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Developing Employee Brand Loyalty through Employer Branding; a Strategy to win the Unconventional War for Talent Retention

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Abstract: Brands are the most valuable assets for the organizations, due to that billions of dollars were invested by the organizations in managing brands. In the modern marketing environment developing and sustaining the brand loyalty plays vital role in attaining competitive advantage. In services sector high employee turnover rate poses major challenge for management. This paper conceptualised the employee brand loyalty as employee's willingness to stay and positive word of mouth about organization's brand and provide inclusive view. The concept of employer branding is still in evolving and developing stage. Existing literature on employer branding were limited and extensively focused in the perspective of potential employees rather than existing employees. This paper aims to review the employer branding within the existing employees context, and also provide the comprehensive view on developing of employee brand loyalty through employer branding

Keywords: employee brand loyalty, employer branding, corporate brand

1. INTRODUCTION

In services sector employees play key role in building and maintaining the relationships with all stakeholders of organization. Employees are considered as substantial asset of the organization. In 2015 recent survey reported that the talent retention is becoming a challenge for global employers and they are more concerned to retain the best talent to compete in this new war for talent (Mosley, 2015). The Australian Human Resource Institute (AHRI) report, highlighted that the employee turnover rate around the globe in 2012 is 13% which increased in 2015 reported as 16% (AHRI, 2015). In 2015 only in USA 59 million employees leave their organizations reported by Bureau of Labor (BLS) statistics report (BLS, 2016). Number of

studies stated that employee's willingness to leave current organization is basically indication of low employee loyalty with organization's brand (Ahmad & Daud, 2016; Bloemer & Schroder, 2006; Itam & Singh, 2017; Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2014; Narteh & Odoom, 2015; Robbins & Judge, 2014). Employee retention is essential to develop employee brand loyalty. The employees having strong sense of loyalty with their organization's brand will improve their intention to stay in organization with having a strong believed to contribute for their brand's success (Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2014; Robbins & Judge, 2014; Narteh & Odoom, 2015).

The literature has recognized few practices that sustaining employees' brand loyalty. Such as internal marketing practices (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2003; Narteh & Odoom, 2015; Wu & Norman, 2006), Internal branding practices (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2014; Itam & Singh, 2017). According to the studies of Wu and Norman, (2006) and Narteh and Odoom, (2015) stated that internal marketing practices are timely impact on developing brand loyalty among employees and considered as for short term practices for employee brand loyalty development. By reviewing the literature on developing brand loyalty among employees for their retention the latest practices known as employer branding which seems to be more appropriate in sustaining long term relationship between employee and employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Gozukara & Hatipoglu, 2016; Kucherov & Samokish, 2016; Jain & Bhatt, 2015; Leekha & Sharma, 2014).

While traditionally branding efforts focuses towards development of corporate and product brands according to consumer perspective. The limitation and restriction for branding is no longer opt for products only. In the past, organizations used branding efforts to promote their products and services, recently branding strategies applied in human resource management, even organizations resorting to branding for attracting and retaining the best talent (Mosley, 2015). Organizations realized that the appropriate way to become attractive in employment market is by having strong, distinguishable and clear employer brand (Gozukara & Hatipoglu, 2016; Kucherov & Samokish, 2016; Leekha & Sharma, 2014). Similarly the aim of consumer brand is to attract and retain the consumers by developing consumer brand loyalty, in the same way the aim of employer brand is to attract and retain the best talent by developing employee brand loyalty.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Conceptualizing employee brand loyalty

The brand loyalty concept attains more attention of academicians and practitioners among all the concepts considered in description of strong brand (Malai & Speece, 2005; Tsao & Chen, 2005). In the early 1940s and 1950s the brand loyalty concept is firstly developed simplistic considered as "brand preferences" (Guest, 1944). Later this concept was developed as multi-dimensional which contains two dimensions of brand loyalty, attitudinal and behavioral loyalty, attitudinal brand loyalty goes beyond repurchasing behavior defined as strong commitment with a specific brand, while behavioral brand loyalty considered as repurchasing behavior (Day, 1969; Farr & Hollis, 1997). Oliver (1999) defined brand loyalty as "a deeply held commitment to rebuy or re-patronize a preferred product/service consistently in the future" (p. 34). Yoo and Donthu (2001) developed on Oliver work by defining brand loyalty as "intention to buy the brand as a primary choice" (p. 3). Further studies also defined brand loyalty as positive behavior towards specific brand and intention to purchase repeatedly the same product/ services of same brand again and again in future regardless of changes in environment (Ahn, Kim & Hyun, 2015; Brown & Alnawas, 2016; Lui,

2007). Other group of researches view brand loyalty as the main element of brand equity or an outcome of brand equity (Aaker, 1991; Erdem and Swait, 1998). Since the brand loyalty was viewed as a significant asset for brand success, the brand loyal customer are said to have low intention to switch another brand even that competitive actions from other brands never affects this relationship (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Ahn, Kim & Hyun, 2015; Brown & Alnawas, 2016).

As brand loyalty was developed to attitudinal and behavioural dimension. Employee loyalty also conceptualized by both attitudinal and behavioral elements. According to attitudinal approach, employee loyalty described as a psychological inclination, such as employee's feeling of identification (Boroff & Lewin, 1997), attachment (Leck & Saunders, 1992) and commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Johnson *et al.*, 2009) with the organization brand. Attitudinal loyalty is difficult to observe due to psychological inclination nature such as emotional (Hajdin, 2005) or moral nature (Coughlan, 2005). The researchers and practitioners considered qualitative assessments to evaluate the attitudinal employee loyalty generally depend on self-reported assessments. Few research studies discussed intended absenteeism as an indicator of attitudinal employee loyalty. The main issues are empirical evaluation of attitudinal approach because it's difficult to measure employee's feeling empirically (Guillon & Cezanne, 2014). The self-reported assessments lead towards the limited subjectivism in the interpretations and also difficult to synthesize the results based on attitudinal approach due to various items used by different studies (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Guillon & Cezanne, 2014).

The behavioral approach of employee loyalty can be observable relationship between employees and organization. The limitation of behavioral approaches is that it measured easily but the interpretations remains fragile, the reason behind some behaviors which express loyalty might be different motives. For example, employee intention to stay within the organization might be due to lack of mobility opportunities (Allen & Tu'selman, 2009). Various research studies stated different understandings of same behavior, consequently employee loyalty defined by different perspectives. Dutot (2004) defined employee loyalty as "relation of trust resistance to the adoption of opportunistic behavior faced with an outside job offer" (p. 12). "Significant length of service in the company, very little tendency to seek or examine outside job offers and, generally, a strong sense of belonging" (Peretti, 2005, p. 110); or "a feeling of belonging" combined with staying in the organization over the long term (Colle, 2006, p. 38).

In sum, the attitudinal employee loyalty relates to psychological contract (Guest & Conway, 2002; Naus *et al.*, 2007) or sense of trust between employee and employer (Eberl *et al.*, 2012). Similarly the behavioral employee loyalty stated as employee productive behavior (Kelloway *et al.*, 2010), intention to stay with the organization's brand (Colle, 2006; Griffeth *et al.*, 2000; Griffeth & Hom, 2004; Narteh & Odoom, 2015; Punjasiri *et al.*, 2009; Punjasiri & Wilson, 2011; Tseng & Wu, 2017; Itam & Singh, 2017). The researchers much focus on behavioral loyalty rather than attitudinal loyalty the reason behind is that practically it's difficult to measure propensity of an individual employee (Ahn, Park & Kang, 2011).

The number of studies defined employee brand loyalty by mixed approach. Punjasiri *et al.*, (2009) defined employee brand loyalty as employee's intention to remain with current organization. Employee's intention to stay with organization used to evaluate the employee brand loyalty. Numerous studies stated that intention to stay with organization and positive word of mouth is basically the sign of employee loyalty with the organization's brand. (Ahan, Park, & Kang, 2011; Bloemer & Schroder, 2006; Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2014; Matzler *et al.*, 2003; Matzler & Renzl, 2006; Narteh & Odoom, 2015; Zeithmal, Berry, &

Parasuraman, 1996; Tseng & Wu, 2017; Itam & Singh, 2017) The consensus of researchers on main dimension of employee brand loyalty is intention to stay with organization and positive word of mouth. High employee turnover intentions is basically indication of low employee brand loyalty with organization (Bloemer & Schroder, 2006; Lee, Kim, & Kim, 2014; Ahmad & Daud, 2016).

Generally speaking brand loyalty concept can apply on human resource management as employee brand loyalty. Similar to consumer's brand loyalty the employees who are loyal to their organization brand have intention to stay with organization and spread positive word of mouth. Various studies provide similar definition of employee loyalty and employee brand loyalty (Narteh & Odoom, 2015; Punjasiri & Wilson, 2011; Du Preez, & Bendixen, 2015; Terglav, Ruzzier, & Kase, 2016; Tseng & Wu, 2017; Itam & Singh, 2017). For instance Allen and Meyer (1990) stated that employee loyalty is basically employee's affective commitment and attachment with organization's brand.

Therefore, it is concluded that employee brand loyalty is sign of employee willingness to stay in organization, which resulted in retaining the talent employee, this will effect costumers brand loyalty and the level of attachment, belonging to organization and its brand.

2.2. Conceptualizing employer branding

Employer branding concept is still in evolving and developing stage (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Davies, 2008; Kunerth & Mosley, 2011; Rampl & Kenning, 2014; Tanwar & Prasad, 2017). The foundation of employer brand concept is basically derived from brand marketing management. In brand marketing the products or services are branded for consumer attraction. Similarly employer brand aims to attract and retain the best competent talent in employment market. The term employer branding was firstly introduced in 1996 by Ambler and barrow conceptualized by bringing together the concept of brand marketing and human resource management. Ambler and Barrow (1996) defined employer branding as "the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (p. 18). This definition further stimulated numerous studies on employer branding concept. This definition considered as the first statement regarding employer brand term.

According to Moroko and Uncles (2008) stated that employer brand have conceptual similarities with consumer and corporate brand. The comparison between definition of employer brand by Ambler and barrow (1996) with the definition of consumer brand by Parker *et al.*, (1986) further strengthen this argument. According to Parker *et al.*, (1986) described the brands on the bases of consumers' needs fulfilment including symbolic, functional and experimental needs. This concept indicates the similarities between product brand and employer brand.

The employer brand enables the organizations to make distinction with other organizations by emphasizing the distinct employment offerings (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). According to Ambler and Barrow (1996) the key role of employer brand is to increase retention and improve recruitments. Ruch (2002) stated that the main concern of employer brand with the "employment experience", which includes both benefits tangible and intangible such as financial benefits like salary and organization culture. However, there is still lack of clarity, whether these offerings by employer actually satisfy and retain their employees. Furthermore, the study of Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) stated that these objectives only achieved when employer brand is attractive for the target audience. The "target audience" term in the

context of employer brand relates with potential employees and existing employees (Kucherov & Zavyalova, 2012).

Review of previous literature indicates that the majority existing literature on employer branding considered potential employees as the target audience and much focused on the dimensions relating with employer attractiveness (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Alniacik, Alniacik, Eart & Akcin, 2014; App & Merk, 2012; Berthon *et al.*, 2005; Born & Kang, 2015; Collins & Stevens, 2002; Lievens *et al.*, 2007; Rampl & Kenning, 2014; Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen, 2013; Shaker & Ahmed, 2014). Maxwell and Knox (2009) stated that employer branding desired benefits only achieved if employer brand considered attractive by the current employees.

2.3. Relationship between employee brand loyalty and employer branding

The study of Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) provide theoretical foundations to describe the relationship between employer branding and employee brand loyalty by using the term employer brand loyalty as outcome of employer branding. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) stated that employer branding has significant positive influence on organizational identity and organizational culture which further affects employee brand loyalty. The brand loyal consumers express their loyalty by continues repurchase even under the unfavorable circumstance, brand loyal consumers never leave the brand. Similar to customer brand loyalty concept, the brand loyal employees have never intention to leave the employer even under less than ideal situations for organization (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The study of Kucherov and Samokish (2016) evaluated the relationship between employer branding and employee loyalty with employer brand by examining the employer brand equity measurement. This study discussed employee brand loyalty as the significant asset of employer brand, the employer branding strengthen the employee brand loyalty (Kucherov & Samokish, 2016). The limitation of that study is, the study conducted in the context of prospective employees rather than existing employees. Maxwell and Knox (2009) stated that the methods and techniques while studying employer brand attractiveness in prospective employees context cannot be appropriate to apply for studying employer branding in current employees perspective. According to Rampl (2014) stated that the existing literature on employer branding and employee brand loyalty extensively focuses in the perspective of potential employees rather than existing employees. There is limited literature focus on employer branding efforts towards existing or current employees context (Tanwar & Prasad, 2016). The purpose of employer branding is not only to attract the potential employees but also have significance importance for engaging, motivating and retaining the existing employees. Therefore, the present study exclusively focused on employer branding practices in context of existing employees to fulfil this gap.

3. DISCUSSION

The previous studies which discussed relationship between employees brand loyalty and employer branding have various limitations. The Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) provide theoretical foundations to describe loyalty by using term employer brand loyalty as outcome of employer branding in employee retention context. The study discussed the mediation effect of organizational identity and organizational culture between employer branding and employer brand loyalty. The study provides theoretical foundation not further empirically extended. The study of Gozukara and Hatipoglu (2016) examines the employer branding impact on organization citizenship measuring loyalty in organizational context. The first limitation of this study is

that employer branding measured by employer attractiveness context. Secondly, the study not conducted in context of employee retention. The study of Davies, (2008) and Ahmad and Daud (2016) studied the employer branding relationship with loyalty in context of employee retention. The limitation is that these studies are discussed brand satisfaction and job satisfaction as the predictors of loyalty. The study of Davies, (2008) studied the employee brand loyalty predicted by the aspects of employer brand personality and identity. Furthermore, the study was limited to examine the employer branding influence only managers. The study of Ahmad and Daud (2016) observed the impact of employer branding on employee turnover intentions by using the further dimensions of employer branding application, development, economic, interest and social.

4. CONCLUSION

The present study is conceptual review of the relationship between employer branding and employee brand loyalty. Nowadays organization are more concern to attract consumers and employment market. This can be done by having strong, distinguishable and clear employer brand. Likewise the aim of consumer brand is to attract new consumers and retain existing by developing consumer brand loyalty, similarly the aim of employer brand to attract and retain the best talent by developing employee brand loyalty. Today's organization is more focusing to strengthen their employer's brand because the employer brand strategy enables the organization to attract and retained the best talent by establishing the employer as an "employer of choice" within the industry (Mosley, 2015).

Numerous studies stated that the effective employer branding not only improving the recruitments, also enhance the employee satisfaction, engagement, commitment and loyalty which lead towards employee retention and strengthen the brand performance (Backhuas & Tikoo, 2004; Tanwar & Prasad, 2017). By reviewing the literature on brand management it shows that those employees who have willingness to stay and spread positive word of mouth about their employer brand are loyal to their organization's brand and having a strong believed to contribute for their brand's success. To retain the best talent, it is necessary to understand how to develop employee brand loyalty. Among all the best practices for developing employee brand loyalty the most relevant practices known as employer branding which seems relevant in maintaining long term relationship between employee and employer. Employer branding is the ability of an organization to implement an employee retention strategy to produce the brand loyal employees who has intention to stay with organization. Employees made comparison their organization with other organizations in such a way that their organization is better and different from other organizations, employees strategically select those attributes on which they compared their organization with other organizations as well as by assigning the each attribute by the importance and value (positive or negative) which affect the loyalty behavior of employee with organization's brand.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper aims to review the employer branding within the existing employees context, and also provide the comprehensive view on developing of employee brand loyalty through employer branding. But it has still few limitations of this study which provide further research opportunities. The concept of employer branding is still in developing stage which needs more research. The employer branding concept was introduced almost before two decades, there is no a single indication that the concept passing fad as a part

of past. It is still considered as “the hottest strategy in employment” and still gained much popularity among employers, also attain the attention of practitioners and academicians in the world of human capital management. The present study conceptualised the relationship between employer branding and employee brand loyalty. It needs empirical evidence; future study can expand the scope of this paper by providing empirical evidence on relationship of employer branding with employee brand loyalty.

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