



Conceptualizing Employer Branding: Is the Whole More than the Sum of Its Parts? Case Study-Based Evidence from Thailand

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Abstract: For several decades now, scholars' and practitioners' interest has been of both scholars' and practitioners' interest to find out how organizations can win the war for talents. Employer branding is considered a possible means to enhance employer attractiveness and secure the employees critical for the organization's success. The purpose of this investigation is to shed more light on the underlying processes and influencing factors related to employer branding in a real-life context. The author has examined the subject in a multinational enterprise in Thailand based on the framework proposed by [Aggerholm, Andersen, and Thomsen \(2011\)](#), which conceptualizes employer branding as the intersection of human resource management, branding, and corporate social responsibility. The data for this single-case study were gathered through guided interviews with experts in these fields who were asked questions about their areas of expertise. After conducting a qualitative content analysis, the findings suggest that human resource management, marketing, and corporate social responsibility are relevant for employer branding and contribute to the operationalization of the phenomenon. Employer branding appears to be a dynamic construct determined by the interaction with the three areas and is permanently subject to changes. This has implications for academics and practitioners, as the understanding of the subject shifts from a product-oriented to a process-oriented one. The author gives recommendations for the design of an effective employer branding providing value for practitioners. Moreover, a quantitative assessment of the findings and taking an extra-company perspective were identified as future research directions.

Keywords: *Human resource management, employer branding, marketing, CSR, case study*

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INTRODUCTION

Motivation

Whereas in early approaches to management, human beings were merely a production factor that could be exchanged and replaced easily, a more contemporary understanding deems employees as the organization's "most important resource" ([Conrad, 2003](#); [Yucel & Halis, 2016](#)) (p.7). Technological advancements such as digitization around the globe foster a shift from a labor economy to a knowledge economy. Therefore, companies are required to attract and retain well-qualified staff in order to be able to compete with their rivals on the market. While it may be comparably easy to attract staff, keeping them in the organization for an extended period of time and being able to materialize the return on investment for training can create challenges for a firm. Where it was not uncommon for the generation of baby boomers to spend their entire working life with one employer, the preferences of succeeding generations have shifted considerably ([Abdurrahaman & Osman, 2017](#); [Kozica & Kaiser, 2012](#)). Not only are they partially less willing to commit and more concerned about aspects such as a healthy work-life-balance, but they are also more nationally and

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internationally mobile, which causes certain issue for organizations (Mahdieh, 2015; Smith, 2010). With so called digital natives joining the work force, much of their employment experiences are not only shared offline but on social media platforms posing an additional complication for many organizations (Dabirian, Kietzmann, & Diba, 2017). To overcome obstacles that are associated with the aforementioned developments, it is imperative for enterprises to position themselves adequately to be perceived as an employer of choice, which is considered to be the result of employer branding (Branham, 2000).

Significance of the Research

Even though the term employer branding has first been mentioned in a publication more than 20 years ago (Ambler & Barrow, 1996), scientific discussions about the topic are still rather rare (Christiaans, 2013). While literature about the practice of employer branding and how organizations can design their employer brand abounds, the underlying principles, mechanisms, and interrelations are not yet fully discovered (Edwards, 2009; Grobe, 2008; Lievens, 2007). Besides, it needs to be pointed out that existing studies are predominantly based on the original definition by Ambler and Barrow (1996) that is rooted in Aaker (1991)'s understanding of a strong brand, which entails a static concept of branding. Even though some very recent contributions are based on the product-oriented idea of brand equity (Theurer, Tumasjan, Welpe, & Lievens, 2018), contemporary challenges such as the ones indicated above necessitate a shift towards a process-oriented understanding of value creation (Aggerholm et al., 2011). Hence, deeming employer branding as the result of dynamic interaction of environmental variables seems yielding. The results are expected to provide value added to both scholars and practitioners dealing with the subject in the context of a dynamic environment.

Aims and Objectives

This paper intends to shed more light on the conceptualization of employer branding in a real-life context. Based on the process-related understanding of the phenomenon proposed by Aggerholm et al. (2011), the author has scrutinized the interrelations of employer branding and Human Resource Management (HRM), employer branding and Marketing Management (MM), as well as employer branding and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) within a Multinational Enterprise (MNC) in Thailand. The findings shall help to enhance the awareness for employer branding processes in a firm and illustrate potential influencing factors as well as implicit mechanisms. Moreover, the purpose was to give recommendations for the design of an employer brand. In order to attain these objectives, the author addressed three primary research questions:

- 1) What is the conceptual fundament of employer branding?
- 2) How does employer branding relate to HRM, MM, and CSR?
- 3) How should employer branding in a firm be designed?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The field of employer branding appeared for the first time in an article published by Ambler and Barrow (1996) and refers to "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company." (p. 187) Nowadays, there is a multitude of similar definitions available with many of them including the benefits that are offered by the employing organizations (Bilal & Zia-ur Rehman, 2017; Bierwirth, 2003; Petkovic, 2008; Yaemjamuang, 2017).

A review of the available literature revealed that to date there is a variety of research streams related to employer branding including human resources management, e.g., Stritzke (2010), marketing and brand management, e.g., Della Corte, Mangia, Micera, and Zamparelli (2011), Slavich, Cappetta, and Giangreco (2014), international employer branding, e.g., Christiaans (2013), Martin and Hetrick (2009), CSR, e.g., App, Merk, and Büttgen (2012), Lis (2012), and Kozica and Kaiser (2012), employer attractiveness, e.g., Holtbrügge and Kreppel (2015), choice of employer, e.g., Eshoj (2012), and Oladipo, Iyamabo, and Otubanjo (2013), demographic changes, e.g., Bollwitt (2010), management of the employer brand, e.g., Baum, Gsell, and Kabst (2012) and Petkovic (2008), and brand communication, e.g., Point and Dickmann (2012). As the scholars' notion of employer branding is mostly static the question arises, whether previous research can explain employer branding in its entirety, given it is subject to a dynamic environment.

In an attempt to appreciate the dynamics of the matter, [Aggerholm et al. \(2011\)](#) suggest that employer branding is made up of "cross-disciplinary processes" in the areas of branding, HRM, and CSR (p. 106). The authors created a framework that combines strategic human resource management and corporate social responsibility in which employer branding is regarded the intersection of HRM, MM, and CSR (see Figure 1). Besides that, employer branding is deemed a crucial component of a CSR-strategy concentrating on a long-lasting employer-employee relationship. Within the process to of creating an added value for the organization through this relationship, staff members are seen as partners. This benefit can be attained by shifting from a product-oriented viewpoint to a process-oriented one. The process-oriented view entails a focus on communication, mutual trust, and transparency, which are critical to ensure a strategic and long-term oriented relationship between an organization and its workforce. This process will ideally lead to a "co-creation of value" ([Prahalad & Ramaswamy, 2004](#); [Wasike, 2017](#)) rather than a predefined value (p. 5).

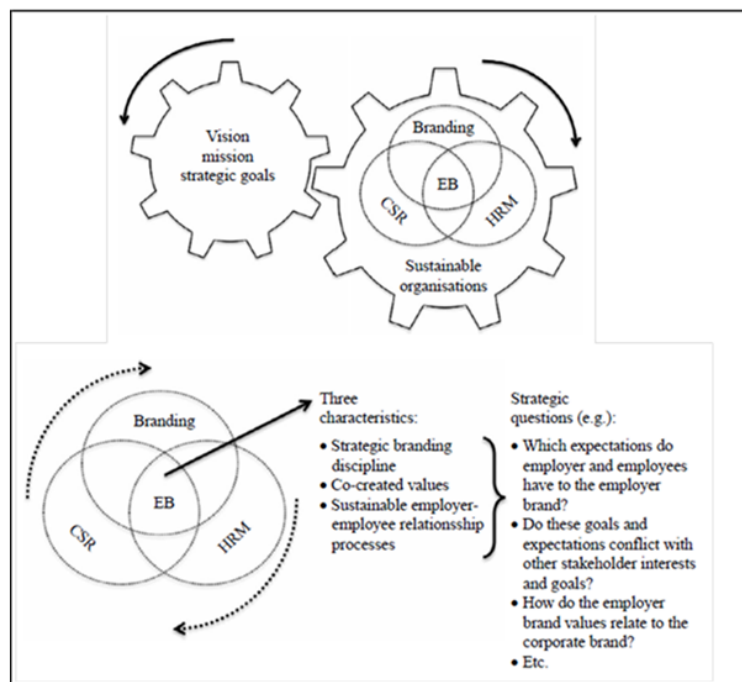


Figure 1 *Employer Branding as the Intersection of Branding, HRM, and CSR* (Source: [Aggerholm et al. \(2011\)](#) p. 114-116)

Conceptual Framework

Within the scope of this study, employer branding is regarded to as the intersection between branding, HRM, and CSR. In order to shed more light on the underlying processes, the interrelation of each of the three areas with employer branding has been examined.

HRM and employer branding: According to [Armstrong and Taylor \(2014\)](#) human resource management is a "strategic, integrated and coherent approach to the employment, development and well-being of the people working in organizations." (p. 4) This definition implies that there is a number of implicit and explicit influencing factors that may have their origins both inside and outside the organization. While a firm may have some power over endogenous aspects, exogenous ones cannot be controlled and shape the environment the firm is operating in. For that matter, it can be assumed that both internal and external employer branding are subject to be affected by these influences. While internal branding emphasizes the "adoption of the branding concept inside the organization to ensure that employees deliver the brand promise to external stakeholders" ([Foster, Punjaisri, & Cheng, 2010](#)) (p. 401), external employer branding "establishes the firm as an employer of choice and thereby enables it to attract the best possible workers" ([Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004](#)) (p. 503). By being actively involved in internal processes, existing employees turn into brand ambassadors for the organization.

Besides that, the question arises how employer branding can be integrated in the HR organization. The extent to which an employer brand needs to be centrally administered depends on the orientation of the employer brand. For internationally active organizations, [Martin and Hetrick \(2009\)](#) propose four strategic choices, with each of them

corresponding to a certain level of centralization. A firm can opt for a global employer brand putting emphasis on the brand in its entirety without accounting for any country-specific differences. Such an approach needs to be managed by the corporate head office with little to no involvement of the subsidiaries abroad, resulting in a high level of centralization. In case a company chooses to apply an international employer brand, HR representatives from the entities abroad support the corporate HR team. This tactic does not only benefit from the global brand image but also the local perspective, leading to a balanced distribution of the efforts. If a firm chooses to follow a glocal employer branding, corporate HR merely coordinates the branding effort, while the majority of the input is provided by local HR. In this case, the employer brand is more decentralized compared to the two approaches presented above. In case an enterprise chooses to apply a local employer brand strategy, self-governing local brands are likely to be established, without any coordination of contents across different entities. It can be concluded that the level of decentralization increases with the degree of localization.

MM and employer branding: The term marketing refers to the process of "finding and stimulating buyers for the firm's output" (Kotler & Levy, 1969) (p. 10). The strategic marketing process entails three steps, i.e., market segmentation, market targeting, and market positioning (Christiaans, 2013). The purpose of segmentation is to identify and classify the target audience in order to address them in a customized fashion. Moroko and Uncles (2009) propose the utilization of observable criteria, i.e., age, seniority, job type, permanence, employee lifecycle, tenure, and physical location as well as unobservable criteria, i.e., career focus, outlook on life stage, and desired career benefits during the segmentation process. These categories shall help to create employee clusters that serve as a basis to identify and determine critical employee segment as a target group. In addition to the market segmentation and market targeting, market positioning concludes the process by drafting a strategy how the brand should ideally be positioned. Within their Global Strategic Segmentation and Positioning Matrix, Hassan and Craft (2005) differentiate between four strategic choices, i.e., focused strategy, geocentric strategy, optimization strategy, and localization strategy. In an employer branding context, these choices depend on the similarities or dissimilarities of employee segments as well as the strategic positions of the employer brand.

		Strategic Positions	
		Same	Different
Market Segments	Same	Focused Strategy	Optimization Strategy
	Different	Geo-centric Strategy	Localization Strategy

Figure 2 Global Strategic Segmentation and Positioning Matrix (Source: Hassan and Craft (2005) p. 83)

CSR and employer branding: Even though this definition is relatively dated by now, CSR can still be described as "business-men's decisions and actions taken for reasons at least partially beyond the firm's direct economic or technical interest" (Davis, 1960) (p. 70). For many years, scholars have investigated the characteristics of different generations and what implications this has on HRM (Lieber, 2010). In recent years, an increasing body of academic literature dealing with the subject of generation Y and millennials and how they can be managed in an organization has emerged, since both generations are deemed to differ substantially from earlier one in terms of the expectations they have of an employer (Holste, 2012). Besides a number of other factors, especially sustainability aspects and CSR programs are

said to have a considerable influence on the perceived employer attractiveness among millennials (Klaffke & Parment, 2011), whereas baby boomers value an appealing working environment and collegiality (Holste, 2012).

Besides that, within the scope of a sustainable HRM, Geiger (2011) suggests managing employees in a holistic fashion by considering not only the task but also the social context. In a working environment that is characterized by an increasing level of complexity, an employee is subject to a variety of sources of stress. This may be enhanced when working in multinational settings, as people may be confronted with clashing cultural norms when working internationally (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). More challenges may arise in case an employee is delegated to a foreign country, as he is expected to not be familiar with aspects such as local taxation, health, or social security system causing difficulties not only for the employee himself but also for his family (Dowling, Festing, & Engle, 2008). Providing assistance to an employee along the employee life-cycle may be beneficial for the organization in the long run.

Table 1 *CONTEXTUALIZATION OF HRM, MM, AND CSR WITH EMPLOYER BRANDING*

Human resource management and employer branding

- External employer branding: Enhancing the brand awareness among the target audience
- Internal employer branding: Using existing employees as brand ambassadors
- Employer branding in the organizational structure: Centralization vs decentralization

Marketing management and employer branding

- Employee segments: Observable vs unobservable criteria
- Determining critical employee segments to be targeted by employer branding measures
- Positioning of the employer brand: Undifferentiated vs differentiated

Corporate social responsibility and employer branding

- CSR as a determinant for employer attractiveness: Generation gap
 - Sustainable employer-employee management provides support along the employee life-cycle
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METHODOLOGY

The succeeding paragraphs shall shed more light on the methodical underpinning of this study. Initially, the author describes the applied methods, followed by an explanation about the data collection, and finally the data analysis.

Research Method

The research method applicable to this investigation is based on a qualitative design. Even though it is not restricted to it, case study investigation is commonly seen as part of qualitative research methods (Yin, 2017). The author argues that case studies are most appropriate if the research questions are targeting the "how" and "why" of phenomena in a real-life context. Whereas research designs such as surveys pursue statistical generalizations based on samples, case studies intend to achieve analytic ones. These analytic generalizations can contribute to either validate or refine existing theoretical assumptions or help to create new ones (Gerring, 2006; Woodside, 2010; Yin, 2017).

This article aims to examine the conceptualization of employer branding introduced by Aggerholm et al. (2011) in a real-life context of a European multinational enterprise with a subsidiary in Thailand. For that matter, executives in key positions related to the areas of HRM, MM, and CSR across the case study firm in Thailand interpreted the phenomenon of employer branding individually, which is anticipated to result in a differentiated perception. As the interviewees are not expected to be aware of the influences and the connection between employer branding and HRM, MM, and CSR as a whole, the scholar needs to assess and interpret their perception in order to derive a clearer understanding of the subject on a higher level (Kusterer, 2008; Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009).

Data Collection

The empirical data has been collected in form of a single-case study. The author has conducted guided interviews with one interview partner from each field of HRM, MM, and CSR. Regarding the selection of interviewees, the author put emphasis on ensuring that the proven experts can make meaningful contributions in their areas based on their first-hand practical expertise rather than interviewing a large number of incumbents. This is in line with the above described objective to arrive at analytic generalizations instead of statistical ones.

Guided interviews allow the academic to steer the discussion in a controlled way focusing on the research area while maintaining a certain level of flexibility (Gläser & Laudel, 2010). This is of great importance for this study, since the phenomenon of international employer branding has so far only been investigated to a limited extent. By questioning the interviewees in an open way, the researcher might uncover unexpected and new findings, which have not been revealed previously. The interview guideline consists of three sets of questions, which target employer branding and HRM, MM, and CSR. In line with Hüttner and Schwarting (2002), all interviews have been conducted personally and face-to-face, allowing the scholar to gain a deeper understanding of the subject.

Data Analysis

The empirical data gathered have been analyzed with regards to the research questions. For that matter, the documented and transcribed data had to be structured and interpreted. Through a qualitative content analysis, the collected information has been examined with respect to the research questions (Gläser & Laudel, 2010; Mayring, 2010). The analysis was based on a category system, which has been derived from the conceptual framework. This system enabled the researcher to extract information that relevant for answering the research questions and allocate it accordingly. The categories have been determined for the contextualization of employer branding and HRM, employer branding and MM, and employer branding CSR. For the decision whether the information gathered through the interviews is in fact relevant, the scholar's interpretation of the transcript was governing in line with Gläser and Laudel (2010) proposing it is essential that the extraction reflects "the cognitive process of each scholar, which makes it individual." (p.201)

FINDINGS

HRM and Employer Branding

It emerges from the discussion with the interviewee that the HR activities in Thailand are mainly transactional with little focus on a strategic development of the area. The entity in Thailand is currently handling the full scope of HRM with little to no support from the headquarters overseas. While the HR Manager overlooks the HR activities in their entirety, he receives operational support from colleagues in the fields of compensation and benefits as well as talent acquisition.

Even though employer branding is not well-established in its function, the organization has a clear understanding about the concept as well as the necessity to formally implement it. In case any employer branding activities are initiated, these are predominantly focusing on existing employees, i.e., internal employer branding due to an unclear budget for external branding projects. The aim of internal employer branding in the organization is to align the company culture and its implicit values with the employees' perception of the same.

MM and Employer Branding

With regards to segmentation criteria, the company classifies customers according to products and employees by the nature of the job. Besides the effort to build clusters, the company does currently not differentiate its communication based on them. However, the interviewee suggests that the firm should focus its employer branding activities on employee groups that are essential for its success. Especially field engineers from the area of customer service are seen as critical, as they can assist the clients in case of any technical issues that may result in costly production downtime. Despite the postulation for a more target group-oriented approach, no systematic method is established. Besides that, the interviewee states that there are no specific requirements or standards related to the strategic positioning of the brand.

CSR and Employer Branding

The interviewee claims that the importance employees attribute to the field of CSR varies considerable between generations. Although CSR is not formally established in Thailand, the younger part of the workforce has its own understanding of the subject and demands a stronger commitment of the firm. According to the interviewee, the company intends to establish congruency between the firm's and the employees' values, while appreciating the circumstance that these are not homogenous among the workforce. In order to present itself consistently to both internal and external stakeholders, the firm envisages to incorporate sustainability aspects into the employer brand message. The case study firm seeks to comprehensively support their employees along the employee life-cycle. This includes an

induction program for new joiners as well as individual coaching sessions throughout the employment period. When it comes to international staff mobility, both incoming and outgoing employees are assisted in a wide-ranging manner, i.e., finding appropriate housing, schools, or guidance in taxation matters.

DISCUSSION

Despite the fact that employer branding is not institutionalized in the organization, it is considered being part of the responsibility of HR to coordinate the activities. Since there is little support from the head office, the firm has a large degree of leeway when it comes to the design of both their HR as well as their employer branding activities. This allows them to account for the local environment and corresponding needs of the target groups, while benefitting from the attractiveness of the global brand leading to a glocal approach to employer branding as described by [Martin and Hetrick \(2009\)](#). Whereas the firm engages in isolated employer branding initiatives, there is no structured concept that can facilitate the alignment of the firm's values and culture with an internal target group's perception or enhance the level of familiarity of external stakeholders with the firm. A systematic approach may also be helpful to utilize internal employees as brand ambassadors, as the established structure can guide them in their actions. When developing a method, the firm can make use of the local freedom to design their activities and develop a structured concept for each target group. Moreover, it may be helpful to allocate resources dedicated to employer branding. This would not only safeguard the feasibility of the initiatives but can also contribute to control related expenses in a transparent way.

Employee clusters are based on observable factors, with unobservable ones being neglected. Even though the firm stresses the importance of addressing the target audiences in a differentiated way, there is no clear concept in place. In order to overcome the limits associated with deploying observable factors only, the firm may consider applying unobservable ones, too. This can help to enhance the segmentation that is a crucial prerequisite for a customized communication concept to convey the employer brand message. As the firm has a sound understanding of which employee segment is most decisive for its success, explicitly addressing this group may help to achieve a sustainable competitive advantage. Since the employer brand is not subject to any strategic positioning, the employer branding activities do not follow any systematic procedure but merely an intuitive approach. By determining a strategic orientation, the limited resources can be used in a purposeful way and may result in an increased effectiveness of the measures.

The firm has developed an awareness that their employees' values are dissimilar across different generations. As it envisages to align the employer branding message with the work forces' values, it is imperative to have an up to date knowledge about the latter to consider them appropriately and effectively in the employer brand message. Moreover, the extensive support and guidance the company already provides to their staff throughout the employee life-cycle can also be incorporated into the employer brand message, in order to stress the firm's attitude towards a sustainable HRM.

CONCLUSION

The study reveals that employer branding can be regarded as a dynamic construct, which is determined by its interrelation with human resource management, marketing, and CSR. Thus, changes in each of these fields are expected to have an impact on the employer brand. In order to avoid unfavorable effects on the employer brand, organizations are therefore required to have extensive knowledge about each area as well as the general environment to anticipate potential developments and how they may affect the subject.

While the case study entity clearly showcases the link of each area with employer branding, there is a partial gap between the suggestions made in the literature and the manifestation of the subject in a real-life context. In order to close this gap and to guarantee an efficient utilization of resources, it seems essential to develop a mutual understanding of the goals and objective prior to engaging in any employer branding activities. Besides, firms must clearly allocate resources and responsibilities, as a lack of it may result in inefficiencies throughout the branding process.

IMPLICATIONS

Seeing employer branding as the result of interactive processes rather than a predetermined product may considerably impact the way both researchers and practitioners see the matter. Propositions made about employer branding taking a static stance may be revisited by taking its dynamic character into account. Moreover, as employer branding is constantly subject to changes, the level of complexity increases for anyone dealing with the phenomenon, both in an academic as well as real-life context. Hence, a clear delineation of the subject as well its environment will be helpful in

order to ensure the validity of the assumptions made about it.

LIMITATIONS

With respect to the applicability of this study's result, it is imperative to take its peculiarities into account. For instance, the data has been collected in a multinational corporation in the area of machine and plants engineering. While this firm engages in business to business trading, companies in other industry sectors may have a different perspective on the subject of employer branding. Furthermore, the study has been conducted in a Thailand-specific context, so cultural implications impede the generalizability of the outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

While this contribution took a company-internal perspective, it will be advisable to take the view of external stakeholders into account in future studies. This may include examining the effectiveness of employer branding initiatives by considering the potential employees' perception. Besides that, a quantitative research design may help to corroborate the findings. This may entail a large-scale study on companies about their employer branding practice either in Thailand or on an international level by widening the scope.

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