Identifying dimensions of attractiveness in employer branding: effects of age, gender, and current employment status

Esra Alıcıık, Ümit Alıcıık, *
Kocaeli University, Kocaeli, 41380, Turkey

Abstract

Attracting and retaining talented human capital become one of the very sources of competitive advantage. In order to attract better employees, firms recently started using branding principles and practices in the area of human resources management. The application of branding principles to HRM has been termed as employer branding. Firms appear to be expending considerable resources on employer branding campaigns, indicating that they find value in the practice. Consequently, the concept of employer branding has become a prominent topic in the HRM field. This study attempts to identify the dimensions of attractiveness in employer branding, to examine their perceived importance levels and to contrast perceptual differences (if any) regarding the age, gender and current employment status of the respondents. In order to respond to these questions, a field study is conducted and data is collected from a convenience sample of 600 adults (half of them were employed and the other half were un-employed college students at the time of data collection). Analyses results indicated significant differences between the perceived levels of importance of employer attractiveness dimensions concerning the gender of the respondents, but neither the age nor the current employment status of them. Theoretical and managerial implications are discussed.

Keywords: Employer Branding, Internal Marketing, Organizational Attractiveness, Human Resources Management

1. Introduction

As a result of the shift from the industrial age to information age, human capital has become one of the main sources of competitive advantage in the global economies. Today, firms’ ability to attract, recruit and retain talented human resources from the job market has become a strategic component of corporate success. In order to attract better employees, firms recently started using branding principles and practices in the area of human resources management (HRM). The application of branding principles to HRM has been termed as “employer branding” (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Employer branding has also been described as the ‘sum of a company’s efforts to communicate to existing and prospective staff that it is a desirable place to work’ (Lloyd 2002). Since 1990’s, numerous firms have developed formal employer branding programs. Firms appear to be expending considerable resources on employer branding campaigns, indicating that they find value in the practice (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Concordantly, the

* Corresponding author. Tel. + 90-262-303-1884 fax. +90-262-303-1803
Email address: umit.aliciik@kocaeli.edu.tr

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concept of employer branding has become a prominent topic in the HRM field and today, ‘Best Employer’ status is something that more and more organizations are striving for (Berthon, Ewing, Hah, 2005). Although its growing popularity amongst human resources practitioners, a small body of employer branding literature do exist, and there is a lack of academic research on the topic. Accordingly, in this study, we tried to respond to this shortcoming by identifying the attractiveness dimensions of employer branding within a Turkish context. We examined the importance levels of the dimensions of employer branding and probed the discrepancies between the perceptions of different respondents concerning their age, gender and employment status. For this aim, we conducted a field research by using the survey methodology on a sample consisted of employed and job seeking respondents. This study aims to add the current HRM literature by investigating the perceived importance levels of the various dimensions of attractiveness in employer branding. Research results may provide important insights about the value of employer branding practices as well.

2. Literature Review and Hypotheses

2.1. Employer Branding

Employer branding has emerged as a result of the application of the marketing principles to human resource management (i.e. internal marketing) (Cable and Turban, 2001). The concept of internal marketing posits that employees are the internal customers of a company and jobs are internal products. To have satisfied customers the organization must first have satisfied employees (George, 1977; 1990). The ‘employer brand’ term was conceptualized for the first time by Ambler and Barrow (1996) in their paper, "The Employer Brand". Upon conducting in depth interviews with respondents from several companies, they concluded that the concept of branding can also be applied to the employment situation. They defined employer branding as ‘the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company’ (Ambler and Barrow, 1996, p. 187). Employer branding is also defined as “a targeted, long term strategy to manage the awareness and perceptions of employees, potential employees, and related stakeholders with regards to a particular firm” (Sullivan, 2004). Employer branding “represents organizations’ efforts to communicate to internal and external audiences what makes it both desirable and different as an employer.” (Jenner and Taylor, 2009). Employer branding is concerned with building an image in the minds of the potential labor market that the company is a ‘great place to work’ (Ewing et al. 2002).

The practice of employer branding is predicated on the assumption that human capital brings value to the firm, and through skillful investment in human capital firm performance can be enhanced (Backhaus, and Tikoo, 2004). Besides, companies with strong employer brands can potentially reduce the cost of employee acquisition, improve employee relations, increase employee retention and even offer lower salaries for comparable staff to firms with weaker employer brands (Ritson 2002). Since competition for the best employees became almost as fierce as competition for customers (Berthon et al., 2005), organizations have to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to be seen as attractive employers for prospective applicants and current employees (Lievens, Highhouse, 2003). It is important for organizations to understand what attracts the job seekers to an organization. Organizational attractiveness denotes “the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization” (Berthon et al., 2005), i.e. perceived economic value, interest value, social value, development value and application value (Jiang & Iles, 2011).

There is a cornucopia of literature focusing on employer attractiveness and employer branding (Barber et al., 1994; Lievens, 2007; Davies, 2008; Agrawal and Swaroop, 2009; Moroko and Uncles, 2009; Mandhanya and Shah, 2010; Wilden et al., 2010; Ong, 2011; Priyadarshi, 2011; Shahzad et al., 2011). A number of academic research directly focused on identifying the dimensions of employer attractiveness indeed. Contemporary researchers view employer attractiveness as a multidimensional construct. There are various attempts to identify the distinct dimensions of employer attractiveness (Berthon et al., 2005; Roy, 2008; Tuzuner and Yüksel, 2009; Bakanauskiené et al., 2011). However the current literature does not fully answer questions about the perceived importance levels of each dimension, nor about the perceptual differences between individuals having different characteristics. There is an important question to be answered: Do current employment status, gender and age of the individual matter when he assesses an employer’s attractiveness? Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the relative importance levels of the dimensions of employer attractiveness and the impact of respondents’ age, gender and current employment status...
on assessments of the importance levels. To address the above research questions, the following hypotheses are developed and tested in this study.

Hypothesis 1: Distinct components of employer attractiveness have different levels of perceived importance.

Hypothesis 2: Perceived importance levels of the components of employer attractiveness may vary according to respondents’ gender.

Hypothesis 3: Perceived importance levels of the components of employer attractiveness may vary according to respondents’ age.

Hypothesis 4: Perceived importance levels of the components of employer attractiveness may vary according to respondents’ current employment status.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Goal

This study aims to identify the dimensions of attractiveness in employer branding, to find out the perceived importance levels of each dimension and to examine whether there is statistically significant perceptual differences amongst respondents who has different age, gender, and employment status. In order to test the hypotheses, a field research was conducted by using the survey methodology.

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The survey instrument was a questionnaire including some demographic questions and the 'employer attractiveness' scale developed by Berthon et al. (2005). A convenience sample of 600 adults (half of them were currently employed somewhere and the other half were un-employed college students at the time of data collection) participated in this study. Data is collected by an online questionnaire. E-mail messages containing the web-link of the online questionnaire were first sent to a small convenience sample. Upon completing the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to share the web link with their friends by e-mail or social networks (snowball technique). Hence, researchers reached a wider sample.

The 'employer attractiveness' scale has 25 items corresponding the functional, economic and psychological benefits delineated by Ambler and Barrow’s (1996) definition of employer branding. This is the only validated scale existing in the current literature for identifying the attractiveness dimensions of an employer brand (Berthon et al., 2005; Roy, 2008). Respondents were instructed by asking the following question at the top of the measure: “After your graduation or when you decide to change your current job, please indicate how important are the following factors to you when considering potential employers?” Responses are taken by Likert type five point scales where “1 = Not at all important” and “5 = Extremely important”. Scale dimensionality and factor structure were checked by exploratory factor analysis. To test the hypotheses, mean scores of the distinct dimensions of employer attractiveness were compared by using independent samples t tests, and contrasts were made according to the respondents’ age group, gender and employment status.

3.3. Analyses and Results

A total of 600 individuals participated in this study by voluntarily filling the online questionnaire. After preliminary analyses, 10 questionnaires were eliminated due to missing and/or careless responses. Remaining 590 questionnaires are coded and entered into a SPSS spreadsheet in order to perform the data analyses. The mean age of subjects was 25.6 years (range:18-60; sd.=6.5) and 58% were male. 83% were single. The mean of their monthly income was 2390 TL. Half of the respondents (295) were currently employed somewhere during the data collection process. The other half was unemployed- mostly undergraduate students in their final year.

Before testing the research hypotheses, we made some preliminary analyses to control the dimensionality and reliability of the employer attractiveness scale. Scale dimensionality was controlled by principal component analysis. Principal component analysis with Varimax rotation and a factor extraction according to the MINEIGEN criterion (i.e. all factors with eigenvalues of greater than 1) was employed. Scale reliability was assessed by internal consistency
using Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient. Descriptive statistics showed that research data was appropriate for factor analysis (KMO= 0.863; Bartlett’s test of sphericity p<0.001). Principal components analysis suggested six factors for the organizational attractiveness scale, which explained 59% of the total variation in the data. Five items were deleted because they showed a weak loading or loaded on several factors. Table 1 shows the remaining items’ factor loadings, explained variance by each factor and the Cronbach’s Alpha values.

Table 1. Employer Attractiveness Scale Principal Components Analysis Results

| Scale Items                                      | Mean  | Std. Dev. | Factor Loading | Eigenvalue | % Variance Explained | Cronbach Alpha |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------|-----------|----------------|------------|----------------------|----------------|
| **Factor 1: Social Value**                      |       |           |                |            |                      |                |
| Gaining career-enhancing experience             | 4.51  | 0.74      | 0.71           | 5.49       | 16.28                | 0.81           |
| Feeling good about yourself as a result of working for the organisation | 4.62  | 0.69      | 0.64           |            |                      |                |
| Acceptance and belonging                        | 4.18  | 0.89      | 0.64           |            |                      |                |
| Having a good relationship with your superiors  | 4.39  | 0.82      | 0.62           |            |                      |                |
| The organisation both values and makes use of your creativity | 4.40  | 0.81      | 0.61           |            |                      |                |
| Good promotion opportunities within the organisation | 4.50  | 0.79      | 0.61           |            |                      |                |
| Recognition/appreciation from management         | 4.53  | 0.70      | 0.51           |            |                      |                |
| Job security within the organisation             | 4.56  | 0.75      | 0.50           |            |                      |                |
| **Factor 2: Market Value**                      |       |           |                |            |                      |                |
| The organisation produces innovative products and services | 3.91  | 0.91      | 0.74           | 1.77       | 12.27                | 0.713          |
| The organisation produces high-quality products and services | 4.03  | 0.96      | 0.74           |            |                      |                |
| Opportunity to apply what was learned at a tertiary institution | 3.85  | 1.06      | 0.68           |            |                      |                |
| The organisation is customer-orientated          | 3.54  | 1.06      | 0.55           |            |                      |                |
| **Factor 3: Economic Value**                    |       |           |                |            |                      |                |
| An above average basic salary                    | 4.29  | 0.80      | 0.81           | 1.31       | 8.09                 | 0.613          |
| An attractive overall compensation package       | 4.24  | 0.80      | 0.78           |            |                      |                |
| **Factor 4: Application Value**                 |       |           |                |            |                      |                |
| Humanitarian organisation – gives back to society | 4.15  | 0.92      | 0.78           | 1.21       | 7.89                 | .580           |
| Opportunity to teach others what you have learned | 3.76  | 1.03      | 0.69           |            |                      |                |
| **Factor 5: Cooperation Value**                 |       |           |                |            |                      |                |
| Hands-on inter-departmental experience          | 3.96  | 0.93      | 0.70           | 1.04       | 7.57                 | 0.541          |
| Supportive and encouraging colleagues           | 4.21  | 0.85      | 0.70           |            |                      |                |
| **Factor 6: Working Environment**               |       |           |                |            |                      |                |
| A fun working environment                        | 4.07  | 0.89      | 0.80           | 1.01       | 7.02                 | 0.530          |
| Working in an exciting environment              | 4.05  | 0.91      | 0.74           |            |                      |                |
| **OVERALL**                                     |       |           |                |            |                      | 59.126 0.851  |

Factor 1, labeled ‘Social value’, assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides the opportunity to gain career enhancing experience, good promotion opportunities, recognition and appreciation, acceptance and belonging, good feelings and job security. Factor 2, labeled ‘Market value’, assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that produces high quality and innovative products and services, and customer oriented. Factor 3, labeled ‘Economic value’, assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides above-average salary and a good compensation package. Factor 4, labeled ‘Application value’, assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that gives back to society and provides the opportunity to teach others what you have learned. Factor 5, labeled ‘Cooperation value’, assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides hands-on interdepartmental experience and has supportive colleagues. Finally, factor 6, labeled ‘Working environment’, assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides a fun and exciting environment. Overall reliability of the scale is satisfactory (α = 0.85). Social value dimension (α = 0.81) and market value dimension (α = 0.71) have satisfactory reliabilities. Economic value dimension has acceptable reliability (α = 0.61). Remaining dimensions (application value, cooperation value and...
workplace environment) have lower reliability coefficients because of small number of items under each dimension. Nevertheless, since these dimensions have strong theoretical support (Berthon et al., 2005), they were retained as they appeared. These results show slight differences from the original factor structure of the scale (Berthon et al., 2005) probably because of cultural differences. However, the modified factor structure of the employer attractiveness scale is still useful for comparative purposes.

Under the light of the principal components analysis results, six composite variables are created by averaging the items scores under each factor. These composite variables are used to test the research hypotheses. The means, standard deviations, and interrelations of the composite variables are presented in Table 2.

### Table 2: Means, Standard Deviations, and Interrelations of Composite Variables

| Composite Variable   | Mean   | Std. Deviation | 1     | 2     | 3    | 4    | 5    |
|----------------------|--------|----------------|-------|-------|------|------|------|
| (1) Social Value     | 4.456  | 0.526          | 1     |       |      |      |      |
| (2) Market Value     | 3.824  | 0.735          | 0.419*| 1     |      |      |      |
| (3) Economic Value   | 4.269  | 0.686          | 0.345 | 0.174 | 1    |      |      |
| (4) Application Value| 4.172  | 0.752          | 0.501 | 0.188 | 1    |      |      |
| (5) Cooperation Value| 3.861  | 0.812          | 0.364 | 0.470*| 0.146 | 0.339*| 1    |
| (6) Workplace Environment| 4.056 | 0.742          | 0.328*| 0.256 | 0.200*| 0.259 | 0.159*|

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In order to explore the possible variations amongst the perceived importance levels of different dimensions of organizational attractiveness, paired contrasts with t tests are run. Table 3 shows the means scores and paired t tests results for each dimension of the organizational attractiveness scale. Social value attained the highest mean score (4.46 perceived as the most important attractiveness dimension) while market value attained the lowest mean score (3.82 perceived as the least important attractiveness dimension). Except the “Market Value & Cooperation Value” pair, all of the mean differences were found to be statistically significant. Thus, our first hypothesis proposing that “distinct components of employer attractiveness have different levels of perceived importance” is supported.

### Table 3: Paired Samples t Tests of Perceived Importance Levels

| Employer Attractiveness Dimensions | Mean   | Std. Deviation | t     | df   | p    |
|-----------------------------------|--------|----------------|-------|------|------|
| Pair 1 Social Value               | 4.46   | 0.53           | 21.833| 589  | 0.000|
| Market Value                      | 3.82   | 0.74           |       |      |      |
| Pair 2 Social Value               | 4.46   | 0.53           | 6.425 | 589  | 0.000|
| Market Value                      | 3.82   | 0.74           |       |      |      |
| Pair 3 Social Value               | 4.46   | 0.53           | 10.304| 589  | 0.000|
| Economic Value                    | 4.27   | 0.69           |       |      |      |
| Application Value                 | 4.17   | 0.75           |       |      |      |
| Pair 4 Social Value               | 4.46   | 0.53           | 18.252| 589  | 0.000|
| Cooperation Value                 | 3.86   | 0.81           |       |      |      |
| Pair 5 Social Value               | 4.46   | 0.53           | 12.828| 589  | 0.000|
| Workplace Environment             | 4.06   | 0.74           |       |      |      |
| Pair 6 Market Value               | 3.82   | 0.74           | -11.807| 589  | 0.000|
| Economic Value                    | 4.27   | 0.69           |       |      |      |
| Pair 7 Market Value               | 3.82   | 0.74           | -10.057| 589  | 0.000|
| Application Value                 | 4.17   | 0.75           |       |      |      |
| Pair 8 Market Value               | 3.82   | 0.74           | -1.128 | 589  | 0.260|
| Cooperation Value                 | 3.86   | 0.81           |       |      |      |
| Pair 9 Market Value               | 3.82   | 0.74           | -6.251 | 589  | 0.000|
| Workplace Environment             | 4.06   | 0.74           |       |      |      |
| Pair 10 Economic Value            | 4.27   | 0.69           | 2.555 | 589  | 0.011|
| Application Value                 | 4.17   | 0.75           |       |      |      |
| Pair 11 Economic Value            | 4.27   | 0.69           | 10.059| 589  | 0.000|
| Cooperation Value                 | 3.86   | 0.81           |       |      |      |
| Pair 12 Economic Value            | 4.27   | 0.69           | 5.708 | 589  | 0.000|
| Workplace Environment             | 4.06   | 0.74           |       |      |      |
| Pair 13 Application Value         | 4.17   | 0.75           | 8.384 | 589  | 0.000|
In order to test the second hypothesis, independent samples t tests based on the gender of the respondents were run. Analyses results indicated significant differences between males and females concerning the perceived importance levels of social value, market value, application value and cooperation value, but neither the economic value nor the workplace environment. Thus, our second hypothesis is partially supported. Table 4 shows the means, standard deviations and t test results of the independent samples t tests based on the gender of the respondents.

Table 4: Gender and Perceived Importance Levels of the Employer Attractiveness Dimensions

| Employer Attractiveness Dimensions | Gender | N   | Mean | Std. Deviation | t    | df   | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|------------------------------------|--------|-----|------|----------------|------|------|----------------|
| Social Value                       | Female | 248 | 4.56 | 0.43           | 4.287| 588  | 0.000          |
|                                   | Male   | 342 | 4.38 | 0.58           | 3.37 | 588  | 0.001          |
| Market Value                       | Female | 248 | 3.94 | 0.63           | -4.687| 589 | 0.000          |
|                                   | Male   | 342 | 3.74 | 0.79           | -1.799| 588 | 0.073          |
| Economic Value                     | Female | 248 | 4.33 | 0.65           | -1.242| 588 | 0.215          |
|                                   | Male   | 342 | 4.23 | 0.71           | -1.200| 588 | 0.231          |
| Application Value                  | Female | 248 | 4.30 | 0.64           | -3.023| 588 | 0.003          |
|                                   | Male   | 342 | 4.03 | 0.81           | -0.748| 588 | 0.455          |
| Cooperation Value                  | Female | 248 | 3.98 | 0.75           | -4.687| 589 | 0.000          |
|                                   | Male   | 342 | 3.78 | 0.85           | -0.748| 588 | 0.455          |
| Workplace Environment              | Female | 248 | 4.09 | 0.64           | 1.058 | 588 | 0.291          |
|                                   | Male   | 342 | 4.03 | 0.81           | 1.058 | 588 | 0.291          |

In order to test the third hypothesis, correlations between the perceived importance levels of the employer attractiveness dimensions and the age of the respondents are calculated. Analyses results indicated significantly positive correlations only between the age and perceived importance of the market value dimension (r=0.118, p=0.004). None of the remaining dimensions had statistically significant correlations with the age of the respondent. Thus, our third hypothesis is not supported.

Finally, another series of independent samples t tests based on the employment status of the respondents were run in order to test the fourth hypothesis. Analyses results did not reveal any significant differences between employed and unemployed respondents concerning the perceived importance levels of the employer attractiveness dimensions. Thus, we did not have enough evidence to support our fourth hypothesis. Table 5 shows the means, standard deviations and t test results of the independent samples t tests based on the employment status of the respondents.

Table 5: Employment Status and Perceived Importance Levels of the Employer Attractiveness Dimensions

| Employer Attractiveness Dimensions | Employment Status | N   | Mean | Std. Deviation | t    | df   | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|------------------------------------|-------------------|-----|------|----------------|------|------|----------------|
| Social Value                       | Unemployed        | 295 | 4.47 | 0.45           | 0.838| 588  | 0.402          |
|                                   | Employed          | 295 | 4.44 | 0.59           | 0.838| 588  | 0.402          |
| Market Value                       | Unemployed        | 295 | 3.77 | 0.61           | -1.799| 588 | 0.073          |
|                                   | Employed          | 295 | 3.88 | 0.84           | -1.799| 588 | 0.073          |
| Economic Value                     | Unemployed        | 295 | 4.24 | 0.61           | -1.200| 588 | 0.231          |
|                                   | Employed          | 295 | 4.30 | 0.76           | -1.200| 588 | 0.231          |
| Application Value                  | Unemployed        | 295 | 4.18 | 0.66           | 0.382 | 588 | 0.702          |
|                                   | Employed          | 295 | 4.16 | 0.83           | 0.382 | 588 | 0.702          |
| Cooperation Value                  | Unemployed        | 295 | 3.82 | 0.74           | -1.242| 588 | 0.215          |
|                                   | Employed          | 295 | 3.90 | 0.88           | -1.242| 588 | 0.215          |
| Workplace Environment              | Unemployed        | 295 | 4.03 | 0.68           | -0.748| 588 | 0.455          |
|                                   | Employed          | 295 | 4.08 | 0.80           | -0.748| 588 | 0.455          |
4. Conclusions

In this study, we examined the perceived importance levels of different dimensions of employer attractiveness. Further, we made comparisons regarding the age, gender, and employment status of the respondents. For this aim, we collected data from a convenience sample of employed and unemployed (job seeking) individuals. Participants’ perceptions regarding the importance levels of distinct components of employer attractiveness were measured by a multi item scale. Factor structure of the employer attractiveness scale was analyzed by principal component analysis. Factor analysis revealed six factors representing the dimensions of employer attractiveness (social value, market value, economic value, application value, cooperation value, workplace environment). These factors were slightly different from the original five factor structure (Berthon et al., 2005) probably because of cultural differences. However, the modified factor structure of the employer attractiveness represented face validity.

We found that respondents attributed the highest importance to social value (M = 4.46) of the possible employers when seeking for employment. They attributed the least importance to market value (M = 3.82) of the potential employers. Further analyses revealed that there were statistically significant differences amongst the perceived importance levels of the distinct dimensions of employer attractiveness. Finally, we found significant differences between the perceived importance levels of the employer attractiveness dimensions regarding the gender of the respondents. Female respondents attributed higher importance to social value, market value, application value and cooperation value dimensions compared to males. There were statistically significant positive (but weak) correlations between the age of the respondents and perceived importance of the market value dimension. As the respondents get older, they slightly tend to be more attracted by employers who produce high quality and innovative products and services, and are customer oriented. Similarly, employed respondents tend to attribute more importance to market value of the employer compared to unemployed respondents, yet the difference is only marginally significant. These results provide important managerial implications concerning human resources management and recruitment practices. As noted earlier, competition for the best employees became very sharp and organizations have to differentiate themselves from their competitors to attract skilled employees. Understanding which factors are valued in the eyes of the job seekers may help recruitment managers to develop more effective job advertisements. Further, comprehending the perceptual differences between various job seekers with different characteristics may facilitate the development of employment messages.

Nevertheless, the study has some limitations. First of all, it was conducted with the use of a convenience sample in a contrived setting. Thus, it is recommended that further researches be conducted with the use of more representative random samples in order to make generalizations. Future studies would gain external validity by using probability samples of wider populations. Further, this study is based on cross-sectional design and thus cannot make causal inferences. Future studies may also examine the construct validity of the employer attractiveness survey by using confirmatory factor analysis. This attempt will help to adapt the scale in Turkish context.

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