HOW HAS MODERN EMPLOYER BRANDING IMPACTED ORGANISATIONS OVERALL RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

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Abstract

Employer branding is an emerging topic amongst both Human Resources and Marketing. Employer branding looks at how organisations present themselves within the labour market. This study investigates the modern application of employer branding and how organisations leverage their brand to create an attractive opportunity for candidates. This research investigates the current labour market and how it has impacted Employer Branding.

This research used both primary and secondary research to understand Employer Branding and its modern application further. The literature review presents an insight into the current situation while introducing some theoretical marketing activities relevant to the topic. Semi-structured interviews complemented this research as first-hand accounts discussing Employer Branding led the research to compare the previous literature and marketing theories and apply them to the findings from the research.

This research project identified Employer Branding as an emerging extension of Marketing. Through the sample, the findings discussed different aspects such as how competition and situations such as the pandemic have accelerated the need for Employer Branding to integrate into both Human Resource & Marketing strategies.

The Research project highlights the practical benefits and methods for organisations looking to build and develop their Employer Brand. The Dissertation concludes with recommendations for further research.

Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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Research Students Declaration Form
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Name: Gerard Farrell

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

An emerging topic in the world of talent acquisition is that of employer branding. As a topic, employer branding is being acknowledged as a vital aspect in attracting and retaining the best candidates (Sengupta, et al., 2015). Employer branding has become increasingly integral to an organisation's overall strategy as the war for talent is becoming more and more competitive. The concept of employer branding is relative to how an organisation attracts potential new candidates (Priyadarshi, 2011). The labour market has shifted to become a more competitive landscape. The candidate-driven market has created a need to develop strong employer branding communications to attract candidates. Competition has created a need for marketing teams to get involved in creating attractive prospects for candidates. The paper by Mearns (2007) suggests that it must create a point of difference for a brand to be successful. In a candidate-driven market, the candidates will view organisations actively recruiting as overall opportunities beyond the job itself. For an organisation to be competitive within the labour market, it must build a strong brand to attract the candidates (Collins & Stevens, 2002).

Organisations know that when attracting the desired candidates, it is now a much more complex situation. The complexity arises as the modern labour market requires more than just the job specifications or requirements. The organisation will need to build an image that highlights its human qualities and brand personality to ensure that the candidates are a suitable fit personality-wise, centring around the idea of brand building and showing their human side (Asha & Jyothi, 2013).

How does an organisation do this? Traditionally, employer branding is an activity that Human resource teams develop internally. This involves building a strong internal brand. There are several elements involved in creating this internal brand (Lamprini & Avonlitis, 2018). Human resource teams will look to build company culture and values internally. Company culture refers to company culture as *"the set of shared values, beliefs, and norms that influence the way employees to think, feel, and behave in the workplace"* (Schein, 1992)*.* These values will become strategically significant when developing marketing strategies, particularly concerning talent attraction. The brand

messaging and how these strategies are developed will be integrated into overall communication strategies.

This research will look to review the literature presented on different elements of branding and employer branding. To gain a broad understanding of the topic, it is vital to research the relevant papers and similar topics to broaden the research horizon. The insights gain will provide a basis for the research. This analysis will identify the gaps within the research and contribute to the primary research in in-depth interviews. The in-depth interviews will look to understand the gaps in the research and draw conclusions for the research. The topic of employer branding is a topic that is only emerging. The research that has been done is predominantly conducted from the perspective of a Human Resource point of view. The research looks at employer branding from a different point of view and looks at how organisations communicate their employer brand to potential candidates.

Modern applications of employer branding are relevant. The research will look at digital channels and how organisations leverage these platforms to build their employer brand online. Using in-depth interviews to understand how organisations effectively use these platforms. Employer branding is an emerging topic within marketing. Employer branding has accelerated in importance due to the competition for employers within the labour market. To understand the strategic impact of employer branding, this research will review the literature and conduct primary research. Interviews will reveal the personal opinions on what the participants believe will work and what has worked in their experience. In contrast, the participants will also disclose whether they believe employer branding is as significant as the research suggests.

This research is an exploratory piece looking at the role of employer branding and determining how important it is. There has not been a significant amount of information on employer branding from this perspective. It is still relatively unknown. This gap in the research looks to provide answers to this unknown.

The research onion dictates the decision made on how this research is shaped (Saunders, et al., 2012). The chapter discussing the research methodology will go in-depth on how the research is structured and provide the reader with an insight into the reasoning of these choices. This chapter will discuss the research philosophy, approach and strategy. Each section will offer an in-depth explanation of why each

decision is made and their suitability to this research piece. This chapter will also disclose the sample that will be researched; it will discuss the reasoning and highlight the interview style that will be conducted.

Following the interviews, the next chapter will look at the results and discuss the interviews' content. These results will be then analysed in a further discussion chapter. Using thematic analysis, the research will identify key themes and discuss the significance of these themes compared to the previous literature review. The themes identified will be discussed and identified. This will lead to a final chapter which will discuss the conclusions and any recommendations from the researcher

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

2.1 – Introduction

The objective of this literature review is to examine the literature around the concept of branding. This review will be a critical analysis exploring various aspects of branding while exploring the idea of employer branding and assessing whether or not is it is something modern organisations value?' To further understand the attitude towards employer branding, it is essential to examine marketing concept aspects such as value propositions, the desirability of an organisation and how an organisation communicates these features.

To critically analyse the concept of employer branding, it is vital to understand the traditional theories of marketing, explore the modern concepts of employer branding, and evaluate the adaptability of traditional concepts into modern ideas such as employer branding. Another aspect to consider is the emergence of digital technologies and how these channels have impacted organisations' communication strategies. External factors such as the competition within the labour market have led to increased levels of marketing in modern talent acquisition (Alashmawy & Yazdanifard, 2019). They were exploring different avenues such as social media to develop talent pipelines and networks. Developing a talent pipeline provides a massive benefit in creating brand recall in the future when they will be actively recruiting. This review aims to evaluate employer branding and how practical it is from large corporations to SME's.

2.2 – Fundamental branding theory

The concept of branding is vital to a business. A brand is a "name that symbolises a long-term engagement, crusade or commitment to a unique set of values, embedded into products, services and behaviours, which make the organisation, person or product stand apart or stand out" (Kapferer, 2012). A brand refers to the identity of a business and how all consumers view it. *Branding* is a discipline that develops the point of difference for an organisation (Mearns, 2007). The perception of a brand is

vital in all facets of a business, and it is a critical factor to its success. This point of difference is significant for an organisation, and a brand needs to develop a competitive advantage within a marketplace (Mearns, 2007). The literature developed this idea of a point of difference, suggesting that creating a superior employee experience can be leveraged as a competitive advantage (Love & Singh, 2011). Establishing a "brand" is a vital aspect of communications from an organisation and developing marketing strategies as a whole as they will centre around the "brand".

2.3 – Introduction to Employer Branding

Traditionally, branding refers to how a brand is perceived by a consumer offering a product or service (Sokro, 2012). More modern literature suggests that branding in its traditional form is no longer sufficient. This is quite significant in understanding the current landscape of branding. It is suggested in the paper by (Armando and Lama (2021) that branding has had multiple new applications in the last ten years which were not previously considered. One of the topics discussed is that of employer branding. Is employer branding a new aspect of branding which will emerge and become part of an organisation's overall strategy? Employer branding has been defined as *"the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company"* (Ambler & Barrow, 1996) (Armando & Vargas-Merino, 2021). The paper by (Mihalcea, 2017) suggests that employer branding is broken down into two different aspects. The two aspects are brand association and brand loyalty (Mihalcea, 2017) (Collins & Kanar, 2013). Brand association refers to how company traits resonate in a consumer or candidate's mind. Brand loyalty is related to the culture and identity of a brand. The two separate concepts are significant when discussing employer branding. Brand loyalty helps reveal the depth of the relationship between a brand and consumer (Aaker, 1991). As a more dated piece of literature, it remains relevant when applying this concept to employer branding.

It is crucial to understand how brand association applies to an organisations employer brand. The literature suggests that the candidate market is like a typical consumer market. This suggests it is by treating the candidate as the consumer and applying for a role as an act of purchase (Mendelson, et al., 2001). As well as this, the idea of

building a positive brand association builds a desirable entity for an organisation which will make candidates want to initiate a working relationship with them (Aiman-Smith, et al., 2001).

2.4 – The Labour Market

Following on from that concept, it is crucial to evaluate the market in which organisations are operating. "The war for talent" (Verma & Ahmad, 2016) refers to how competitive the market is for candidates. This means that employer branding is becoming an increasingly vital aspect of a company's marketing strategy. One of the key ideas discussed in the literature is how a candidate will externally view an organisation and build their expectations to foresee where this opportunity will bring them (Aiman-Smith, et al., 2001) (Pingle & Sharma, 2013). Referring to the idea presented in the (Mendelson, et al., 2001) paper where the candidate is considered the consumer, the organisation's employer brand will prove vital in attracting the desired candidates. Having an employer brand is unavoidable (Barrow & Mosely, 2005). To put this into context, every organisation will have an employer brand whether it intends to push it or not. This is because candidates or consumers will have an association with a brand. While an organisation may not be investing in their employer brand, it may harm its overall performance as the attraction of high-quality candidates will be unlikely. In the current market, which has been named the "war for talent", is employer branding a strategic element of marketing that needs to be developed within organisations?

One of the recurring obstacles across the literature relates to how increasingly competitive the labour market is (Priyadarshi, 2011). The increase in competition is due to several factors. The working population is gaining further education, upskilling, flexible working conditions, and an increased number of organisations competing for the same candidates. The concept of employer branding emphasises an organisation to create attractive opportunities to attract the optimal candidates. It is evident across the literature that an organisation's employer brand is an aspect of the business whether an organisation invests and develops in it or not (Sokro, 2012). This paper highlights the broad range of factors that impact an employer brand. An employer

brand considers the organisation's history, including its staff, previous campaigns, and any public reviews that impact the overall brand's reputation.

With the increasing level of competition in the labour market, it is vital to develop a talent attraction strategy. Positioning the organisation with a strong employer brand will help gain a competitive advantage within this market. This is one of the vital consideration's organisations will need to evaluate. How does an organisation want to be viewed in the labour market? Like product or service marketing, an organisation needs to create an attractive brand image. Across the literature, there is a common consensus that from a human point of view. The higher the skill level of the people in the organisation, the overall greater quality produced within an organisation. An organisation must understand the emphasis placed on the actual marketing of the employer brand. This highlights the importance of building a strong employer brand and utilising it as a competitive advantage to attract the highest quality of candidates (Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019). As mentioned in the literature, the quality of candidates is increasing (Priyadarshi, 2011). The assumption of higher-skilled workers and the opportunity to upskill for candidates emphasises the need for effective employer branding to reach the most sought-after candidates. The opportunity to leverage an employee value proposition in these communications can prove to be effective strategy-wise (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). An employee value proposition is the candidate's perception of the value or benefits an employee perceives to be obtainable (Herger, 2007). Using a combination of factors from the literature, an organisation can utilise these elements to create a strong employer brand. One of the main objectives for an organisation building an employer brand will increase the likelihood of an organisation becoming a "first choice" as a brand (Rampl, 2014). Becoming the first-choice brand creates enormous opportunities for an organisation. This is particularly prevalent regarding the preconceived relationship a potential new candidate will have with the organisation (Foster, et al., 2010). The relationship created by the organisation creates an opportunity where candidates will aspire to work there instead of outreaching to the labour market to source candidates.

2.5 – Internal & External Branding

Looking at the example of small and medium-sized enterprises (SME's) and the obstacles these organisations face regarding their employer brand. A significant obstacle for SME's is building their employer brand. One of the significant reasons is how much larger organisations use aggressive tactics in creating attractive opportunities for candidates (Prabhjot, et al., 2015). Larger organisations have the capabilities and resources to communicate the values they present as an employer, increasing their employer brand. It is evident to see how large corporations communicate their corporate culture. The idea of creating a strong culture within an organisation is like creating a brand community. The idea of developing a strong community is linked to inspiring the members within the community to develop a stronger sense of brand loyalty (Alexander, et al., 2002). For a brand to apply this concept to their employer brand and showcase the community within the organisation could suggest why it is viewed as an essential aspect of communicating company culture. An organisation may leverage its community to create a sense of belonging for candidates, arguably making the organisation a more attractive prospect.

Part of employer branding is the internal brand created within an organisation. This internal brand refers to the "brand loyalty" aspect of the employer brand. This feature of employer branding is built internally by creating a brand identity and brand culture (Mihalcea, 2017). The idea of having employees committed and who relate to the brand identity and culture will increase their loyalty (Bulut & Culha, 2010). One of the essential tools in building an internal brand is developing an employee value proposition. The literature refers to creating a value proposition as the first step in creating an employer brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The strategic impact of the employee value proposition crosses over from the Human Resource function into strategic marketing. At the same time, identity and culture are to be created internally. An organisations culture and identity must be built internally. Human resource teams typically implement these strategies. This ensure that the organisation's personnel are appropriate for the organisation. The marketing department within a business is tasked with communicating and building the public employer brand. The internal brand is significant as it could be considered the foundation of an employer brand strategy. Developing an employee value proposition is a feature that will be crucial to the overall

brand image. Across the literature, it is suggested that brand image heavily impacts a candidate's attraction to a company (Lievens, et al., 2007) (Alexander, et al., 2002). With SMEs, the concept of investing in their employer brand to combat larger corporations means implementing aggressive recruitment strategies. Using the theory suggested by (Alexander, et al., 2002), using a more personal approach of leveraging a brand community instead of large corporations.

In employer branding, the external brand is the feature that attracts potential candidates to the organisation itself (Das & Ahmed, 2014). The previously mentioned employer value proposition details the culture and identity of an organisation (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The importance of utilising the internal brand built within the organisation to acquire new candidates. (Mendelson, et al., 2001) the paper created suggests a parallel between the idea of marketing to a consumer and a candidate. A consideration for an organisation is to implement an employee value proposition and integrate it into the strategic aspect of their employer brand. When developing an employer brand, one of the key objectives is to communicate the organisation's values (Berthon, et al., 2005) with potential candidates to gain a greater likelihood of attracting the desired candidates. The communication strategy of these values must be correct and accurate. The consequence of undervaluing this communication will lead to an organisation being associated with the previous poor decisions they have made regarding their employer brand (Foster, et al., 2010). The significance of this relates to how organisations view the idea of employer branding. If this is not considered when evaluating an organisation's strategy, it can impact various levels. Ultimately the literature promotes the idea that an organisation's employer brand is responsible for the people.

The literature suggests that upon the initial touchpoint between a candidate and an organisation, the candidate's brand association has already generated a preconceived relationship between them and the organisation (Foster, et al., 2010). This relationship is generated by employer branding. Effective employer branding creates an organisation that will be sought after in the labour market compared to an organisation that may neglect the concept of employer branding. It is vital in such a skilled marketplace that organisations utilise employer branding to leverage their positions.

Particularly in current situations with the increasing "war for talent" (Verma & Ahmad, 2016), the growing importance of employer branding is becoming clear.

With the much broader access to information, there is greater visibility to the overall brand. Various outlets such as social media have led organisations, employers, and corporate brands to be exposed, whether positive or negative. This visibility increases how important it is to be consistent with brand messaging (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The greater level of visibility provides both an opportunity and a threat for employer branding. The possibility of showcasing corporate and employer brands can be utilised through social media, and previous employee reviews build a solid online employer brand that is widely accessible. Alternatively, the access can provide issues with a brand's reputation as any inconsistencies with the brand messaging and brand promises. Particularly with external factors such as online reports and reviews. The risk associated with an organisation is damage to the brand's reputation. This highlights the importance of when creating an employer brand strategy of creating a consistent message and creating a true employee value proposition (Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019). This is also dependent on the candidate's organisations are pursuing. For example, if an organisation wanted to tailor their communications to Generation Z, the social channels mentioned above would be more suitable (Pandita, 2021). A common occurrence is the importance of understanding the company culture and aligning the employer brand to meet that. The reversal of the brand reputation damage caused is difficult, particularly in the labour market, as it is so competitive and time-consuming as the commitment of employment is less than a standard product or service. This overall brand image can positively and negatively impact an employer branding strategy (Sokro, 2012). Another perspective of access to information is looking at the information competitors will be able to analyse.

2.6 – Long Term Strategy

Employer branding is a long-term strategy. This contrasts with the traditional idea of recruitment strategies which are reactive to the needs and wants of the organisation. Employer branding differs in that an organisation will constantly enhance an organisation's ability to react (Srivastava & Bhatnagar, 2010). An essential element of research for an organisation is benchmarking how they perform compared to their

competitors (Maxwell & Knox, 2009). The benefit of benchmarking in this context of employer branding is that it allows for an organisation to evaluate its current strategy. Looking at how top performers within the labour market is important in evaluating the organisation's processes. Understanding both good and bad practices is important to develop the employer brand strategy continuously. One aspect of being considered is looking at similar organisations and the platforms they use. Understand the unique features of the employee value proposition to evaluate how strong the employer brand strategy is in comparison. The literature discusses how the retention of a consumer is far less expensive than the acquisition of new customers (Kotler, 2003). Creating a positive employer brand through employee retention can arguably contribute to implementing a stronger acquisition strategy.

Benchmarking is also essential to look at how the employer brand is communicated. This is particularly prevalent with the emergence of social media. With the increase of channels in which organisations can communicate, it is significant to benchmark how these channels are used and to leverage these platforms to create the most effective employer brand strategy. Alongside this, the data gathered provides actionable insights for an organisation in the employer brand strategy. Using their data versus the competitor's data as a benchmark will increase the strategy's effectiveness.

2.7 – Shift to online methods

With processes moving online, the concept of employer branding has had to adapt to modern technology. Social media has not only revolutionised communication, but it has created platforms where consumers can actively engage with content produced by an organisation (Kissel & Büttgen, 2015). The variety of channels creates a challenge for organisations when it comes to communicating with potential candidates. It is important to recognise the differences between the different channels. For example, a brand will have to alter the language and content between Snapchat and LinkedIn. This is due to the estimated demographic of users on either platform. Typically, Snapchat would be considered to reach a younger demographic and LinkedIn a more professional demographic. It is significant when developing a digital employer brand strategy tailored to the desired demographic. Different generations with different aspirations relate to different channels. To capitalise on this theory

suggested in the literature, an organisation needs to understand their target market (Pandita, 2021). Using social channels to gain insight into potential candidates would impact how employer branding campaigns are tailored. The information and data available online can provide insights for both the candidate and the organisation. Considering consumers' current situation moving online, organisations need to modernise their employer brand to meet this need (Kissel & Büttgen, 2015).

Following on from the modern employer brand, a key opportunity presented by social media is the idea of building a talent network (Kissel & Büttgen, 2015). Building a talent network, as suggested, is an opportunity to build that employer brand while maintaining a touchpoint with a talent network. Applying this concept to the example of how SME's struggle with building employer brands competing with much larger organisations (Prabhjot, et al., 2015). The potential for SMEs to build a social presence online and develop their brand organically through content to connections or followers presents the potential to combat the resources of much larger organisations. An organic approach including how the current employees represent the organisation. Using the current employees as "brand ambassadors" highlights the brand's human side (Asha & Jyothi, 2013). This literature suggests that, as product or service branding, a significant objective is to create a personal relationship and build an emotional attachment to the brand. Applying this to employer branding suggests that employees will be brand advocates increasing the overall employer brand.

It was previously discussed how effective social media could create a digital employer brand (Kissel & Büttgen, 2015). Promoting the corporate brand alongside the culture is an effective technique in promoting an organisation's employer brand. To ensure that this strategy is implemented effectively, the content produced must be genuine and authentic (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). This is consistent across multiple disciplines of marketing, mainly employer branding. One of the key elements discussed throughout the literature is the effective communication of aspects such as value propositions and culture; it is important to maintain the human element to create genuine connections with candidates. Building a brand relies on creating an element of trust between both the organisation and the public. Particularly in talent acquisition, a brand will promote a psychological contract with potential candidates (Moroko & Uncles, 2008) (Davies, 2008). It is further emphasising the importance of transparency

in the marketing of their employer brand. The importance of reputation is vital; the degree of risk for the candidate is much larger than that of most consumer transactions (Priyadarshi, 2011).

2.8 – Conclusion

The literature provides evidence to show the growth and prominence of employer branding. There are multiple aspects to building a successful employer brand. It is vital first to understand primary branding and the concept of an employer brand. Understanding the idea that organisations build brands to attract the desired talent. This has become increasingly significant as the labour market has become competitive, with an increased level of educated and skilled candidates becoming available. The opportunity for potential candidates to upskill and change roles is becoming more frequent.

The idea of positioning a brand to increase the likelihood of attracting the desired candidates has become more critical. Being the first-choice brand is now seen as a significant competitive advantage within the labour marketplace. Looking at the case study highlighting large organisations aggressive recruitment strategies, it is evident to see how SME's struggle to compete with a corporate and employer brand with such great resources.

The shift to digital has created significant opportunities and risks within the employer branding landscape. The opportunity to produce content and highlight positive employer branding on digital channels. Digital channels such as social media can help develop an organisation's online presence. The access to information creates the possibility to benchmark against competitors or larger organisations. The access to competitors' digital channels will help understand the position of the employer brand helps develop a more successful strategy.

This idea has been further emphasised with the importance of utilising social media. Different channels are used effectively to ensure that communications can be tailored either by platform or target market. Also, utilising social media to provide insight into the brand's human side will aid the development of an employer brand. Social

platforms also have employees who will be representing the brand. The risk associated comes as poor experiences can lead to public criticism, which will create a negative aspect to an employer brand.

The literature for employer branding placed a heavy emphasis on the human resources function within an organisation. The key concepts such as building a corporate brand and employee value proposition is undoubtedly a part of the human resource element. As the literature developed, it is suggested that with the greater competition in the labour market. The idea of organisations being dominant has been diminished, and the market has become candidate dominated. This has led to an increased emphasis on marketing for employer branding. The communication and advertising of the employer brand have become so important as organisations are competing for the talent rather than the talent competing for the organisation. The development of digital platforms and the emergence of social media has further emphasised how employer branding has shifted to being an overall strategic aspect. While it has become a more critical aspect, it is not easy to quantify its importance to an organisation. Reflecting on a case study that highlights the difficulties SME's face in comparison to large organisations. How important is an employer brand? Is employer brand emerging for SMEs to compete with large corporations who attract the desired talent.

Chapter 3 – Research Question & Objectives

3.1 – Research Question

The literature review identified a gap in which this research will look to analyse. The literature revealed Employer Branding as an emerging topic. This research will look to investigate Employer Branding through the personal and professional experiences of current professionals. This research will aim to answer the question:

How has modern employer branding impacted organisations overall recruitment strategy?

3.2 – Research Objectives

To answer this question effectively, the research was segmented into smaller research objectives. These objectives were developed from the literature review.

3.2.1 – Research Question 1 – To understand employer branding and how it is currently used

The first research objective was first to gain an understanding of employer branding. The research looked to gain insight from the research participants in both their personal and professional experiences. To complete this objective, the interview investigated their current understanding, previous experiences, and any methods the participants found to communicate an employer brand effectively.

3.2.2 – Research Question 2 – How to build an effective employer branding strategy

As employer branding is an emerging topic, the literature did not provide ample proof of building a successful employer brand. To ascertain whether Employer branding will be a crucial aspect of an organisation's strategy moving forward, the research seeks to understand the different methods from professionals first-hand. This aspect of the

research covered a broad range of topics such as communication strategies, company culture, and modern technology to create a strong employer brand online.

3.2.3 – Research Question 3 – What is the future of employer branding?

The final research question was derived from the literature. Employer branding is a fast-developing aspect of marketing; the researcher wanted to understand where Employer Branding will develop. As the literature is limited on the future of Employer Branding, the objective was to understand how it could develop in the participants' opinion. This objective will also cover the anticipated importance of Employer Branding to an organisation's overall strategy.

3.3 – Conclusion

This chapter sets out the objectives of the research. The research objectives above have been identified by the researcher as areas in which the interviews can provide more context. The research will then compare the literature review and the findings in the primary research to contribute useful knowledge.

Chapter 4 – Research Methodology

4.1 – Introduction

This chapter of the research will outline and discuss the methodology used to answer the research question. This chapter will discuss the research aims and objectives. Research methodology refers to the theory of how research should be undertaken (Saunders, et al., 2012).

The Research onion helped structure this research project (Saunders, et al., 2012). The proposed methods will follow this in conducting this research and the goals set out for the investigation to discover. The research onion was used as it sets out the framework which this research will follow clearly. It was vital in helping the researcher understand the methods and strategies appropriate for this research problem. It is vital to ensure the correct research methods are selected to ensure the research is completed effectively (Adams, et al., 2014)
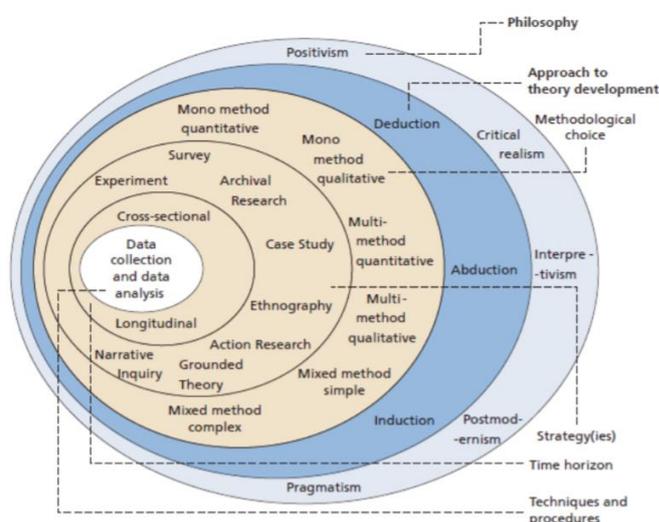
Source: (Saunders, et al., 2012)

This section of the methodology chapter will discuss different strategies and evaluate the most appropriate method for success. Research methods are defined as "*a way to solve a research problem systematically*" (Kothari, 2004). The results generated will be analysed and evaluated to conclude the research. It will also look to justify the

methods selected. The participants in the research will need to be carefully selected as the participants will be vital in determining the accuracy of the research. How this research will be completed will also be discussed. For example, if interviews are conducted, how are they recorded?

The methodology chapter will also discuss any ethical concerns with the research question and any further ethical considerations in collecting the data. Finally, this chapter will discuss the limitations of conducting the research. When deciding how to conduct a research project, it is vital to know the limitations of each method and evaluate the most appropriate methods for this research project. (Thorpe, et al., 2002)

4.2 – Research Proposed Methodology

The research onion provides the structure to this research. This structure will guide the entire process, ensuring that the research topic is investigated thoroughly. The concept of the research onion is to address each layer. The outer layers refer to the approach and philosophies, and the inner layers are concerned with the methodology, research strategy and time horizon of the research (Saunders, et al., 2012). The choices made while working through the research onion will shape the research.

4.3 – Research Philosophy

A research philosophy has multiple definitions. To understand what this section will cover, it is necessary first to define it. Research philosophy refers to a person's assumptions about how the world is perceived and how they come to comprehend it (Trochim, 2001). One of the first things to establish is the philosophy of the research. Epistemology refers to how we know things. (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) This contrasts with ontology, which is concerned with what information we know (Saunders et al., 2012) (Slevitch, 2011). When designing the research, it is essential to evaluate which philosophy is appropriate and why it is chosen. (Bell, 2010) Within these philosophies, there are two paradigms to consider.

Positivism refers to research that can be measured and observed. Positivism is usually associated with quantitative-based research. It also should be value-free. This means

that the researcher should be detached from the population being surveyed (Kincaid, 1990). The opposite of this is interpretivism. *Interpretivism* is a much more flexible philosophy that views the reality much broader taking into account the value or meanings created by the individuals involved in the research (Rabinow & Sullivan, 1987). Interpretivism is associated with qualitative research as a significant aspect of understanding subjective questions and understanding the individual's point of view. Usually, interpretivism is conducted on a much more micro level. This is due to the level of detail required in the research methods to gather the information. Contrasting to the positivist approach of having the researcher distant from the subjects, it is vital that with an interpretivist approach, the researcher is actively involved in building relationships and rapport with the research population. The reason for this is to ensure that the researcher can gain a deep insight into the research question.

Ontology refers to the study of being. It has been characterised as the study of the most general kinds that exist in the universe (Hacking, 2002). It looks at whether social entities will be objective or subjective. There are two aspects of Ontology, objectivism and subjectivism. Objectivism is the belief that the world contains facts. Objectivism also tests a hypothesis and is only applied to one single application of the research question. Subjectivism is the opposite in that rather than testing a single hypothesis and single application of the research question. It involves seeking explanations for casual factors. It also looks at the human element and evaluates their perception.

Having researched different philosophies and paradigms, this research will be undertaken with an epistemological interpretivist psychological approach. (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) After considering the research question and looking to understand modern employer branding and its value to an overall marketing strategy. The research explores a topic and how it has developed from what was once considered an element of human resources and has evolved into strategic marketing activity. An interpretivist approach has been favoured over a positivist approach as a positivist approach will seek facts to understand the research. This research will require the researcher to gain a deep insight into various topics surrounding employer branding. This will explore the meaning behind the details given, understand the participants' perspectives, and analyse an emerging discipline.

4.4 – Research Approach

When designing research, it is vital to understand the two different approaches: inductive and deductive. A deductive research approach looks at a theory and compares the research to the theory it is related to (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The deductive theory essentially moves the research from the theory to the data. Conclusions are drawn from subtracting the data from the theory to answer the research question. The process of the deductive approach involves creating a hypothesis from the theory. The data is then collected, and the findings are discussed. The next step is to understand the findings and test the hypothesis. The hypothesis will then be confirmed or rejected (Bryman, 2006). Deductive approaches are often associated with quantitative methods and structure.

The opposite of a deductive approach is inductive. "*Inductive research is a study in which theory is developed from the observation of empirical reality; thus, general inferences are induced from particular instances*" (Collis & Hussey, 2014). To simplify this definition, the concept of inductive research looks at how data will develop and shape the theory behind the research. The process of an inductive approach is much different to a deductive. An inductive approach begins with stating the research question. From initial observations, a hypothesis is then developed. The hypothesis will then be tested by the research undertaken and analysed to conclude. This conclusion will contribute then to the overall theory. The inductive theory is associated with qualitative data; this contrasts with deductive by understanding the research context instead of a single truth from the data analysed. Inductive research is far less structured and open to development in line with the data gathered (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

This research project will undertake an inductive approach. The research will explore the topic of employer branding and its place within a modern marketing strategy. As the literature reveals, the concept of digital marketing has evolved. To gain further insight into this topic, it is crucial to adopt a flexible approach as the research emphasis may change as it develops. Alongside this, a key consideration during this research process is to understand the context of the research participants to develop a conclusion based on their experience.

4.5 – Research Strategy

There are two different strategies to consider when structuring a research project. To choose which strategy is appropriate, it is vital to understand the two different strategies and apply them to the research. The first strategy is Quantitative research. Researching with a quantitative strategy involves collecting numerical data and analysing the data to test a hypothesis. Typically, quantitative research is conducted via surveys, either physical or online. These surveys are highly structured and will provide actionable data to critically analyse (Levitt, et al., 2021).

Qualitative research is non-numerical data gathered during research. A much broader range of information is gathered. Qualitative research takes into account opinions and perspectives, among other factors. Usually, qualitative research is conducted in non-structured or semi-structured methods such as interviews, focus groups, ethnographies, as an example. These methods create environments where the researcher is an active participant. The information gathered can provide the researcher with a much deeper insight while also uncovering new ideas in the research.

This research is suited to Qualitative methods. As the topic itself is subjective and exploring employer branding will look to uncover the modern application. As the literature revealed, employer branding is an element of HR that has now branched into marketing departments. To fully understand the current situation regarding the topic, it is essential to gain insights from the research participants to see if what the literature has suggested is relevant in their field. The research strategy aims to be flexible, beginning with exploring the topic and further understanding further applications of employer branding. For this to be conducted, the qualitative method chosen has been to conduct in-depth interviews. The interviews will be semi-structured to maintain some consistency while also allowing the research to develop further. Interviews provide deep and holistic insights giving vital data for the research (Thorpe, et al., 2002). The insight gained within interviews can allow research to develop to discuss new topics, changing the researcher's focus.

4.6 – Qualitative Data Primary Collection

In-depth interviews have been selected to gain insights from professionals and their own experience with employer branding. Experiences and opinions will provide much greater understanding than quantitative research could provide analysing data. The human element can be understood further (Beck & Manuel, 2008). The in-depth interviews will be conducted over a video call. These interviews will be semi-structured. The benefit of using this interview-style will complement the different opinions of the participants (Wilson, 2012). Pending permission from the research participants, these interviews will be recorded for analysis. The recording of these meetings will ensure that the analysis of the meetings is accurate. It will also help with the transcription of the interview.

4.7 – Population/sample

Due to the limitations and impracticality of collecting data from a large population group for this study, it was necessary to select a sample. (Saunders, et al., 2019) discusses the two different types of sampling. These two methods are probability and non-probability sampling. Probability sampling chooses a sample within a target population that has a known probability of being selected in the sample. This is a contrast with non-probability sampling, where the probability of selecting each unit is not known.

The main objective for the population samples was to get the perspective of professionals in senior positions who work in positions that the researcher felt were appropriate for this piece of research. The researcher decided to adopt a Purposive Sampling approach which means that the researcher decides on what needs to be known. This means the participants are found based on their knowledge and are willing to provide the information for the research (Bernard, 2002)

The Researcher sourced participants from multiple avenues such as mutual friends and LinkedIn. The interviews were conducted over Zoom which was recorded and transcribed. The researcher took notes throughout each interview. The interviews were also transcribed to help the researcher analyse the content of the interviews. The

research consisted of two males and three females, all of whom are employed in senior management positions.

Participant	Role	Time in Current Role	Gender (M or F)
1	Director	4.5 Years.	M
2	Business Owner	5 Years.	M
3	Business Owner/Human Resources.	5.5 Years	F
4	Marketing Manager	8 Months.	F
5	Marketing Manager	6 Months.	F

Table 1 – Interview Participants

4.8 – Analysing Qualitative Data

To analyse the data gathered efficiently, it is essential to structure the interviews to obtain the required information. As previously discussed, the interviews will be semi-structured to focus on developing and maintaining the structure to achieve the goal (Wilson, 2012). The recording of this information is essential to analyse.

To understand and analyse the data gathered within in-depth interviews, it is essential to analyse these conversations and identify any common themes. To do this, codes will need to be created to pick out themes from the interviews. Categorising these insights will then attribute to the overall conclusion. These themes will then be presented as a conclusion, and these observations will contribute to any further research recommendations.

4.9 – Ethical Considerations

The concept of ethics is centred around human relationships. It is about what humans should be like as members of society (Ciulla, 2004). This research needed to remain fair. The following measures were taken; the participants were anonymised unless

they had given a specific example. This measure was to help candidates feel comfortable knowing that their identity and any organisations identities would remain confidential. The meeting was recorded and transcribed. This information is now stored on the researcher's laptop, which is password protected. Each participant was made aware of these measures before the interview process began. The researcher also took the time to remind each participant at the beginning of each interview.

4.10 – Limitations to Research Project

4.10.1 – Pandemic

The pandemic situation meant that no in-person interviews could take place. While online interviews are an option, critical observations such as body language will be limited. While listed as a limitation, the limitations presented by the pandemic meant that some methods had to be adapted. The pandemic also limited the researcher's access to college resources such as the library, as not every book was available online.

4.10.2 – Academic Project

As this is an academic project, the resources are limited. Some of the limitations of an academic project include time. This study has a deadline to be completed, meaning that there was no time to observe this topic over a more extended period. As a marketing topic, employer branding is in an early stage. The academic literature presenting employer branding as a marketing topic is limited. A lot of the literature reviewed was from a human resource perspective. It meant the research was conducted with an exploratory mindset.

4.11 – Conclusion

The objective of this chapter was to provide the details of the research methodology of this study. This research project adopted an inductive methodology with an interpretivist philosophy. The research will be conducted qualitatively via interviews. These interviews will provide the research with much greater depth into the

participants perspective on the research topic. These interviews were conducted over Zoom as the Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a limitation in organising in-person research. The data collection methods are also discussed alongside any ethical considerations needed to be undertaken by the researcher when interviewing participants. The next chapter will detail the findings based off the research objectives in chapter 3.

Chapter 5 – Analysis & Findings

5.1 – Introduction

The research conducted via interviews allowed the researcher to gain an insight into the participants personal and professional experiences. For this method to be effective, the researcher decided to use a semi-structured approach. This consideration was taken as the participants were from a wide range of backgrounds. This structure enabled the interview to develop based on the participant's responses rather than rigidly to a question group. The identity of the research participants will remain anonymous. The interviewers will be identified under generic labels such as (Participant A). The reason for the selected anonymity was to ensure that any personal opinions of external organisations remained anonymous in the publishing of results, and participants volunteering their personal experiences of their place of work is also protected.

A pilot interview was conducted to ensure that using interviews to conduct the research was used to its potential. This interview enabled the researcher to test different aspects of the interview process. This review allowed for changes to be made in terms of technique and content. It also gave a foundation to compare the following interviews. The pilot interview meant that the participant could provide feedback to the researcher to refine the process. It also helped in deciding if the selected questions were relevant to participants. For this interview to be successful, the researcher used open-ended questions, which allowed participants to give their professional experience. This idea helped give the participants the ability to give their opinion if they have not encountered a particular aspect of the interview.

Some of the topics discussed in this pilot gave a basis for further questioning for the following interviews. The idea of referencing and questioning participants throughout the interview process gave the research further structure. The developments in the interviews then allowed the researcher to explore different emerging themes and understand new opinions on the topic.

5.2 – Research Question 1 – To understand Employer Branding and how it is currently used

The first research objective was first to understand the participants understanding of the topic. The researcher opened the interview with a fundamental question asking the participants directly. Each participant had their understanding, but a selection of common themes emerged.

5.2.1 – Theme 1 – Company Reputation

The first emerging theme associated with employer branding is how the participants viewed a brand externally and their perceived reputation. This reputation covered a variety of areas concerning a company's reputation. This theme was across every participant who took part in the interviews, and it was a unanimous perspective.

Participant 3 detailed their understanding of the topic and highlighted that is it something both internal and external.

"it is how the general populace views your company, and internally and externally, so your employees, and then you know, any prospective employees, customers."

(Participant 1)

Participant 4 had a similar perspective but focused on the external features associated with employer brand and branding

"employer branding is what represents a company and what they say about them; that is actually employer brand. employer branding is how it is applied to the market."

(Participant 4)

Participant 5 discussed how an employer brand would exist whether the organisation intends to communicate it or not. Therefore, the organisation's decision will impact its reputation, tied to a positive or negative employer brand.

"Whether you specifically focus on employer branding or not, you are sending out a message anyway."

(Participant 5)

5.2.2 – Theme 2 – Company Reputation over a job opportunity

The following emerging theme was to gain an insight into the participants perspective. Looking at either their previous experiences or to get their current perspective on if they were to enter the job market on how they view employer brandings importance.

Participant 4 raised an interesting opinion about targeting a company instead of targeting a particular role. This concept highlighted in this participants perspective the importance of employer branding in their potential job search.

"I'd marry target companies I want rather than go after jobs."

(Participant 4)

Participant 2 spoke to how different industries have valued employer branding more than others. Referencing the healthcare industry, this is considered a more "traditional" industry that does not have a modern approach to building its brand, particularly online.

"it's nearly too late, because it takes a bit of time to build up, you know, the employer brand sites, so yeah, look, I think traditional based companies, there is huge benefit in them switching their mindset now to look at, you know, how they can actually portray their brand a bit better online."

(Participant 2)

This concept of building an online employer brand complemented Participant 1's perspective, who spoke about where they would first look to investigate a potential employer's employer brand.

"I would look at their Glassdoor reviews; I would look at their LinkedIn."

(Participant 1)

5.2.3 - Theme 3 – Personal aspirations aligning with Companies aspirations

Naturally, a potential employee will look to align their success to the success of their potential employer. Participant 1 referenced that looking at lists ranking companies in terms of growth or anything similar would have a positive effect on their employer brand

"The other thing that I like seeing is companies on, let's say, Deloitte fast 50 list."

(Participant 1)

Participant 4 provided a similar insight; while not referencing any similar lists, the participant detailed that they would need to have great confidence in the product or service offered before considering the potential employer in their search for a company. It is fair to consider this a perceived measure of success as their brand reputation will be built from this.

"I have always been someone who could not do a job unless I genuinely believed in the product."

(Participant 4)

5.3 – Research Question 2 – How to build an effective employer branding strategy

The following research question to be answered was broad. The participants discussed questions regarding how an effective employer brand is developed. As this research question is broad, it was segmented into smaller topics. Looking at how employer brand is developed internally but crucially communicated externally also. This section of the interview also examined external factors such as the labour market, communication strategies and factors such as covid.

5.3.1 – Theme 1 – Company Culture

The most prominent theme which arose in this section was that of company culture. Referenced across every interview as a critical element of building an employer brand. Company culture was central to these interviews as it featured in each strategic

element. Communicating culture is vital for an organisation to build an employer brand. It is also prominent in different aspects, such as how a company positions itself.

"you could really focus on the type of person and the culture fit that they had in the organisation."
(Participant 1)

"So people are actually aware, when they come into the job, what the culture is actually like, and when they actually come in, and the first day that they fit in with the culture and the overall brand that we have created for our company, on the employment front."
(Participant 2)

"I've always kind of put an emphasis on people in COMPANY A, because I don't think we would have achieved any of what we've achieved without the people."
(Participant 3)

"what you need to do is you need to create a value system and of what you believe your culture is"
(Participant 4)

"the values that they have, and what's really important to them in both their career and what the employer offers"

(Participant 5)

The above is a selection of how culture was discussed in each interview. The spectrum in which Company Culture is applied across employer branding strategies. The interviews provided a broad range of how each participant views culture. A poignant quote from the interviews came while discussing culture with Participant 3.

"unless you embody it, and that's been shared across the team, like you're not really going anywhere."

(Participant 3)

This is a consideration an organisation must take when discussing an employer brand. Do the employees align themselves with the culture of the organisation? If not, is the culture being communicated by the organisation honest communications or is a false culture harming the Employer Brand.

5.3.2 – Long-term project

When discussing the strategic significance of employer branding, one of the key discussions was how employer branding is a long ongoing project like most marketing activities. This means that Employer branding is becoming increasingly significant in overall strategies as to facilitate growth, there must be a plan in place.

Participant 1 spoke about the beginning of the company which they had founded. While in the beginning, it was not a rigid aspect of the strategy, the company was developed with the founders' values created from previous roles.

"I'd say without kind of being conscious of it, we had a kind of an idea of the kind of organisation we wanted to create."

(Participant 3)

Participant 2 shared an opinion on how Employer Branding is a process. The participant's opinion refers to the investment of resources that do not contribute to a quick solution. The time taken for the Employer Brand to build is vital

"One of the things like employer branding, doesn't result in more applications, the day after you release the website, it takes time, like marketing takes time."

(Participant 2)

5.3.3 – Theme 3 – Employees are the best asset

This theme has similarities to the Company culture built. The internal brand looks at the culture but utilising the employees as part of an external strategy. Employees represent the brand and understand the employer brand. The research begins with employee feedback. Participant 4 discusses, "*build an internal brand, or an employer*

brand is a base, and HR departments actually, like actively getting feedback from your staff". The concept of using employee feedback as a base to develop strategic decisions was a theme that was also discussed by Participant 3.

"It's not hard if its not true."
(Participant 3)

This extract emphasises the need for genuine feedback to build a foundation of Employer Brand Strategy. If the feedback is taken into consideration, the Employer brand strategy can be developed more effectively.

"unless you embody it, and that's been shared across the team, like you're not really going anywhere."

(Participant 3)

5.3.4 – Theme 4 – Tailoring brand messaging

When developing a strategy for any aspect of a business, it is vital to research the market. For an organisation to strategically plan and target the optimal candidates, this market research is essential. This research will help develop a strategy tailored to the targeted personas. Participant 4 discussed this in detail and highlighted the benefits of creating these personas and how integral they are to a strategy,

"do a constant persona, and then you go into the market, and you hit them where they are with the right matching, which is all be fed through, you know, a really educated employer brand piece."
(Participant 1)

Similar discussions occurred with the other participants. The topic of personas did not arise, but each participant elaborated on what communications they find effective in their personal opinion. This complemented the idea of the personas as the participants from a variety of backgrounds differed. A common discussion was the stage of the participant's career and how their perception of employer brand changed over time.

5.3.5 – Theme 5 – Employee Retention as an indication of Employer Quality

The Employees within an organisation are consistently mentioned throughout the interview process as the main asset when developing an employer brand strategy. A perspective shared by Participant 1 spoke about how the use of social media. How it impacted their perception of an employer brand as the longevity and journey of the employees within the company impacted their employer brand. An observation made was to say if an organisation was to have a high churn rate, it would negatively impact their employer brand

"I would look at their LinkedIn and I would see, you know, typically, where do some of the management to senior management come from? How long have they been there"

(Participant 1)

Participant 2 shared a similar thought on the employee experience. The suggestion made by Participant 3 relates to how a genuine company culture can come across through content produced.

"I think, like starting with your website, you could have like employee testimonials. And you know, you could have pictures of, you know, your team at different events to kind of show the kind of stuff you get up to"

(Participant 3)

5.4 – Research Question 3 – What is the future of employer branding?

The research has shown that employer branding is a developing discipline within marketing. As it falls between two departments, it is often forgotten about. Employer branding was discussed throughout the interview process as something growing in importance but not quite a core element strategically. The increase in competition in the labour market and external factors like the pandemic increased the importance of building an employer brand. The interviews concluded with the researcher questioning the participants on their opinion of how employer branding is trending.

5.4.1 – Theme 1 – Technology playing a more increasingly significant role

A theme discussed in the future of employer brand was the shift of traditional brands using modern methods to develop their employer brand. The participants discussed various industries and expressed their opinions on how specific industries need to develop their employer brand. Looking at how traditional industries have not embraced modern technologies to enhance their employer brand.

"it's nearly too late, because it takes a bit of time to build up, you know, the employer brand sites, so yeah, look, I think traditional based companies, there's huge benefit in them switching their mindset now to look at, you know, how they can actually portray their brand a bit better online."

(Participant 2)

"Yeah, like, obviously, I do think finance, legal, you know, those really kind of traditional industries will be the last to change"

(Participant 3)

5.4.2 – Theme 2 – Becomes integral to an overall strategy

One of the discussions with Participant 4 suggested that the Employer brand will not develop in terms of how strategies are formed. Participant 4 spoke about how employer branding is a constantly developing process. This theme supplements the previously discussed topics such as how company culture is a long process to develop. Across the interviews, it was discussed how employer branding is going to become increasingly integral to organisations.

"So it's not it, do it, and we'll do it again in six months. It's an average of constant process."

(Participant 4)

Similar to Participant 4, Participant 3 discussed how the Employer brand could arguably be accelerated to the forefront due to the pandemic and the need to shift focus.

"it's going to be a huge part of the strategic process for recruitment, and, you know, for retention as well. And I think it is a bit of a fad."

(Participant 3)

5.5 – Conclusion

This chapter provided an insight into the primary research conducted. The chapter highlights the main findings from the interviews discussing employer branding. These themes were interpreted separately against the research objectives detailed in Chapter 3. The study provided insights detailing the participant's current evaluation of employer branding, external factors impacting its importance and their opinion on the future of employer branding.

These themes that emerged in this section resulted in some valuable considerations for organisations. These themes will be discussed further in the following chapter. These themes will also be compared to the existing literature discussed in Chapter 2. The researcher noted that this topic is increasing in importance. Further research will be discussed in the recommendations section of this study.

Chapter 6 – Discussion

6.1 – Introduction

This research chapter will discuss the findings from the interviews in the previous chapter compared to the literature analysed. To ensure that the chapter remains structure, it will be based on the three main research questions: 1 - To understand employer branding and how it is currently used. 2 - How to build an effective employer branding strategy; 3 - What is the future of employer branding? The discussion chapter will break down the research questions and discuss the themes that emerged within the interviews.

6.2 – Research Question 1 – To understand Employer Branding and how it is currently used

The initial research question is set with the objective of providing a foundation for the research. The thematic analysis will evaluate the most common and important themes.

6.2.1 – Theme 1 – Company Reputation

It became clear from the onset that the research would concur with the findings of the literature review. Employer branding is a fast-emerging topic. Most of the research participants referenced the employer's reputation as their first thought regarding an employer brand. The participants spoke about how organisations are viewed by anyone, whether that is internal or external. This concept is further developed with Participant 4 speaking about how employer branding discusses the method that an organisation applies its brand as an employer to the market. Applying an employer brand to the market is implemented to create a point of difference for potential candidates in their job search to create a point of difference for the organisation. This theme concurs with the theory that general branding is an organisation's features that help the brand stand out from others (Kapferer, 2012). A brand's identity is vital, particularly when it comes to its recruitment. As mentioned in the literature, a brand aims to create a point of difference (Mearns, 2007). This point of difference is crucial

across all aspects of a brand. It is evident to see how important it is for an organisation's employer brand as their reputation as an employer will be a point of difference in the market, both positively and negatively. The research conducted concurs with the literature. An organisations reputation is vital no matter what aspect of marketing it is. The research highlights that this is the same in employer branding.

6.2.2 – Theme 2 – Company Reputation over a job opportunity

The literature referenced creating an employee value proposition (EVP) as foundational to building an employer brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). EVP is something that a human resource team will create in most organisations. One sub-objective in this theme was to understand what department is responsible for creating an employer brand. Participant 4 references how employer brand is something that falls between two departments, human resources and marketing. For an organisation to build an effective employer brand, the two departments must collaborate. Participant 4 suggested that the skillset of Human Resources will create the company culture, and the marketing skillset can communicate the culture developed to potential candidates. Participant 5 spoke further about how employer branding is *"an extension of marketing. So like, you know, you have your product marketing, your company marketing, but employer branding, is, it is a new take on this."* Ultimately, the importance of utilising both skillsets helps in creating an employer brand.

The point of difference is an essential aspect in developing a brand (Mearns, 2007). This concept reoccurred in understanding how a potential candidate will view employer brands in their job search. Participant 4 spoke to how they "target companies I want rather than go after jobs". This opinion had similarities as most of the participants referenced how they would not have taken the employer brand into account previously in the early stages of their careers. With the participants in this research being experienced professionals, their perspectives changed as they grew in their careers. Utilising an employer brand as that "point of difference" creates a more attractive opportunity for skilled workers. Alternatively, it is worth discussing how a negative employer brand can impact an organisation. The employer review website and job board Glassdoor was mentioned multiple times. Managing both the positive and negative reviews were discussed.

It concludes that employer branding can prove to be a point of difference for a candidate instead of a real job opportunity. An organisation can use this point of difference as a competitive advantage which is very significant for an organisation in attracting the desired candidates.

6.2.3 – Theme 3 – Personal aspirations aligning with company aspirations

The literature suggests that the initial touchpoint between a candidate and an organisation generates a preconceived relationship from the candidate's brand association (Foster, et al., 2010). The idea of a brand association for the participants was different as their values and priorities varied. Participant 1 spoke about how lists such as the *"Deloitte Fast 50"* would impact their brand perception. For this participant, looking at an organisation in growth mode resonated with them as they had similar aspirations for their career. This sentiment is shared by other participants who valued the company's overall success, such as the product or service offered. This idea is highlighted by Participant 4, saying, *"I have always been a person who could not do a job unless I genuinely believed in the product"*. The importance of aligning own beliefs to the company values itself or aspiring to work in an organisation that matches their ambition emerged as a theme throughout the interview process.

This theme highlighted the growing importance of employer branding. The alignment of the person's aspirations to brand success highlights how important it is for a brand to communicate its achievements. Building a brand tailored to attract the desired candidates can prove vital in a successful recruitment strategy.

6.3 – Research Question 2 – How to build an effective employer branding strategy

The second research question was to understand employer branding further. After gaining a basic understanding of the topic, the objective was to understand how an employer brand is built effectively. The following themes emerged and will be discussed below:

6.3.1 – Theme 1 – Company Culture

The foundation of an organisation's employer brand is the actual culture built within an organisation. The idea of an internal brand built within an organisation that inspires employees to be loyal advocates of the organisation is discussed in the literature (Mihalcea, 2017). This theme was discussed in each of the interviews. The idea of company culture centred around how potential employees will fit into an organisation also helps attract and retain employees. The participants in the interviews spoke at length about culture, and it was similar to the previously mentioned alignment of candidate aspirations compared to company aspirations. Participant 5 spoke about *"Employee Value Propositions"* as a method for organisations to build their employer brand initially. A fascinating insight was the discussion around how an employer brand can be used as a repellent for candidates in the market. Employers will position themselves based on their employer brand and use this as a positioning tactic. This concept is a significant feature of candidate attraction within the labour market as the literature discussed the "War on Talent" (Verma & Ahmad, 2016). This war on talent relates to how competitive the labour market has become for employers (Priyadarshi, 2011). With the increasing competition, a brand needs to ensure that their employer brand strategy will increase their recruitment marketing strategy.

One of the strongest themes across the research was the company culture. The company culture was discussed at length in the literature. The literature took the perspective of how human resource teams build a company culture. Company culture was a significant aspect of the interviews as the researcher looked to understand how it is used from a different perspective. The research identified that the communication of this culture is vital after a strong culture is built. This culture is a significant feature of an employer brand. Emphasising building a good culture and communicating it effectively will aid the building of an employer brand strategy.

6.3.2 – Theme 2 – Long Term Project

The investment in creating an employer brand is significant. This investment is relatively dependent on the scale, but the primary resource needed to develop a strong employer brand is time. As the literature on employer branding is not vast, this specific

aspect did not arise in the initial literature review. The literature revealed how time-consuming it is to develop a brand; more importantly, the research revealed that it is difficult to repair a poor brand image. As a segment of an organisation's brand, it is essential to understand that the overall brand image will impact its employer brand (Sokro, 2012).

While the interviews focus on employer branding, the opinions correlated with the concept of creating a brand being a long-term project. Participant 2 spoke to how creating and implementing an employer brand takes time. *"Employer branding does not result in more applications the day after you release the website. It takes time".* This opinion was shared across the interviews. Each participant spoke about how time-consuming it is to maintain a positive image and spoke of examples regarding websites like Glassdoor, where reviews need to be managed positively and negatively. Creating a culture and understand how to communicate this culture is time-consuming when creating an employer brand.

Overall, the literature has parallels with the insights gained from the interviews. While the literature did not focus on the concept of employer branding in-depth, the primary research showed that employer branding follows the same long term project theme as ordinary brand building. As with most marketing activities, it is vital to implement the strategy effectively. This takes time, and it applies to employer branding as an extension of marketing.

6.3.3 – Theme 3 – Employees are the best asset

Employees play a huge role in creating an overall employer brand. This refers back to the Employee Value Proposition (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). This value proposition will provide the foundation in which an internal and external strategy can be developed. This strategy can be developed through feedback from employees and finding out the honest culture of an organisation.

The insights gained by an organisation will contribute to developing a strategy to build its employer brand. This theme has similarities with the previously mentioned importance of building a successful brand. Using the resource of employees can quite easily hamper an employer brand. Participant 3 poignantly said, "it is not hard if it's

true." This quote highlighted the importance of employees for this participant within their organisation.

Across the interviews, the participants mentioned that a critical element they would research if they were to look for a new role is the employees. Employees have social media accounts and can be involved in various marketing content produced by an organisation. Employees' online presence can then contribute to an organisation's overall brand image, whether their social channels such as LinkedIn or any channel its employees can be researched. Participant 4 discussed the importance of word of mouth for an organisation. "*The best thing you can do is get your employees to talk about you unprompted*".

This theme had similarities with the previously mentioned theme centred around culture. The people within an organisation are vital in an employer branding strategy as they are the organisation's source of research. This means that conducting market research via employees, employees' public activity on social channels, and word of mouth can contribute to the overall employer brand.

6.3.4 – Theme 4 – Tailoring brand messaging

Building on the insights gained via employees, this collection of information helps an organisation develop a more comprehensive strategy for tailoring its communication strategy to meet the needs of its target audience. The literature referenced social media as a critical channel of communicating these brand messages. The content and messaging on these channels are vital (Kissel & Büttgen, 2015). Social channels had been referenced throughout the interview process. Participant 1 referenced how they value the retention of employees. In this interview, we discussed how viewing social channels such as LinkedIn shaped their opinion on how attractive an organisation is to work for – "*how well how good is that company to work for, I would always be looking at how much time those people are spending there.*" This idea relates to textbook marketing. The idea of attracting a customer is more expensive than retaining one (Kotler, 2003). Applying this traditional theory to a more modern aspect of marketing such as employer branding, shows how adaptable traditional marketing is to more modern areas.

The literature also refers to employees as "Brand Ambassadors" (Asha & Jyothi, 2013). This concept can be applied to both physical and digital environments. This concept was discussed and further developed in the interviews with Participants 4 & 5, developing candidate personas to deliver these brand messages to the desired audience. An organisation can use their historical data to isolate any trends emerging. This includes employee feedback, social channels and any other online presence such as review sites like Glassdoor. The development of the candidate persona can help in tailoring the brand messaging. These profiles will help design the language an organisation will use and the channels these messages are communicated. Participant 5 discussed that these could work in the opposite direction, using the candidate personas as a repellent for unsuitable candidates.

A case study discussing how SME's struggle to compete with large organisations regarding talent attraction (Prabhjot, et al., 2015) compared how different sized businesses managed their employer brand. This section of the interview had multiple contrasting opinions. The difference in the messaging between an SME or start-up versus a large organisation is vast. The consensus among the interviews was that start-ups/SME's employer branding was based on the opportunities and experienced gained as the budget difference is significant. According to the research participants, large organisations with employer branding arguably centred around benefits and perks. This idea was encapsulated by Participant 2 – "*you have to try and play on your strengths when it comes to your employer brand.*" The literature agrees with the sentiment that a strong employer brand incorporates the overall offering of the employer. This offering will include multiple aspects such as salary, benefits, and career progression (Bhatt & Jain, 2015). In this instance, organisations need to understand their situation and communicate these elements to candidates. This can be further enhanced with candidate personas as the tailored messaging will ensure an organisation focuses its efforts on the appropriate audience.

The primary research conducted agrees with the literature review discussing the different aspects of employer brand messaging. This is a critical element of the employer brand and has its place amongst all the themes. Ultimately, an organisations employer brand is a combination of the culture built internally and communicated externally by a marketing team. It is vital to make sure the communication is tailored.

6.4 – Research Question 3 – What is the future of employer branding?

This research question concluded the interviews. The final questions revolved around the future of employer branding. This research question focussed on the participant's personal opinions on where employer branding strategies will evolve. The prominent themes are discussed below:

6.4.1 – Theme 1 – Technology playing a more significant role

Technology plays an integral part in all aspects of branding and marketing. Looking at how organisations utilise technology and modern platforms to leverage their employer brand. Building off the literature citing social media as vital in building an online employer brand (Kissel & Büttgen, 2015). The primary research suggested that only some industries have embraced technology and utilised it to improve online branding. Participant 2 emphasised how more traditional industries such as healthcare have seen a downturn in their recruitment due to the pandemic. This resulted in professionals switching industries and being attracted to industries with more modern and attractive opportunities. Similar was mentioned by Participant 3, referencing the hospitality industry. The uncertainty surrounding the industry amidst the pandemic suggests these industries such as healthcare and hospitality require reform. Rather than new emerging technologies taking over, the future of employer branding lies with these industries embracing technology. Whilst the literature did not forecast future trends, the participants within the interviews suggested that the current literature will need to be applied across more industries. As mentioned previously, building an employer brand is a long-term project. Participant 4 discussed how not much would change around employer branding, but those organisations will begin building and implementing an employer branding strategy.

The increased emphasis on modernising the methods in which organisations is vital across all aspects of a business. The pandemic accelerated this advancement and placed technology as a vital part of an organisation's strategy. The significance of this shift is the need for organisations to embrace technology and utilise it to maximise their potential employer brand.

6.4.2 – Theme 2 – Becomes integral to an overall strategy

Currently, employer branding is an emerging topic within marketing. The interviews suggested that due to the pandemic, the need to integrate employer branding has been fast-tracked. The literature revealed how the current situation within the labour market is becoming increasingly competitive (Priyadarshi, 2011). This theme was constant across all interviews, but the primary research reaffirms the idea of a competitive labour market. The market is continuously getting more competitive. This competition leads to employers competing against each other. Participant 5 spoke about how employer branding sometimes can be a *"box-ticking exercise"*. The interview further discussed how now, due to competition, it is an extension of marketing that needs to be taken increasingly seriously. Strategically, larger organisations have created positions within the company to manage and build their employer brand. This role can fall under titles such as Head of People, Head of employer branding or internal recruiter, according to Participant 5. Arguably, this shift will trickle down to organisations of all sizes and ensure that employer branding will become central to a recruitment marketing strategy to gain a competitive advantage.

As mentioned previously, with organisations embracing technology, it is important for employer branding to be embraced as a core aspect of a brands strategy. Across this study, different aspects, such as labour market competition, were discussed. The need for an organisation to develop an employer brand to attract the desired candidates will be vital. With much greater competition in a candidate-driven market, the employer brand could be the aspect that creates the point of difference (Mearns, 2007).

6.5 – Conclusion

This chapter discussed the results of the research in more depth. This primary research conducted was then compared to the literature. In conclusion, the literature provided a basis in which the primary research added valuable context from an employer branding perspective. The overall conclusion of this research project will be discussed in the next chapter in more detail. The next chapter will highlight the key findings and discuss the opportunities for further research.

Chapter 7 – Conclusion & Recommendations

7.1 – Conclusion

The overall goal of this study was to explore the topic of employer branding and to understand its modern application. This study looked to uncover effective employer branding techniques through primary and secondary research and their strategic importance. The research further looked to identify themes for the future of employer branding. These insights were developed through primary research. This research was conducted qualitatively via interview. The findings from these interviews were analysed through thematic analysis, which enabled the researcher to understand the topic and its application further.

The literature review provided the foundation for the research. The literature covered a broad range of topics across Marketing and Human Resources. These topics included fundamental branding theory and discussed how Human Resource teams use employee value propositions to build solid internal brands. The chosen method of research was conducted qualitatively. Interviews with professionals working across a variety of roles, such as senior management roles to Marketing Managers, allowed for the theories in the literature reviews to be explored through the experience of the interview participants.

The overall question asked in this research is as follows - *How has modern employer branding impacted organisations overall recruitment strategy?*

This research topic presents a considerable future. The literature revealed how it has already developed in such a short amount of time. The primary research discussed how the opportunity to utilise employer branding would become a core aspect of an organisation's strategy as the labour market continues to be competitive. The war for talent is not slowing down and is arguably increasing.

The topic of employer branding was mentioned throughout the research project as an emerging topic. The main complication in researching this topic was differentiating between being part of human resources or marketing. Ultimately the research revealed

that it is a topic that is a collaboration between both departments. It was discussed how recently, the emphasis on having this brand for potential candidates to view is becoming essential. It is argued that neither department has a complete skill set to implement an effective employer brand strategy. It was also discussed how larger organisations with bigger budgets have begun hiring staff to manage their employer branding. Ultimately it is a hybrid skillset needed within an organisation.

Overall, this research concludes that employer branding is a topic only growing in importance. Currently, it is not necessarily a core aspect of an organisation's overall strategy. However, it is evident from the literature and primary research conducted that the future of employer branding is an essential aspect of an organisation's overall strategy.

7.2 – Recommendations for further research

As discussed, as an emerging extension of marketing, there is a broad scope to develop and enhance this research. This research had multiple limitations, such as the pandemic situation, it is an academic project and access to research participants. A study with a broader range of participants and a broader time frame would create a much greater insight to enhance this research. This research mainly focussed on SME's due to the lack of access to larger organisations. This access would provide much greater insight into how large budget employer brand strategies differ.

A second recommendation would be to research over a much more extended time. A recurring theme throughout each aspect of the research project was the emphasis on time. Time was discussed in how much employer branding has evolved quickly, its acceleration because of the pandemic, and how building a strategy is a long-term project.

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Appendix

Interview Guide

The question guide highlights the core topics the interviews will cover.

Interview Opening: Discuss the data collection methods and reiterate that the interviews will be anonymised. Go through what the research is about again.

Mention that the meeting will be recorded to help with its transcription and kept on my laptop. If at any stage the participant would like to bypass or move on from any questions to let the researcher know. Inform participants if they wish to withdraw their contributions it is also no problem.

Objective 1: What is your current Understanding of Employer Branding?

What is your understanding/interpretation of employer branding?

When applying for your current/any role, did you take the organisation's employer brand into account?

- Researcher asks to elaborate on importance in their own search particularly early stages of career versus current.
- Basic probes such as why?
- What changed between the two different times of career?

In your experience, has employer branding been a part of any organisations you have worked for marketing/recruitment strategy? Would you agree it has become something a business will need to look at overall?

- Questions centred around their own organisation
- Question its strategic importance? E.g Should you value it more? Do you need to?

What is your opinion on the current situation of the labour market?

- Question external factors?
- Candidate or Employer controlled market?
- Why?
- How to manage this from the participants perspective

- Will this change?

Would it be fair to say that it currently is more competitive than ever?

Objective 2 – How to build a successful employer brand

Do you feel that employer branding is something that should be emphasised more or less?

- Why?

What do you think are the vital components in employer branding/Developing an employer brand?

- The researcher probed why throughout this question as the participants elaborated on different elements.
- What works for you?

How do you communicate your employer brand?

- This section looked at how the participant in their current employer leverages their employer brand as well as their own personal preference.
- Ensure to question why throughout

What companies would you look at as examples of good employer branding?

- Used to add context and almost as a case study from participants.
- Question participants on example to gain more understanding of why they feel a particular brand has a good employer brand.

Objective 3 – What is the future of employer branding?

What do you think is the future of employer branding? In 5 years' time do you think there will be a shift in how it is approached?

- Probe to identify if the participants have identified any emerging trends?
- Try to gain an insight into their strategic plan for their own employer brand

Anything Participant would like to add?