

Building Strong Employer Brand via Electronics Word-of-Mouth in the ‘New Normal’

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As the world comes to terms with the changes in work and workplace in the COVID-19 period and beyond, benefits offered to the employees and electronics word-of-mouth (eWOM) play a critical role in building a strong employer brand image. The global pandemic has forced us to adopt various digital practices to meet the challenge of social distancing at work. This paper argues that eWOM will play a mediating role between employment work experience (EWE) and employer brand image. This relationship is viewed through the lens of Social Exchange Theory. The paper presents a conceptual framework with stated propositions combining the resource-based view with employer branding using eWOM as an influencer to achieve competitive advantage.

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Introduction

Organizations are competing to position themselves as best employers with extraordinary and unique benefits and value propositions to encourage both potential and existing employees to join and continue in the organization (Gaddam, 2008). To advance this goal, organizations are trying to differentiate themselves from their competitors as an attractive employer (Johnson, 2000; Bakanauskiene et al., 2011). Berthon et. al (2005) contends that attracting and holding onto talented candidates has become as important as attracting customers for a firm. Thus, it may be contended that organizations must create a unique brand for themselves to be attractive for employees. This branding for attracting and retaining employees is called employer branding (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented global health and economic disruptions. Employees and the organizations alike were struggling to adopt to the ‘new normal’ (Alter & Villa, 2020; Mull, 2020; Soloman, 2020). In terms of time, COVID-19 has been

considered as one of the prolonged crises in employment history and it has dramatically put the organization's status at stake. The present scenario spurred by necessary interventions to avoid its spreading has remarkably affected various areas of working life. What makes this an area ripe for study is the contention by authors such as Bianchi (2020) who argue that there are more assumptions than evidence in terms of understanding how the pandemic is influencing employees (potential and current) preferences. Studies in this area are required to substitute assumptions by evidence.

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Studies show that organizational support is a key attribute to maintain employer brand image during COVID-19 (Lee et al, 2020). Employees seek compassion, consideration, and empathy from their employers to cope with the situation (Amnba et al.,2021). Benefits and resources for employees colored by employee sensitivity will strengthen the employer brand in the eyes of the present employees. Resources in the form of various benefits emotional, psychological, social, economic are now listed as the top priorities for consideration by employees. Additionally, facilities towards enhancing support are considered as a vital strategy towards employee well-being (Caligiuri et al., 2020).

Khalil et al. (2020) also explained that by making a few fundamental changes in the system in the form of social, technical and economic support can capture the attention of the individuals. Social support in the form of sharing work, responsibility, and information related to organization. Technical support by providing training, capability building, and economic support act as prime factors for building a strong employer brand image. It may be assumed that the need for upgrading, reskilling and increasing support has been growing in response to the pandemic (Yawson, 2020) and it may be safely assumed that this momentum would continue resulting in building employer brand image.

COVID-19 pandemic has put every organization's employer brand to test. Potential and current employees are looking for employer brands that have demonstrated compassion and empathy during these times. Berthon et al. (2005) expounded that, in employer branding process the firm sells its exclusive employment experience to its employees. It is in this context that electronics word-of-mouth (eWOM) plays an important role.

As a result of 'Great Resignation' the organizations need to constantly upgrade and enhance employer brand as a prime part of recruitment approach (Nelke, 2021). We are in an era where we can find reviews and comments about an organization with just a 'click of mouse' (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004). Helle, Sophie & Chirsta (2011) suggested that through communicating the employer brand by

showcasing the real work environment provided by the firm right candidates would be attracted towards the organization. Present employees are said to be the best recruiters for the firms as they have lived the brand and can share great stories as well as can embody the firm's unique values, cultures, vision and benefits to the outside world by spreading positive eWOM. Thus, they become the firm's ambassador who have the power to attract and retain talent.

In this context, the main purpose of this paper is to advance the understanding of employer brand by exploring the benefits offered by the employers to attract and retain them using eWOM as a tool for achieving competitive advantage. The paper begins by presenting relevant conceptual base from marketing background which is considered an important approach to understand employer brand and its effect. The paper then tries to develop the elements of benefits that forms employee's work experience in the employment setting. Drawing from Ambler and Barrow (1996) explanation on employer brand, this paper tries to explain how benefits help to build a strong employer brand image for a firm.

Objective

1. To explore how different benefits offered to employees form the employees' work experience that shape the employer brand.
2. To understand how eWOM acts as an influencer to build a strong employer brand.

Employer Branding

Employer brand concept as an academic idea has its origin traceable from mid-and late- 1990s (Rosethron, 2010). As a term, it was coined and examined by Ambler and Barrow in 1996. They extended the concept from marketing setting to the employment setting considering the organization as a brand and its employees as customers. Researchers such as Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) and Edward (2010) further expanded the concept as having two different customers: existing employees as internal customers and aspiring and potential employees as prospective customers. Inherent in these arguments and as clarified by Cable & Turban (2001), the assumption is that the prospective employee faces the same decision dilemma as a new consumer faces while making a purchasing decision and current employees face the same dilemma that the existing consumer faces when they have to decide to continue with the brand's product.

Various researchers have explained employer branding according to the nature of research and scope of work. Researchers such as Ambler & Barrow (1996) expounded employer branding as "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company". Additionally, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) explained it as "the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity". In similar lines extending the notion of reference to strategy and making it far more intense Sullivan (2004) expounded

it as a long-term strategy. Further employer branding was described by Rosethorn (2010) as a state of an emotional relationship between the employer and the employee by referring to employer brand as a deal.

Employer brand explained by Ambler and Barrow (1996) includes 3 types of benefits that the employees experience being a part of an organization. Functional benefits incorporate developmental activities (Urbancova & Hudakova, 2017), economic benefits include monetary and non-monetary rewards, and psychological benefits involve organization's value and missions (Cincinnati & Cambridge, 2013). These benefits when customized for employees will lead to an increase in their motivation and satisfaction levels.

Various researchers have also discussed the benefits derived from having a powerful employer brand. Scholars such as, Love and Singh (2011), recommended that employer brand gives information about the benefits an employee will get on being associated with a specific employer. Schalger et al. (2011), suggested that a strong employer brand will help in increasing the organization's profitability through increased employee identification and satisfaction. Robertson and Khatibi (2013), in their study, found that there is a strong relationship between productivity of the firm, attractiveness, and employer brand. Storsen and Ampuero (2013), explained that employees having a positive perception towards the

employer will increase their loyalty. Tanvar and Prasad (2016), suggested that there is a positive relationship between employer brand and employee retention leading to employee satisfaction and recommendation. In addition to the above explanations, Kashive and Khanna (2017), also expounded that advertisement and word-of-mouth in the early recruitment stage will help to enhance knowledge which will help increase organizations' attractiveness and intention to stay.

For building a strong employer brand image, a mix of tangible and intangible attributes such as employee benefits, and work environment is needed.

According to Pop (2008) and Helm (2011), for building a strong employer brand image, a mix of tangible and intangible attributes such as employee benefits, and work environment is needed. The main focus of having a strong employer brand image is to motivate and make the current employees stay in the organization (Hitka et al., 2015; Love & Singh, 2011) and target and attract potential employees (Archana et al., 2014). In relation to it, current employees are said to be the propagator of the benefits provided by employers in the form of WOM (positive/negative). It is therefore crucial to know how the organization will care for its employees, what working conditions it generates, and what employee benefits are provided to them (WoŹniak, 2015).

Employees' Work Experience (EWE)

EWE was explained by Plaskoff (2017) as “the employee’s holistic perception of the relationship with his/her employing organization derived from all the encounters at touch points along the employee’s journey”. Employee’s work journey has many milestones and the experiences faced have a direct impact on employee satisfaction, engagement, loyalty, and retention which is said to be EWE. The fundamental relationship between the employer and the employee therefore in the pandemic situation must shift from a traditional ‘transactional’ strategy to a deeply involved and supportive strategy, where the employers understand the needs and wants of every employee. The main aim of this strategy is to design an experience that demonstrates care for the employees.

EWE focuses on the experiences in total (Nelke, 2020). An employee is viewed from various perspectives like cognitively, emotionally, and economically (Plaskoff, 2017). In the prevailing situation focusing on all the above perspectives are very important to satisfy an employee. All these perspectives are categorized into three different forms of benefits that an employer must offer to its employees (economic, psychological, and functional benefits).

Benefits forming employees' work experience. To understand the benefit being used as a strategy for forming EWE for building employer brand im-

age two theoretical perspectives need to be studied: Aaker’s (1991) brand equity (BE) model and Ambler and Barrow’s (1996) employer brand equity model. Aaker (1991) gives the most comprehensive and reliable BE model containing 4 distinct assets forming major sources for value formation i.e., brand loyalty, brand awareness, brand association, and perceived quality. This paper intends to use Aaker’s (1991) model as it is said to be the first seminal work done on brand equity and has also been empirically tested by different authors (Kim & Kim, 2004; Eagle & Kitchen, 2000; Pappu et al., 2005; Shakhikala, 2013). Along with it, Aaker’s model describes BE from both managerial and customer perspectives. Aaker’s model measures dimensions that are both customer and firm-specific.

As against Aaker’s (1991) brand equity model, Ambler and Barrow (1996) came out with employer brand equity theory as a parallel model for HRM. Similar to brand equity, employer brand equity is also formed in the minds of the employees by being exposed to various human resource practices. According to it, during work experience, the value is exchanged between the employer and the employee (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). These values are referred to as benefits, which are provided by the employing company to its employees. These include functional, economic, and psychological benefits (Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

To explain this further, Mckinsey & Company (2001) recognized four groups

of benefits that help to attract and retain employees by making them an employer of choice. They act as the prime drivers for the employees to be associated with the organization and are grouped into emotional benefits such as culture, rational benefits such as career development and training, tangible such as product and firm's success, and intangible associations such as the firm's missions and goals.

Following the above explanation, Kuchеров and Zavyalova (2012), looked into employer brand attributes through four perspectives: economic, psychological, functional, and organizational factors to satisfy the employees.

Various authors have also individually studied different factors to find an 'employer of choice' such as Hadi & Ahmed (2018) who mainly focused on economic value and its impact on current employees. Judge, Bono and Locke (2000) focused on developmental benefits such as firm's culture. Saari and Judge (2004) focused on social value including team spirit. Berthon et. al. (2005) focused on diversity values referring to different aspects of the job. Lastly, Cable and Turban (2001) focused on reputation value which includes the firm's reputation and brand name. Combining all the above-mentioned explanations with that of Ambler and Barrow's (1996) conceptualization, Berthon et al. (2005) explained three sets of benefits which are most essential for every firm to provide to its employees: functional, economic, and psychological benefits. All these three ben-

efits clubbed together will help in motivating an employee to remain and work in the organization as well as attract prospective candidates to apply in the organization.

One of the most effective methods of retaining employees is making sure that they feel valued (Hadi, 2018). Thus, all the above-mentioned features sum up to form a strong strategy for building an employer's brand image (Sokoro, 2001). These benefits form a complete employment experience for the employees (Gardner, Erhardt & Martin-Rios, 2011). The current employees make use of first-hand employer experience to build the employer image, which they subsequently share with potential employees (Priyadarshi, 2011).

Electronics Word-of-Mouth as an Influencer

With the development of social media and with the utilization of smartphones, eWOM has become ubiquitous (King et al., 2014). When compared to traditional WOM, eWOM enables individuals to get real-time and real-life information from previously available sources extending into the virtual environment. The internet allows individuals to easily share their experiences and get information in lesser time in a cost-effective manner, thus speeding up the diffusion of eWOM (Burnasheva, Suh & Villalobos-Moron, 2019). Web 2.0 applications have empowered customers to intensify their views regarding exploring and sharing information before or after making a

decision (Sigala, Christou & Gretzel, 2012). Online reviews and social networking sites enable individuals to communicate and exchange information virtually. It also enables them to share their thoughts and experiences about all kinds of products, services, and brands virtually. Individuals have various intentions for searching for information regarding a product/ organization as well as they also want to share their own experiences and reviews (King et al., 2014; Zhu & Zhang, 2010). Some of these practices encourage the spread of word-of-mouth (WOM) on the web, namely e-WOM (Bronner & de Hoog, 2011). Researchers from the marketing domain have put forward several definitions of electronics word-of-mouth. This paper takes on the conceptualization given by Hennig-Thuraut et al. (2004), since it integrates the possibility of incorporating multiple receivers and senders, “eWOM is any positive or negative statement made by potential, actual or former customers about a product or company, which is made available to a multitude of people and institutions via the internet.”

eWOM exists online and enables individuals who are strangers to communicate with one another to discuss and share their experiences and viewpoints about goods and services initially. But at a later date, this was also used to share experiences and opinions about an organization. This individual-to-individual communication has become one of the most influential tools for taking any decision. eWOM has transferred the power

of influencing the individuals from the marketers/owner to the customers/employees and have made the consumers and employees active communicators who share their own opinion and experiences and also accepts reviews from others (Chu & Choi, 2011).

Theoretical Perspective

This paper has considered Social Exchange Theory as the underpinning that supports the conceptual framework. Social Exchange Theory (SET) has been widely used to study various organizational relationships such as between employer and employee (Shore & Taylor, 2005). According to Shore and Coyle-Shapiro (2003) SET was developed to explain the process by which individuals make relationships and maintain them. According to SET individuals evaluate their relationships by analyzing the benefits they feel that they might receive from being in that relationship. After analyzing the benefits received, individuals, decide about the relationships by comparing them with the alternatives available (Batson & Shaw, 1991). SET has been successfully applied to employment scenarios to study the relationship between the employee and the employer.

An employment relationship involves the interaction between two parties to exchange benefits (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005; Freeney & Fellenz, 2013). According to Shore & Coyle-Shapiro (2003), SET mainly includes two dimensions, process of exchange and content of exchange benefit. The process of exchange involves three aspects: relation-

ship, reciprocity, and exchange. Social exchange relationship starts with one party bestowing a benefit to another. If the beneficiary reciprocates, a series of exchanges of benefits occur; this will generate a feeling of mutual obligation between the two parties (Cotterell, Eisenberger & Speicher, 1992).

March and Simon (1958) explained the content of exchange as an 'inducement-contributions exchange', where the employee receives benefits according to their contribution to the firm. Considering employment exchange from the perspective of employment consumers Edward (2010) adopted Ambler and Barrow's (1996) classification of benefits (functional, economic, and psychological benefits) and argued that the exchange comprises totality tangible and intangible benefits offered to the employees. Celani and Singh (2011) contemplated that the exchange of benefits occurs during an employee's experience with the employer which helps them to decide whether to continue a relationship or not. This is considered in the paper as an employee's benefit. Effective management and proper delivery of benefits would result in a high preference for the firm which makes it a 'good place to work'. Prospective employees, however, have no direct experience,

thus they can only perceive what they might experience if they join the firm with the help of word-of-mouth received from others whereas the current employees will live the experience and will generate a positive image of the employer which will lead to loyalty (Alshathry, 2015).

Conceptual Framework & Propositions

a) Employee's Work Experience and Employer Brand Image: The essence of the employment relationship showcases the actual interaction between the two parties to exchange benefits, which is explained by Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Freeney & Fellenz, 2015). According to SET, the exchange relationship occurs between the employer and the employee in the form of experiences they share (Celani & Singh, 2011). During the exchange process, benefits are exchanged in return for the contributions made by the employees to the employer.

EWE is a complex concept relying on the job and organization-related attributes that can satisfy the needs and wants of the employees (Celani & Singh, 2011). EWE takes shape with continuous interaction between two parties and is influenced by the benefits. Successful management and proper delivery of the benefits lead to a high preference for the firm and leverage employment-associated beliefs about the firm as a good place to work which leads to developing a powerful employer brand image. However, prospective employees

Effective management and proper delivery of benefits would result in a high preference for the firm which makes it a 'good place to work'.

have no true experience with the employer. Thus, they can get an impression of what experience they may face being a part of the organization. These perceptions lead to expectations and employment-related associations and help in building an imaginary employer brand image in their minds. A positive perception of an employee's work experience creates a positive employer brand image. Therefore, EWE may be considered the most influential factor for building a strong employer brand image. Thus, it is proposed that:

Proposition 1: Employees' work experience has a positive influence on building a strong employer brand image.

b) Employees' Work Experience and electronics Word-of-Mouth: An organization's image is built through the information the candidates perceive about the firm (Highhouse et al., 2009). The exposure and lucidity of an organization within the market have increased largely with the development of social media; it empowers people to communicate and influence specific features of the reality around them (Sigala & Marinidis, 2009). Since we know that an employer brand and employer image are formed by certain specific cues, social media have resulted in increased potential influences on the employer brand. Similar to the marketing concept, currently the internet has engendered social media committed to rating the employer's role, describing its features, and advertising the brand of the firm. These sites help to present the views, opinions, and of-

ferings of the firm by the employees, other individuals, and the employer itself. Due to its content, social media in the present situation is considered a vital cue for building an employer's brand image (Cable & Yu, 2006).

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Every firm nowadays is using a strong strategy to provide employees with a good job experience. As said by Branham (2001), the benefits offered influence an individual to spread information about the firm in the employment market. Thus, it can be proposed that:

Proposition 2: Positive employees' work experience leads to positive eWOM for an organization.

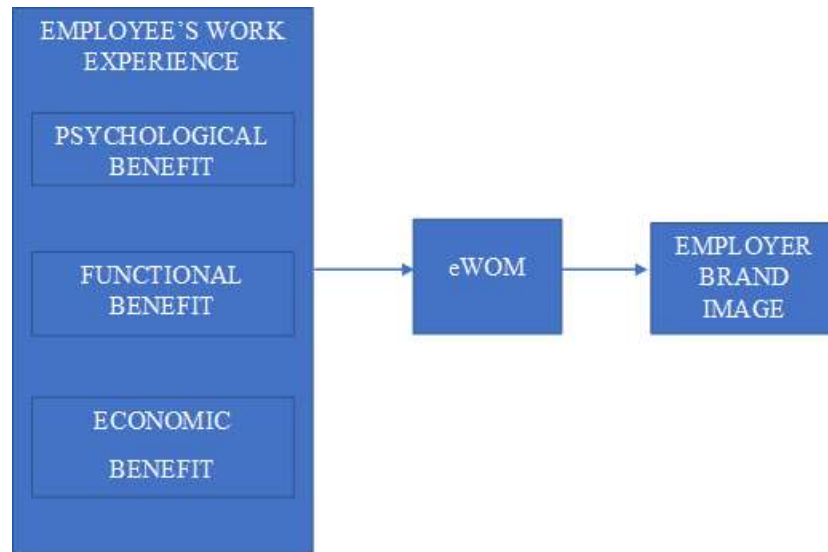
c) Electronics Word-Of-Mouth and Employer Brand Image: Since the development of the internet in the 1990s, human connectivity with each other has moved beyond the physical boundaries to cyberspace. The capability to communicate globally is considered to be a prime tool for firms that want to expand themselves and stand out in the competition (Martin & Hetrick, 2009). This interconnected world of web has given individuals and firms the power to express their views to each other without even physically seeing each other (Breazeale, 2009). Social media consists of a bundle of information that every individual wants

to know before taking any decision. Virtual communities present in social media brings individuals together by sharing common interest and goals (Wagner, 1995). Shared vision constitutes the collective goals of the firm members as well as the firm itself which can be achieved by collaborating (Wagner, 1995). Social media pro-

vides independence in space and time and provides opportunities for open communication which allows every firm to advertise itself and also be advertised by others. Thus, it can be proposed that:

Proposition 3: Electronics word-of-mouth will influence building a strong employer brand image.

Fig. 1 Conceptual Model Showing relationship between Employee's Work Experience Leading to Building an Employer Brand Image Using eWOM as an Influencer



Implications

The conceptual framework presented in the paper has important theoretical and managerial implications. Theoretically, the paper is a response to the contention by authors such as Bianchi (2020) to the absence of any evidence to justify assumptions in the prevailing times. Testing this model in future can generate evidence to support

these contentions. The pandemic also presents a time of experimental bubble where certain elements get accentuated or attenuated. While there have been reports of employers demonstrating compassion and empathy, its effects amplified through eWOM on employer brand image have not been studied. This is an area that can receive more attention to identify what elements of EWE can impact employer brand.

It becomes the responsibility of the organizations to respect, protect and even elevate their reputation for internal and external stakeholders.

The paper has important managerial implications for employers in harnessing the strategic nature of eWOM for enhancing the brand image. During a time of crisis, the organization should enhance and continue with their benefits to build a powerful brand image. In the employment market, employer brand has its importance, thus it becomes the responsibility of the organizations to respect, protect and even elevate their reputation for internal and external stakeholders (Moroko & Uncles, 2009). For building a strong image the firm must understand the needs of the employees that will encourage them to cope with the pandemic situation. Current employees can be used as brand ambassadors to talk about the benefits offered. Employers who have had to resort to retrenchment like harsh measures due to Covid-19 will also have to keep a watch on eWOM and take steps to include positivity in the messages. In an effort to revamp a sullied brand image, employers can also proactively harness eWOM to stimulate conversations on the positives that flowed from those measures. As the economy would pick up and applicants begin dusting their resumes to apply, a positive employer image can help employers win the war against 'Great Resignation'.

Conclusion

This paper presents a conceptual framework that explains the effect of benefit that forms employees' work experience. It also aims to explain the role of EWE provided by the employer in building an employer's brand image. By integrating the HRM and marketing literature, the framework apprehends the interactive nature of the employment relationship between employees and employers beginning in the recruitment phase and continuing throughout the employment contract.

The framework has theoretical and practical value. The framework provides a theoretical rationale for a set of propositions and also incorporates additional concepts (such as employees' benefits, and employees' work experience), that will help advance our understanding of key variables in employer branding. In the present situation, eWOM is playing a prime role in every individual's life and has taken a trajectory growth over the past few months. In relation to the statement, this paper has tried incorporating eWOM as an influencing tool that is used to build a strong employer brand to achieve a competitive advantage.

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