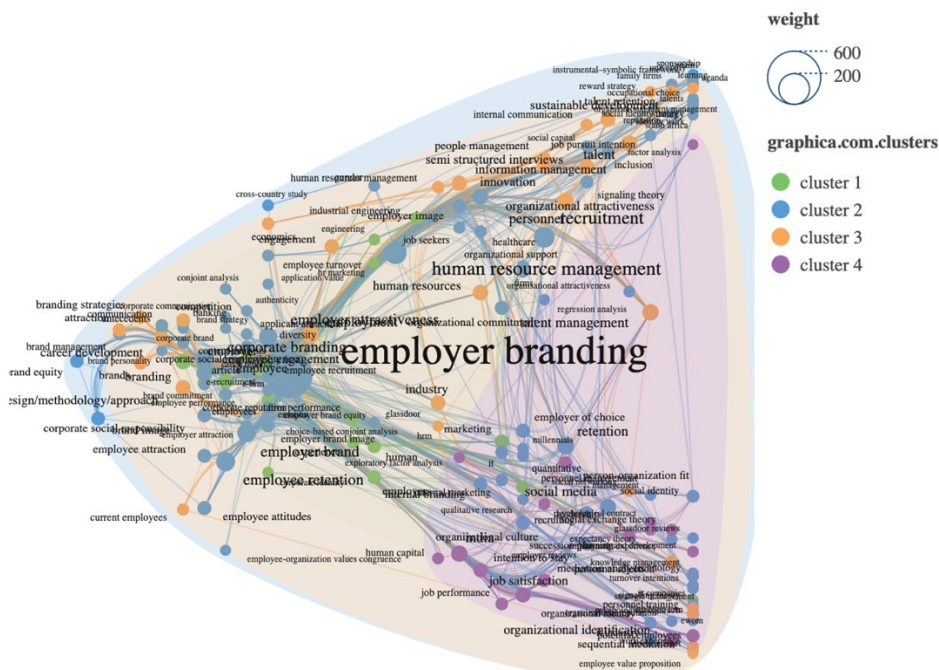


Figure 1. Keyword co-occurrence analysis

3.3 Cross-cluster integration and implications for theory development.

The connections between clusters suggest that multi-faceted employer branding is shaped and, in turn, shapes organisational/strategic human resource (HR) practices, employee relations, and digital ecosystems. The robust connections among employer branding, HR management (HRM), and employee outcomes reinforce the argument that employer branding is best understood as a dynamic process rather than a fixed system. The network still shows a lack of integration, however, in the fragmentation of theory. Even when branding, HRM, and signalling theory are applied, they are often used in a vacuum. There is little cross-pollination among the micro (employee perceptions), meso (HR systems), and macro (labour markets and digital ecosystems) levels.

Furthermore, the positioning of sustainability, sustainable development, social inclusion, social identity, employee value proposition, and other related constructs at the fringe suggests that the intersection of sustainable and ethical employer branding is still in an early stage of evolution. The importance of this is amplified by the growing demand for sustainable employer branding that incorporates environmental, social, and governance (ESG) considerations, diversity, and responsible employment practices.

Terms are abundant, such as quantitative analysis, regression analysis, factor analysis, and conjoint analysis, that point to a methodological bias toward cross-sectional surveys. While these approaches aid in constructing scales and testing theory, they are restrictive with respect to causal explanation and the temporal succession of the perception of employer branding. The scarcity of developing-economy and sector-specific studies suggests a considerable geographical and contextual bias in the literature, with an overwhelming focus on the Western labour market and private sector. This concentration is problematic because it raises questions about the applicability of employer branding theories in a multicultural, multi-institutional, and multi-sectoral context.



Organisational Culture and Values

The main components of an employer brand include an organisation's values and culture. Sustaining an unbroken chain of positive feelings and behaviours among employees of an organisation is fueled by an organisational culture that values togetherness, teamwork, and creative thinking. An organisation can foster a strong employer brand when employees feel it values and motivates them. Moreover, to achieve a positive employer brand, organisations must focus their employer branding efforts on fostering and nurturing a culture that reflects their values. A strong, positive employer brand is achieved when culture and branding

are aligned, and a culture is established and maintained that provides a positive experience for employees (Schein, 2010).

Employee Value Proposition (EVP)

An employer branding critical component is the Employee Value Proposition (EVP). It is the unique combination of benefits and pay that a company offers an employee in exchange for their knowledge and efforts. An employee value proposition (EVP) is compelling when it is aligned with the employee's needs and expectations and the company's brand values. The elements of an EVP include compensation, career advancement opportunities, work-life balance, and company culture. High-quality talent acquisition, employee engagement, and employee retention are all results of a strong Employee Value Proposition (EVP). The talent marketplace favours organisations that invest in developing and marketing a strong Employee Value Proposition (EVP) to attract and retain passionate, committed employees (Minchington, 2010).

Social Media and Digital Recruitment

The new digital environment and the rise of various forms of social media have changed how companies manage employer branding and recruitment. Organisations can demonstrate the value of their employer brand and engage interested candidates by leveraging social media. These companies can also strengthen their brand on social media with platforms like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter by providing information, promoting employer value propositions through employee narratives, and advocating social brand values. Studies have shown that social media positively influences an organisation's attractiveness and improves recruitment outcomes (Kaur & Sharma, 2015). Another important part of branding an organisation is digital recruitment. Digital recruitment is when organisations use different digital platforms to mobilise potential employees.

Employer Brand Image

Furthermore, potential employees' perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours are influenced by the employer brand's image, which can be favourable or adverse. Employer brand image is the organisation's unique image in the market as an employer, and the level of fit between individual values and the employer's brand image is a decisive factor in shaping an individual's job pursuit intentions and choices (Cable & Judge, 1996). The organisation's reputation as an employer, its values and culture, and employees' (current and ex) experiences are the multiple factors that determine the favorability and strength of the employer brand image. A strong, positive employer brand image captivates potential employees and keeps current employees from leaving the company. Based on research by Cable and Judge (1996), people are more attracted to job opportunities from organisations that align with their personal values, thereby enhancing the organisation's value proposition.

Theories advancing the employer branding paradigm

Engagement Theories: The ability of the research to identify the key elements of employee engagement lays the foundation for engagement theories that incorporate employer branding (Sharma et al., 2024; Chopra et al., 2024). These theories should examine the impact of branding on employee engagement and organisational performance.

Organisational Culture Theory: The development of this theory is supported by the role of organisational culture in influencing employer branding (Kaur et al., 2024; Mosley, 2007). Such theories ought to examine the extent of the influence

that the employer brand's cultural values and practices have, both internally and externally.

Brand Image Alignment Theory: The congruence of individual values with the employer's brand image advances theories of person-organisation fit (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016; Theurer et al., 2018). Such alignment theory could be further researched to explain the congruence of individual and corporate values and their effects on job pursuit intentions and employee engagement.

Psychological Contract Theory: The psychological contract between employees and employers, including expectations and obligations on both sides, can also be incorporated into theories of employer branding (Sandeepanie et al., 2023). This addresses the informal contracts that shape employees' attitudes and behaviours.

Social Identity Theory: The significance of employer recognition and organisational identification corresponds with social identity theory, which states that people, in part, gain their identity from the firms they associate with (Mittal et al., 2022; Xie et al., 2015). This theory can be broadened to examine how social employer branding enhances organisational identification and commitment.

Signalling Theory in Recruitment: The application of signalling theory to the recruitment process helps understand the impact of employer branding on recruitment, as potential employees view it as an indicator of an organisation's value and culture, as well as the conditions under which they will be working. This theory can be refined to understand better the specific signal that attracts the best talent.

Resource-Based View (RBV) of HRM: The integration of HRM practices and employer branding supports RBV, which states that human resources can be a source of competitive advantage (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). This theory can be advanced with employer branding as a strategic HR resource that improves organisational performance.

Social Influence Theory: The relationship between social media content, employee advocacy, and employer branding can be analysed through social influence theory, which examines how the attitudes and behaviours of others in one's social network influence an individual (Higgins, 2001).

Crisis Management Theory: Cultural and Value-based Impacts. Pragmatic Value-Based Employer Branding during crises calls for potential crisis management theories integrated with branding (Kashive et al., 2022). Such theories explain how firms can safeguard the integrity of their employer brand during crises.

3.6 Theoretical Implications

There are several ways in which this study advances the employer branding literature theoretically. First, through the systematic mapping of the field's intellectual structure, the bibliometric analysis shows that employer branding has emerged as a significant, albeit fragmented, construct, spanning branding, human resource management, organisational behaviour, and communication sub-disciplines. Such a finding points to the necessity of moving beyond siloed, one-dimensional, theoretical applications and reinforces the need to reconceptualise employer branding as a construct that operates simultaneously at the micro (individual employee perceptions and experiences), meso (HR systems and organisational culture), and macro (institutional and labour-market) levels. Second, the bibliometric study reveals a significant imbalance in the literature, highlighting

employee-centrism and sustainability as under-researched, and, in addition to the dominance of recruitment and attraction, underscores the need for more integrative frameworks that draw on identity, the psychological contract, and sustainable HRM. Acknowledging such gaps offers a starting point for theory development that is more concerned with dynamic, cross-level, and contextually embedded processes and relationships, thereby moving employer branding from static, instrumental frameworks to more comprehensive, relational constructs.

3.7 Practical Implications

There are multiple ways this research contributes to theories of employer branding. The employer branding field, as evidenced by the bibliometric analysis, continues to grow as an intellectual area by demonstrating how disparate regions within the field come together to form an integrated yet central area of focus within branding, human resource management, organisational behaviour, and communication research. There is still an application of theory in an insular or closed system. It should be the case in the field of employer branding that the theory should focus on and be developed from multiple levels of analysis concerning employee perceptions and experiences (micro), systems and cultures of the organisation (HR and organisational culture or meso), and broad structures of the institutional and the labour market (macro). There are still gaps, as evidenced by the field's dominance in recruitment and employee attraction, rather than a focus on employees and an employee-centred approach, or a lack of focus on sustainability. The author aims to construct an integrative framework that brings together theories of identity, psychological contract, and sustainable human resource management (HRM) into a unified system. There is an imbalance in the theories that need to be constructed, with a focus on the dynamics and cross-level interactions, and on the context in which those interactions take place. The author is attempting to promote a shift away from gaps in the construction or static, instrumental model of employer branding toward a more holistic and substantive approach.

3.8 New directions for research

In the field of employer branding, research should expand beyond viewing branding as merely a pre-employment signalling framework. More research should be done on employer branding as a holistic, experience-based continuum throughout the entire employee journey: from branding as a tool for attraction and recruitment, through onboarding and socialisation, to career development and exit. While the signing theory has provided a foundation for understanding how job seekers decode cues from employers, its overemphasis has led to an inadequate understanding of the post-entry phase and the dynamics of a prolonged employer-employee relationship. Therefore, there is a need for longitudinal studies that explore the relationship between employer brand promises and employees' lived experiences, and how this relationship affects psychological contracts through the constructs of trust, organisational identification, commitment, and retention (Mihalcea, 2017; Arriscado et al., 2018; Edwards, 2009; Tran et al., 2024; Sengupta et al., 2015).

The bibliometric structure shows fragmentation across branding theory, strategic human resource management, organisational behaviour, and communications, suggesting they should be used in conjunction to build a more cohesive analysis framework, rather than in isolation. While these areas of research and practice draw on the literature in others, the lack of integration among

them has left the study and practice of employer branding underdeveloped (Tran et al., 2024; Sengupta et al., 2015). It provides simple descriptions of the rich, sophisticated complexity of employer branding as a practice, both strategically for the organisation and socially for an employee. For research to continue, the fragmentation must be addressed by integrating multiple levels of theory, and, more critically, by incorporating these levels in employer branding as a micro, meso, and macro phenomenon.

At the micro level, the research must consider how employees perceive, interpret and respond psychologically to employer branding, including sensemaking, identity construction, motivation, trust, and perceived authenticity. The inclusion of theories from organisational behaviour, specifically social identity theory, psychological contract theory and self-determination theory, will aid in understanding how individuals cognitively and emotionally respond to employer brand signals, and how these signals translate into desired outcomes. However, these micro-level responses must be examined in relation to the organisational settings that influence daily work experiences.

At the meso level, studies must explain the mechanisms by which employer branding is interwoven with HR architecture, leadership, organisational culture, and internal communication systems. It would be helpful for scholars to analyse the role of HR bundles, such as recruitment, performance management and appraisal, training and development, and remuneration and rewards systems, with respect to undermining as well as reinforcing the promises of the employer brand. These should help explain the role of organisational culture as a mediating or moderating variable in sustaining or eroding the credibility of employer brand initiatives. Bringing together strategic HRM and internal branding perspectives articulates the need to move beyond mere emblematic manifestations of the employer brand and to appreciate how it is lived, perpetuated, or resisted in an organisation (Leekha Chhabra & Sharma, 2014; Edwards, 2009; Backhaus, 2016).

At the macro level, research should examine the employer branding phenomenon in the context of the candidate's country's other institutional setups, culture, and the labour market. Country-specific employment-related laws and regulations, prevailing labour market conditions, and the value systems and cultural expectations regarding work and employment in a particular country influence the goal of employer branding, how it is conveyed, and the perceptions it is likely to create (Hoppe, 2018; Sandeepanie et al., 2023). With the help of institutional and cultural theories, cross-country comparative research can help explain the presence of employer branding in some countries. In contrast, it is absent in others, where the results expected of employer branding have not only not been achieved but have proven counterproductive.

The cross-level interactions should be explored in future research to understand how different levels influence one another. For instance, at the meso level, organisational culture and leadership practices may moderate the impact of employer brand signals on employee outcomes at the micro level. In contrast, macro-level institutional pressures may impact both the design of HR systems and employee expectations. Constructing and empirically validating such cross-level models would increase the explanatory and contextual sensitivity of employer branding research.

The existing literature's marginal positioning of constructs related to sustainability indicates a need to systematically incorporate ethics, sustainability,

and responsible HRM into employer branding research (Pimentel et al., 2021). This integration should include examining the impact of sustainability-oriented employer brands on attraction, legitimacy, and retention; employees' assessment of the authenticity of ESG-related claims; and employer branding as a moral and societal commitment rather than solely a competitive strategy, especially in emerging economies and the public sector.

The persuasive potential of employer branding no doubt warrants the deployment of critical research lenses when examining the impact of digitalisation on the digital, platform-based, and algorithmically mediated processes of employer branding. This includes the social media and employer review sites. In these contexts, AI amplifies or attenuates the employers' signals. The critical research lens is warranted, particularly with respect to AI-driven analytics of social media and employer review sites, which raise ethical concerns about surveillance and data management, privacy breaches, and employer rebranding as a means of reputational management. The fragmentation of the literature is a signal of the need for integrative frameworks to address its gaps. It is suggested that the gaps in the literature be addressed at the micro level of employee perceptions, the meso level of HR systems and organisational culture, and the macro level of institutional, cultural, and labour-market frameworks to achieve optimal explanatory power across contexts.

There is a strong need for the HR field to break its overreliance on cross-sectional survey designs. The field must employ longitudinal and experimental designs, as well as mixed-methods and experience-sampling techniques, qualitative research, and ethnographies. To capture the dynamic, process-oriented characteristics of employer branding, there is a need for contextual and comparative research across diverse sectors, organisational forms, and national contexts, especially within the Global South, to develop employer branding theories that are globally relevant and sensitive to particular contexts.

Altogether, these shifts entail moving away from the question "Does employer branding work?" to the questions of "Why, for whom, and under what circumstances does employer branding work?" This shift situates employer branding as key to understanding sustainable, ethical, and meaningful employment relationships for the parties involved.

4. Conclusions

The complexity and fragmentation of the employer branding field, as demonstrated in this study, is an advance for the research. The field possesses notable conceptual building blocks, but overall, it seems poorly integrated theoretically. The bibliometric and thematic analysis demonstrates that employer branding has been predominantly examined in isolation, from the perspectives of branding, recruitment, and/or human resource management. This has resulted in an undue focus on employer branding's attraction outcomes, while underplaying employee outcomes and the contexts in which they occur. This study, in addressing the call for greater multi-level integration, conceptualises employer branding as a function of the interplay among micro-level employee perceptions, meso-level HR practices and organisational culture, and macro-level institutional and labour-market systems. These findings suggest that the cross-level and

temporal integration of these contextual factors is critical in understanding the dynamics of employer branding.

Thus, the study suggests that advancing the field beyond fragmented understandings necessitates adopting integrative theoretical frameworks, longitudinal and mixed-methods designs, and context-sensitive perspectives in future studies. It is imperative to reposition employer branding as a construct that is strategically, ethically, and experientially rational, thereby explaining sustainable and meaningful employment relationships across varied organisational and societal contexts.

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