

Impact of Employer Brand Equity on Employee Attraction and Retention in Telecommunication Industry

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, companies have faced the challenges in attracting, and retaining high-quality employees because of growing talent war. To address this challenge some of the firm's in Sri Lanka's telecommunication industry have developed employer branding programs aimed at building employer brand equity in the labour market. Traditionally, the branding concepts has been used for building brand equity in order to acquire and retain customers. Thus the adoption of this marketing concept to the field of HR management has been widely accepted among scholars and practitioners in the context of strategic HRM. However, the effect of employer brand equity in the labour market remain unclear because of a lack of empirical evidence.

Thus, the current study was conducted with the aim of investigating the impact of employer brand equity on employee attraction and retention in the context of internal audience of employer branding in the telecommunication industry. The current study used univariate and multivariate analysis techniques to analyze data and find the results of the study objectives. Results of the study revealed that all employer brand equity dimensions and employee attraction and retention variables are in high level. Consequently, employer brand equity is significantly contributing to determine employee attraction and retention and employer brand association having the higher proportion of variance (54.9%). Moreover the higher level of employer brand equity leads to higher level of employer attraction and retention among engineers of the selected firms in the industry.

Keywords: *Employer branding, Employer brand equity, Employee attraction and retention*

1. Introduction

Employer branding is 'an activity where principles of marketing, in particular the "science of branding", are applied to human resources activities in relation to current and potential employees' (Edwards, 2010). The key assumption behind this application is that individuals in the labour market are customers of an employment relationship who are influenced by the company brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Over the past two decades, employer branding has become a widely used strategy to increase an organization's chance of attracting talents who make difference and contribute to the organization's success. Many scholars have described employer branding as a strategic tool that helps organizations to gain a competitive advantage through its people (Streb, Voelpel, & Leibold, 2009). Further, expected contribution of employer branding is becoming more important because of the increasing belief in the usefulness of adopting a marketing approach as a way to face current challenges in labor market such as talents war.

Therefore, companies adopt strategies that aimed at differentiating them in the labor marketing in order to become attractive. One effective strategy, that company such as Google is to develop a superior employer brand to promote the company's attractiveness externally to prospective employees. Thus, individuals in labor market become aware of and interested in, what the company is offering to employees. In addition, considers in promoting employees' attractiveness and ensuring retention. In doing so, the company moves from dealing with a 'vacancy management' approach to a more strategic focus, where the best talent continuously looks for a chance to work for the company, and where employees of choice enjoy helping the company to achieve a competitive advantage (Alshathry, 2015).

Although, little is known about employer branding and Employer Brand Equity (EBE) and building this strategy is becoming more popular. More organizations are developing employer branding programs and aligning them strategic human resource and organizational goals. The potential benefits of having an attractive employer brand include lower costs, customer satisfaction and higher than average return on investment (Barrow & Mosley, 2011).

However, developing an employer brand strategy which builds a strong EBE in the labour is not an easy task. It requires investment, commitment and support from top management to achieve the required objectives. EBE is defined as the effect of the employer brand of the company on potential and existing employees (Collins & Kanar, 2013). It represents the value of working for an organization (employer) as perceived by both groups. The ultimate goal for EBE differs between two targets; for individuals outside the organization the intension is to generate interest and joining, while for those internally it is to continue experience they value. EBE is a central concept in the branding literature and it is designed to measure the success of employer branding programs from the employment customers' perspective (Alshathry, 2015).

However, the employer branding concept as an organizational strategy has only recently received attention in academic researches (Edwards, 2010). This is possibly because employer branding needs to be investigated with a multidisciplinary approach that combines branding theories from marketing with human resource understanding (Alshathry, 2015). Therefore, current study attempt to find out the effect of EBE on individuals in the labor market related to attraction and retention; by combining branding theories with a human resource perspective.

Moreover, adapting the brand concept to an employment context requires integration of both marketing and HRM. But, past studies that have aimed to adapt EBE elements from the marketing literature. It has resulted in re-labelling with a limited applicability to HRM context and which might provide limited contribution to the notion (Alshathry, Clarke, & Goodman, 2017). Obviously, there is a clear empirical knowledge gap in EBE in HRM context which means that contribution of brand equity to employer branding is unclear.

Further, most adaptations attempted to focus only one audience, potential employees indicating that the majority of research has more focus on the effect of employer branding on recruitment and employee attraction (Martin, Gollan, & Grigg, 2011). Whilst, in practice employer branding has two different type of customers; potential and existing employees (Cable & Turban, 2003; Collins & Kanar, 2013). Consequently, the majority of research studies have result in models that lack applicability to internal audience of employer branding and brand equity, which can be misleading for employer branding practice (Alshathry et al., 2017). Thus, there is a dearth of empirical studies in EBE and employee attraction and retention in existing employee context in telecommunication industry Sri Lanka. And as Sri Lanka's telecommunication and networking employers compete for talent, it is important to develop employer branding programs aimed at establishing strong EBE in the labour market with the goal of becoming employer of choice.

So, consideration of this motivates researcher to investigate the impact of employer brand equity on employee attraction and retention in telecommunication industry with special reference to Colombo district, Western province, Sri Lanka.

2. Literature Review

Reviewing literature is a strategy that aims to give plenty of knowledge regarding the subject area and gives the full knowledge in theoretical and methodological perspective.

2.1 Employer Brand Equity

Collins and Kanar (2013), defined EBE as the effect of the employer brand of the company on potential and existing employees. It represents the value of working for an organization (employer) as perceived by both groups. EBE is a key concept in brand literature and is intended to measure the success of employer branding programs from the point of view of employees (Alshathry, 2015). Further, in an employment context EBE represents a cumulative assessment of a benefit package that reflects the value of an employee of a company while the value added of the employer is intended to internally promote that value to potential employees and existing employees in order to make the company a desirable place to work (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). The equity elements of the brand therefore play an important role in influencing the brand's preferences for potential customers and influence the desire to maintain a relationship with the brand chosen by existing customers (Chang & Liu, 2009).

Accordingly, in a HR setting, brand awareness or brand familiarity concept relates to an employee's level of knowledge about an organization (Brooks, Highhouse, Russell, & Mohr, 2003). Thus, the individuals in the labour market need information in order to make a decision to join or stay with an employer. In HR terms, individuals in the labour market form feelings about a company based on the benefits it offers to its employees. Thus, in the employment context, employer brand associations derived from the way in which workers assess the employer on the basis of their knowledge of the employment attributes (Collins & Kanar, 2013). For example, an employee may form an association of a company as a non-caring employer because of a lack of respect and appreciation of the employee's achievements (Alshathry, 2015).

Employee experience represents a wide range of benefits (Edwards, 2010). Accordingly, in HR setting experience with the employer brand is linked to experience of employees have with that employer brand. Whether their contribution to the employer is appreciated and well paid. Similar to marketing, loyalty of employer brand refers to the feelings of existing employees over their membership of an organization as a result of work experience with the employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Rampl & Kenning, 2014).

Brett Minchington developed the model of EBE consisted of four core employer assets (Kucherov & Samokish, 2016). Employer brand awareness, associations, loyalty and perceived employment experience. Accordingly, Alshathry et al., (2017), has gave their attention to a model for EBE in labour market, namely familiarity with the employer brand, employer brand associations, experience with the employer and loyalty to the employer through their research.

2.1.1 Familiarity with the Employer Brand

Kucherov and Samokish (2016), defined familiarity with the employer brand as the level of recognition people have about an organization's positive and negative employment attributes. It reflects the knowledge level of and familiarity with, an employer and forms the basis for other elements of EBE. Further, Cable and Turban (2001), defined familiarity with the employer brand as 'the level of awareness that job seekers has of an organization'.

2.1.2 Employer Brand Associations

Employer brand associations are the ideas of current and perspective employees about rational and emotional employment attributes (Kucherov & Samokish, 2016). Further, Employer brand associations contains of anything linked in memory to a company and may carry the fundamental meaning of an employer brand for employees. It can be original, in terms of the sources on which it was built or the conclusion reached on the basis of evidence and reasoning from existing associations (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016).

2.1.3 Experience with the Employer

Edwards (2010), defined experience with the employer as an internal and subjective response to the value exchange process. For employees, this implies functional, psychological and economic benefits which together make up the employee experience. Further, experience with the employer is the associations employees have about working for an organization based on the online and offline touch points the person interacts with (Kucherov & Samokish, 2016).

2.1.4 Employer Brand Loyalty

Kucherov and Samokish (2016), defined employer brand loyalty as individuals commitment to join or remain employed with an organization. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), argued that brand loyalty in employment can also have behavioral and attitudinal components and for them it is analogous to organizational commitment.

2.2 Employee Attraction and Retention

Attraction and retention of talent has become a great challenge for business today. According to Sayers (2007), both public and business sector organizations are finding it increasingly difficult to attract and keep talented employees. Further, the ability to attract and retain talent is one of the most critical issues of people management, which face organizations today (Hughes & Rog, 2008).

Employee attraction in that sense, creating a positive first impression in the mind of a potential employee of an organization and this is a crucial step in an employment relationship. These impressions represent the beginning of the relationship and encompass the organization's practices and activities with the primary purpose of identifying and attracting potential employees (Gomes & Neves, 2011). Alshathry, O'Donohue, Wickham, and Fishwick (2014), argued that in the context of existing employees attraction refers to create a favorable impression about their current employer. According to Collins and Han (2004), strong positive impressions

should improve the supply of better quality employees to the company through HR practices such as selection and socialization.

After attracting employees, retaining them is another challenge that organizations face. Although, different levels of employee attrition are acceptable, the loss of key staff through unavoidable turnover means the loss of knowledge, skills and experience, which is essential for organizational success (Beardwell & Claydon, 2010). According to (Finnegan & Taylor, 2004) employee retention is 'the effort by an employer to keep desirable workers in order to meet business objectives'. These workers remain when they perceive their employer as a great place to work and when their experience meets their needs.

Although, employee attraction and retention have been explored independently, according to Alshathry (2015), in the context of employer branding, these two areas revealed a common set of factors that influence employees' perceptions of the company before and after they join. Accordingly, in employer branding organizations' primary purpose is to be the 'employer of choice' for both audiences (potential and existing employees).

Armstrong (2006), defined employer of choice as 'a place where people prefer to work'. Sears (2003), called this as 'a value proposition', which communicates what the organization can offer its employees as 'a great place of work'. Thus; a powerful method of attraction and retention is simply to ensure that people feel they are valued. Accordingly, based on the company preference people choose to join or stay with the company (Sokro, 2012). So, company preference and intention to join or stay are critical determinants of employee attraction and retention.

2.3 Impact of Employer Brand Equity on Employee Attraction and Retention

Sovina and Collins (2003), have suggested that organizations which have strong EBE attract larger pool of candidates than organizations with weak EBE. Further, that research results reveals that, familiarity with the employer brand majorly influences on intention to apply of job seekers. Alshathry (2015), has suggested that EBE has greater influence on employee company preference and intention stay among both audiences of employer branding. Moreover, EBE keeps existing employees within the organization through offering a great experience and delivering attractive benefits to maintain the positive relationship (Ito, Brothridge, & Mcfarland, 2013). Thus; EBE is positively related to employee intention to stay with the employer. According to Alshathry et al., (2017) among EBE elements familiarity with the employer brand, employer brand associations have greater influence on job seekers or potential employees' perspective than other two elements while existing employees' intentions largely influenced by the experience with the employer and employer brand loyalty.

Thus, based on the evidences and discussions, researcher proposes following hypothesis;

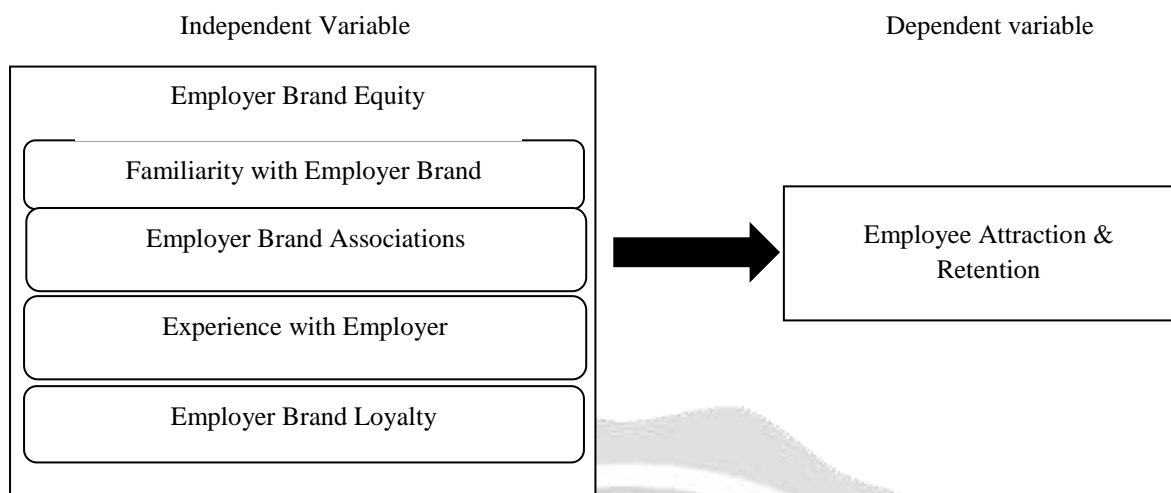
H1: Employer brand equity (EBE) has a significant positive influence on employee attraction and retention

The impact of Employer brand equity elements, namely familiarity with the employer brand, employer brand associations, experience with the employer and employer brand loyalty on employee attraction and retention adopting Signaling theory.

Signaling theory is useful for describing behavior when two parties (individuals or organizations) have access to different information. Typically, one party (sender) must choose whether and how to communicate (or *signal*) that information, and the other party (receiver) must choose how to interpret the *signal* (Brian, Connelly, Trevis, Duane, & Reutzler, 2010). In the employment context, signaling theory explains the influence of information on employees in terms of building knowledge (Alshathry, 2015). Employees learn through different formal and informal communications within the organization as well as from external sources, such financial reports and CSR projects. This information increases the familiarity with the employer and builds upon employees' existing knowledge and influences the associations related to the employer brand they have. Accordingly, some existing associations are confirmed, whereas others are modified and new associations are created.

Based on the literature and the Signaling theory, in particular, this study conceptualizes the following conceptual framework as shown in Figure-1.

Figure-1 Conceptual Framework of the Impact of EBE on Employee Attraction and Retention



This section includes the way researcher solves the research problem and which techniques used to achieve research objectives systematically to investigate the impact of employer brand equity on employee attraction and retention.

3.1 Sampling and Sample Size

The target population of the this study was 1190 number of telecommunication and networking engineers engaged with ICT business operations who were working for headquarters and head office of telecommunication companies, Colombo in Western Province. The researcher has selected 240 employees from each company using the simple random sampling, where each employee of the population has an equal chance of being selected as a respondent.

3.2 Research Instrument

According to Kumar (2011), the construction of a research instrument or tool is an extremely important aspect of a research project. The questionnaire consisted with two separate sections. First section included the questions which are developed to gather the demographic information of respondents, namely: name of the company, age, gender, highest academic qualification, work experience in the industry and work experience at current employer.

In second section, researcher used structured questionnaire with 5 point Likert rating scale. Five point Likert scale is used to measure the variables and this consisted of five boxes ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Researcher used 18 items to evaluate the perceived EBE among employees, made of 5 items for familiarity with the employer brand, 5 for employer brand associations, 4 items for experience with the employer brand and 4 questions to measure employer brand loyalty. Moreover, researcher used 6 items to assess the employees’ company preference and intention to stay (employee attraction and retention).

3.3 Univariate Analysis

It is the simplest form of quantitative analysis (statistics) and these techniques are used to explore the range of values, as well as the central tendency of the values including mean and standard deviation.

Table 1 Decision Rule for Univariate Analysis

Range	Decision attributes
$1 < X_i < 2.5$	Low level of perceived EBE and employee attraction and retention
$2.5 < X_i < 3.5$	Moderate level of perceived EBE and employee attraction and retention
$3.5 < X_i < 5.0$	High level of perceived EBE and employee attraction and retention

3.4 Multiple Regression Analysis

Multivariate analysis is the analysis of the simultaneous relationships among several variables (Babbie, 2012). Further, this analysis develops upon separate univariate analysis of each variable in a study as it assimilates the information of statistical analysis about the relationship between all the variables. For to do this analysis multiple linear regression technique was selected. Multiple linear regression analysis is a statistical technique of analyzing collective impact and relationship of two or more independent variables on a dependent variable.

4. Findings

Data presentation and analysis is one of the crucial parts of a study and it assists to reach accurate study conclusions. This part of the research study analyzed data of personal information and research information in an understandable way.

4.1 Analysis of Reliability

In accordance with current study the overall variables reliability analysis of CAC for the EBE is 0.882 and Employee attraction and retention is 0.805. Moreover, EBE dimensions as familiarity with the employer brand, employer brand associations, experience with the employer and employer brand loyalty are 0.705, 0.710, 0.739 and 0.710 respectively. Overall CAC value for EBE and employee attraction and retention is above 0.7 and it indicated that the measurement which was used in current study is acceptable ($0.7 \leq CAC < 0.8$).

4.2 Mean and Standard Deviation Values of Employer Brand Equity and Employee Attraction and Retention

According to data revealed of EBE dimensions such as familiarity with the employer brand, employer brand associations, experience with the employer and employer brand loyalty shows mean values as 3.83, 3.78, 3.78 and 3.85 respectively. Furthermore, overall mean value of EBE reported as 3.81. It indicates high Level of employer brand equity. Additionally, it is deviated around the typical level at 0.39 which indicates that the responses of all four dimensions were closed to the average level. Also overall mean value of employee attraction & retention reported as 3.73 which indicates high level of employee attraction & retention perceived by telecommunication and network engineers in Western Province.

4.3 Impact of Employer Brand Equity on Employee Attraction and Retention

The study used the multivariate analysis to find out the impact of employer brand equity on employee attraction and retention. Under multivariate analysis multiple linear regression was employed.

Table 2 Model Summary of Step Wise Multiple Linear Regression for EBE and Employee Attraction and Retention

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Change Statistics		
					R Square Change	F Change	Sig. F Change
1	0.741	0.549	0.547	0.35351	0.549	289.872	0.000
2	0.791	0.626	0.623	0.32258	0.077	48.825	0.000
3	0.807	0.651	0.646	0.31236	0.025	16.754	0.000
4	0.810	0.657	0.651	0.31036	0.006	4.057	0.045

Predictors: (Constant), Employer Brand Associations

Predictors: (Constant), Employer Brand Associations, Experience with Employer

Predictors: (Constant), Employer Brand Associations, Experience with Employer, Employer Brand Loyalty

Predictors: (Constant), Employer Brand Associations, Experience with Employer, Employer Brand Loyalty, Familiarity with Employer Brand

(Source: Survey Data)

Above table (Table 2) specifies the step wise multiple linear regression for EBE and employee attraction and retention. According to the statistics reveals by table 5.35 R square change statistics is reported as 0.549 which means 54.9% of proportion of variance of employee attraction retention is explained by employer brand associations.

R square change statistics 0.077 is indicating that experience with employer has 7.7% impact on employee attraction and retention. R Square change statistics indicated that the 7.7% of the proportion of variation in the employee attraction retention is explained by experience with employer.

Moreover, R square change statistics indicates a value of 0.025 which indicates an impact of 2.5% on employee attraction and retention and 2.5% of the variation in employee attraction and retention is explained by employer brand loyalty.

R square change statistics 0.006 is indicating that familiarity with employer brand has 0.61% impact on employee attraction and retention. Further, it indicates that 0.61% of the proportion of variation in the employee attraction and retention is explained by familiarity with employer brand among telecommunication and network engineers in Western Province.

This clearly shows the overall impact of employer brand equity on employee attraction and retention ($r^2 = 65.7\%$) and it is clear that the employer brand association dimension of employer brand equity comparatively has the greatest impact on employee attraction and retention. Also the significant value of the regression analysis values are lesser than 0.05. So, it is proved that the employer brand equity is has a significant positive influence on employee attraction and retention. Thus, the hypothesis of the study was accepted.

H4. Employer brand equity has a significant positive influence on Employee attraction and retention

5. Discussion

Employer brand equity among employees in telecommunication industry is measured through four dimensions, namely familiarity with employer brand, employer brand associations, experience with employer and employer brand loyalty. Results indicate that EBE dimensions are having high level of contribution in determining the employee attraction and retention while the mean value of EBE is 3.81 with standard deviation of 0.39. In the opinion of Kucherov and Samokish (2016), through their research, employers who indicate high level of EBE belongs to 'Green Zone' and they have strong employer brand equity and employers who indicate moderate level of EBE come under 'Yellow Zone' and they have moderate employer brand. With support of their opinion, in current study Sri Lanka Telecom, Dialog Axiata and Mobitel are in 'Green Zone' with strong employer brand and Etisalat Lanka in 'Yellow Zone' with moderate employer brand.

Among 240 telecommunication and network engineers in Western Province 67.1% of employees have high level to determine employee attraction and retention. These high levels employee attraction and retention among employees indicates that high preference towards their employer has emerged in their minds and high intention to stay with their current employer for a longer period.

Multiple regression analysis is studied to understand the impact of each dimensions namely, familiarity with the employer brand, employer brand associations, experience with the employer and employer brand loyalty on dependent variable, employee attraction and retention. Because, it is necessary to understand the real and major element/elements of EBE which leads to attract existing employees for the employer and retain them with the current employer, in telecommunication industry as one of the fastest growing industries in Sri Lanka. And also it is critical when studying specially regarding the talent war among telecommunication employers in the country. Alshathry (2015) and Alshathry et al., (2017), stated that employer brand loyalty is more effective than other elements of EBE in attracting existing employees to employer brand and retaining them. But, table 5.36 of the current study indicates that the results is in contrast to previous reserches that employer brand associations (54.9% of proportion of variance) and experience with employer brand (7.7% of proportion of variance) are having a vast variance of employee attraction and retention than employer brand loyalty among telecommunication and network engineers in Western Province.

This study is focusing on the impact of one of the emerging HRM strategies, employer branding on employee attraction and retention. The study deeply discusses regarding the impact of EBE elements on attraction for the employer and retention among telecommunication and network engineers in Western Province. In the past few years, Sri Lanka's telecommunication industry has been over crowded with local as well as foreign employers. Consequently, war for talent could be seen among telecommunication employers to attract and retain best talented employees. So, to tackle the talent war some organizations have developed employer branding

programs aimed at building EBE in the labour market with the goal of becoming employer of choice. Accordingly, this study discussed managerial implications that contribute organizations to build stronger EBE to encourage best talented employees to prefer the organization and choice to stay with the organization.

The relationships between employer branding and employee attraction and retention explained by many researchers in different contexts but very few studies attempted to examine the impact of EBE on employee attraction and retention in Sri Lankan context. Moreover, majority of the researches has focused on an external audience of employer branding, with little attention paid to internal audience; existing employees (Alshathry, 2015). Correspondingly, lack of studies in the context of existing employees is a considerable gap in the previous literature. Therefore, the current study has approach each gap of the literature and revealed the impact of EBE on employee attraction retention in Sri Lanka's telecommunication industry.

6. Recommendations of the Study

There can be some managerial implications based on findings. It is crucial for the organization to implement effective policies and practices to build up strong EBE by enhancing its elements among employees to raise the employee attraction and retention. It is necessary to arrange some awareness programs aimed at raising familiarity about employer brand components such as company's vision, leadership, workplace environment and position in the market. Therefore, social media groups like Facebook pages, WhatsApp groups is effective tool to make aware the employees regarding employer brand.

Furthermore, employers have to engage with corporate social responsibility practices such as SR-HRM and recognized as best workplaces in the country through winning awards like 'Great place to work' improve the employer brand associations among employees by establishing positive attitudes in their minds regarding their employer.

Moreover, improving employees' perception of working, comfortable working conditions and reward corresponding to performance and competencies and clear career paths and career ladders in organization will be much more effective to enhance the employee perceived employment experience which aimed at raising great experience with employer.

Additionally, daily performance of obligations or promises in relation to employee rewards and benefits is critical in improving the employee loyalty towards the employer. Correspondingly, by implementing these practices related to raise EBE elements result in high level of EBE and ultimately, it will influence over employee attraction and retention.

7. Limitations of the Study

Despite the interesting findings in this study, a number of limitations should be acknowledged. First of all, data is only obtained in the four selected firms in telecommunication industry, Western province in a quite small sample (N=240). Due to this fact, the extents to which the results can be generalized are limited. Further, current study is confined only to the context of existing employees, studying the context of potential employees as well will be more beneficial to draw the conclusions.

Also the study is limited to four employers in one sector and to one category of employees. Another limitation is the use of cross-sectional design in the study. The data is gathered at one time point, and therefore no conclusion can be taken about causal relations. Also the study used only the quantitative approach, using qualitative research approach as interviews and observations will be effective to get more explanation regarding the objectives of the study.

8. Direction for Future Research

Several directions for future employer branding research have emerged from this study. First, the present study analyzed the impact of EBE on employee attraction and retention without considering the antecedents of EBE. Accordingly this study only took EBE elements in to consideration, thus the future research should understand the antecedents of EBE.

Further, future research should explore the concept among different employment positions such as non-executives, executives and study may not restrict to only one position.

Additionally, while EBE influenced individuals' perceptions such as company preference and intention to stay, it is important to examine the other effects it has on behaviors and emotions of employees, which may also establish a link between EBE and employee performance. For example, examine the impact of EBE on organizational citizenship behavior is a fruitful area to be investigated. Because, organizational outcomes from employer branding initiatives can be beneficial.

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