



EMPLOYEE BENEFITS AS A COMPETITIVE STRATEGY FOR BUILDING EMPLOYER BRAND IN COVID-19 ERA

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ABSTRACT-

As the world comes to term with the emerging future of employment in the Covid-19 era and beyond, social media and benefits offered to employees will be playing a critical role in building an employer brand. The global pandemic has forced us to adopt many digital practices to meet the 'war for talent'. Presently we are living in a virtual world where the usage of social media has taken a trajectory growth. With the war for talent intensifying, corporates are vying to get the best talent on the bus. In this context 'Employee Benefits' plays a vital role to persuade both potential and existing employees to join and remain in the firm. Firms consider its employees as the first customer. Hence, it applies great effort to satisfy them by offering various benefits (functional, economic and psychological). These benefits form employee experiences that influence their decision. Now-a-days workplace moments and experiences can quickly go viral in the form of reviews and comments. In this context, the purpose of the paper is to propose a conceptual model to explore how different benefits help to build an employer brand using social media as an influencer to achieve competitive advantage.

Keywords: Benefits, Employer Brand, Pandemic, Social Media

1. INTRODUCTION-

In the present day scenario, firms are competing vigorously to place themselves as a unique employer with extraordinary and special set of benefits and attributes to encourage the talented potential employees and existing employees to join as well as stay in the firm (Gaddam, 2008) [1]. Firms are now trying to differentiate themselves from their competitors not only in their product/ services but also as an attractive employer for both potential (Johnson, 2000) [2] and existing (Bakanauskiene et al., 2011) [3] employees so that they cope up with the Covid-19 situation. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of employer brand. The corona virus has largely affected and hampered global economy and employment market. Many organizations are now trying to develop different strategies to attract and retain top talents to achieve a competitive advantage in the employment market. The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has put every organization's employer brand to the test. During this time of crisis, the organization should try to build a strong employer brand to stand out in the competition. In the employment market, employer brand is given top priority by the candidates, thus it becomes the responsibility of the organizations to respect, protect and even elevate their reputation to internal and external stakeholders (Moroko & Uncles, 2009) [4].



In the present Covid-19 situation, potential employees as well as current employees are looking for the employer brands that have successfully adopted the pandemic situation. Thus, the firms today must brand itself to be attractive for capturing the attention of the individuals. According to Taylor (2010) [5] same branding techniques used in marketing concept can be applied here to attract and retain top talents. The branding in HR area to attract and retain talents and to make sure that the present employees are engaged in the firm's culture and strategy is said to be as employer branding (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004) [6]. Berthon et al. (2005) [7] expounded that, in employer branding process the firm (product) sell its exclusive employment experience to the potential and existing employees (customers). Employer branding mainly deals with creating the image of a firm as an employer among different target groups. For building a powerful employer brand the firm must understand the needs of the employees well and the factors that encourage them to join and continue in the firm.

The war for talent is on in the present pandemic situation and the organizations need to constantly upgrade and enhance employer brand as a prime part of recruitment approach (Barrow & Mosley, 2011) [8]. Helle, Sophie & Chirsta (2011) [9] suggested that communicating the employer brand and by showcasing the real work environment and culture of the firm more and more right candidates would be attracted towards the organization. Technology has changed the way of our living. We are in the era where we can find reviews and comments about an organization in just a 'click of mouse' (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004) [10]. Online advancement has brought changes in the HR field with the emergence of social media. In this period of pandemic, we are living in a virtual world where the usage of social media has taken a trajectory growth. Usage of social media is increasingly used in employer branding campaigns to attract and retain employees (Madera, 2012) [11]. Employers are trying hard to advertise themselves to be noticeable in the market. Organizations are also using their current employees who are said to be the best recruiters for the firms because they tell great stories about the firm through the power of electronics word-of-mouth (eWOM) as well as they also embody the firm's unique values, cultures, visions and benefits to the outside world with the help of social media (). The current employees become the firm's ambassador who has the power to attract and retain potential and existing talents by sharing their experiences.

In this context, the main purpose of this paper is to advance the understanding about employer brand by exploring the benefits offered by the employers to its employees to attract and retain top talents using social media as a tool for building up strong employer brand to achieve competitive advantage in the employment market. The paper begins by presenting relevant conceptual base from marketing background which is considered an important approach to understand employer brand and employee attraction and retention. From there the paper tries to develop the elements of benefits in the employment setting provided by the employer. Drawing from Ambler and Barrow (1996) [12] explanation on employer brand, this paper tries to explain how benefits helps to build a strong employer brand for a firm.



2. OBJECTIVE-

- 1.To investigate how benefits offered to employees helps the firm to achieve a competitive advantage.
- 2.To understand how social media acts as an influencer to build strong employer brand.

3. THEORITICAL BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY-

Since the time the concept employer brand has been coined by Ambler and Barrow (1996) [12], it is considered to be exercised as a strategic tool for increasing the firm's chance for attracting and retaining top talent who will make a difference to the firm and will help in contributing to achieve a firm's success. Many researchers have reported building employer brand as a strategy used by different firms to gain competitive advantages with the help of its workforce (Streb, Voelpel&Leibold, 2008) [13]. Various authors have claimed that employer branding is still at its infancy in case of both research and practice and adopting marketing strategies is likely to be considered as an approach to face the present day challenges prevailing in the employment market (Edward, 2010; Kimungu and Maringa, 2010) [14] [15]. In this backdrop, its intended contribution is considered to become more and more substantial owing to the fact that adopting marketing strategies is likely to be considered as a way to face the present day challenges present in the employment market.

Increase in interest in EB context has been marked as an approach by which firms can maximize their human capital by attracting and retaining employees. In this context, employer branding is described as an activity of building an employer brand which results in developing the image of the firm as a suitable place to work (Lloyd, 2002) [16]. The picture of the firm is portrayed to prospective (external) and existing (internal) employees to allure and absorb and retain the most adept workforce in the firm (Ahlrichs, 2000) [17]. Ambler and Barrow (1996) explained EB as package of benefits. These benefits proffered by the EB can be grouped similarly to the benefit that is offered by a product brand to its customers. According to Berthon & Ewing (2005) and Ambler and Barrow (1996), functional benefits comprises of developmental and utilitarian activities, economic benefits incorporates non-monetary and monetary benefits and lastly psychological benefits includes a feeling of belongingness, affection and motive. All these three benefits clubbed together will help in motivating an employee to join, remain and work in the firm.

The root of EB concept has evolved from marketing's branding concept (Morocco& Uncles, 2008). Branding was explained by Kotler (1991) [18] as "a name, term, sign, symbol or design or a combination of them which is intended to identify the goods and services of one seller or group of seller and to differentiate them from those of competitors". This definition was primarily used for describing product brands (Mosley, 2007)[19]. But according to Aaker (1992) [20] brand is considered to be one of the most valuable resource of the firm. Therefore, managing the brand is considered as most important function of a company. Recent marking literature explains that a brand also has a huge influence on the firm as an employer. Brands now-a-days is not all used as an identification mark for the company's



product but it is also used as an identification mark for different organizations to be remarkable and noticeable among different companies so that best talented employees will be attracted towards them and the most competent employees of the firm will be retained. Successful brands are the brands which continuously deliver on their promises made to their customers (Cambell, 2002) [21]. In general, a customer associates a brand with a firm's name, product, services and logotype. The current literature on marketing also indicates that the brand also has an immense effect on the company as an employer. When branding schemes for instance brand association, brand image, brand loyalty etc. are incorporated with HR strategies (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Therefore, having an employer brand is contemplated to be an emerging approach to create a positive picture of the firm to the outside world (Knox & Freeman, 2006) [22].

Tikkane (2011) [23], reported that the employment market has changed from employer driven to employee driven and stated that: "from a 'demand driven market', in which employees are in dominant position, to a 'supply driven market', in which employees assumes a dominant position. It is unclear how employers will respond to this change". This change was named as 'War for Talent' by the practitioners (Michaels, Handfield, Jones & Axelrod, 2001) [24]. It says that the employers will now require to plan strategically so as to create a strong status and reputation in the market as a result of which they will be unique and will come in preferred lists of employees as 'Employer of choice', where the employees would like to work in (Streb, Voelpel & Leibold, 2008) [13]. As per Mc Nulty (2006), the rival firms who are intending to be in competition in near future should rethink and revisit their assumptions and strategies so as to attract, hire, motivate and retain top talented employees.

Therefore, the firms should think of strategies that will differentiate them from their rival companies and will make them stand out in the competition in the employment market (Olapido et al., 2013) [25]. One of the most effective strategies used by some of the big companies is to build unique and powerful EB to advertise the firm's attractiveness externally to future potential employees. In addition to it, firms make sure that the employees 'live' the brand and it matches with their needs and expectation as the promise was made. In this respect various authors have commented that the companies are now moving from just having a 'vacancy management' approach to building the best talents that would like to work and help the firm to achieve a competitive strength (Baumgarth, 2010) [26].

For creating an unique and powerful EB, developing a strong benefit strategy with high work experience is much needed by any firm to project itself in the employment market (Kuchеров & Samokish, 2016) [27]. This expects for investment, obligation, commitment and strong assistance from top management to acquire desired goal.

4. THE EMPLOYER BRAND-

Employer branding, is somewhat a recently developed academic idea having its origin traceable to mid- and late-1990s (Rosethron, 2010) [28]. Its growth can be synchronized with the concept of branding in marketing literature and associated literature related positioning of the organization's product and services (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). A brand is basically an assurance of obligation and performance given by a firm to its customers (Cambell, 2002). It



deals with creating an impression or image by the action of alternating and reinforcing people's thoughts or beliefs. As Edward (2009) contends the application and incorporation of the same branding principle, by HR managers can create an employer brand.

Brands are said to be successful when they continuously deliver on their promises made (Cambell, 2002). Generally, individuals associate a brand with an organization's name, product, services and logotype. When these branding ideas are incorporated in HR strategies it is entitled as 'Employer Branding' (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Various researchers have explained employer branding according to their nature of research and scope of work. Researcher such as Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) explained the term employer branding as "the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity" as well as "a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors". In similar lines extending the notion of reference to strategy and making it far more intense Sullivan (2004) [29] had expounded employer branding 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". Further employer branding was described as "a generalized recognition for being known among key stakeholders for providing a high-quality employment experience and distinctive organizational identity which employees value, engage with and feel confident & happy to promote to others" (Martin et al., 2011) [30]. Lloyd (2002) expounded employer branding as "an aggregate of a company's effort to acquaint to present and future prospective staffs that it is an adorable place to work for". Rosethorn's description from the article: "The Employer Brand: Keeping Faith with the Deal" (2009) states it as an emotional relationship between the employer and the employee by referring to employer brand as a deal. More specifically she states "An employer brand is in essence the two way deal between an organization and its people the reason they choose to join and the reason they choose and are permitted to stay. The art of employer branding is to articulate this deal in a way this is distinctive, compelling and relevant to the individual, and to ensure that it is delivered throughout the lifecycle of the employee within that organization".

5. BENEFITS AS STRATEGY-

To understand benefit as a strategy for building employer brand two theoretical prospective needs to be studied: Keller's (1993) [31] consumer brand equity model and Ambler and Barrow's (1996) employer brand equity model. Keller (1993) model states that brand awareness and image are the outcome of brand knowledge which influences a positive, or negative, customers response. Where brand awareness is explained as a consumer's ability to recall and recognize a particular product or service, brand image is explained as the benefits or personal value consumers are associated with the product or service (Keller, 1993). Brand benefits represent the economic benefit (price), functional benefit (attributes), and psychological benefit (symbolism of ownership) that motivate the customers to buy a product or to take a repurchase decision (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Keller, 1993).



In relation to the Keller's (1993) consumer-based brand equity theory, Ambler and Barrow (1996) comes out with employer brand equity theory as parallel model for HRM (table). Similar to consumer-brand equity, employer brand equity is also formed in the minds of the current and prospective employees by being exposed to various human resource practices (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). During work experience the value is exchanged between the employer and the employee (Moroko & Uncles, 2008). These values are referred to as benefit, which is provided by the employing company to its employees. These benefits include functional, economic and psychological benefits (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). According to Berthon et al. (2005) [32], functional benefits comprises of developmental and useful activities, economic benefits incorporates material or monetary benefits and lastly psychological benefits includes a feeling of belongingness, affection and purpose. All these three benefits clubbed together will help in motivating an employee to remain and work in the organization as well as will attract prospective candidates to apply in the organization. (benefits consume n employee).

The above mentioned three benefits forms a complete employment experience as formed by the opinions of current and prospective employees (Gardner, Erhardt, & Martin-Rios, 2011) [33]. The current employees make use of the firsthand employer knowledge to build the employer image, which they can subsequently share with potential employees (Priyadarshi, 2011) [34].

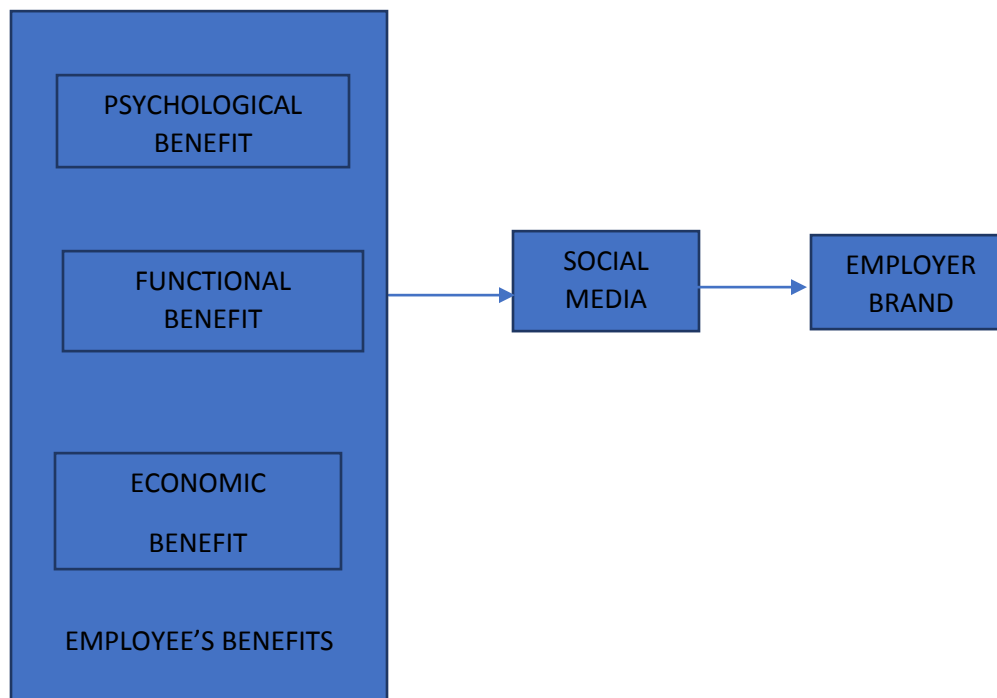
6. SOCIAL MEDIA AS INFLUENCER-

In the present day, scenario social media has become an important tool that helps in building an employer brand. Social media allows an employer to utilize the social networking sites to make aware the current and potential employees about its plans, offerings, benefits and also demonstrate how they provide the best working environment. The emergence of social media has opened several new opportunities for the employers to advertise their brand as well as share information about the firm via social networking sites (Borstorff et al., 2005) [35]. Social networking sites are considered as one of the best channels used by the firms to communicate themselves to the outside world.

Similar to the product brand, a job represents a bundle of psychological, economic and functional benefits (Ambler & Barrow, 1996) which is needed by both potential and current employees to satisfy their needs as well as to take a joining or stay decision. Making right decision regarding an employer is considered as a crucial task by every individual because it can affect their personal lives. Hence, getting right information about the employer is a vital task (Lamb et al., 2011) [36]. Information sources may include media both traditional and modern, other people (family and friends) and personal experiences (current and ex-employees) (Perterson & Merino, 2003) [37]. In this paper the author is mainly considering social networking sites as a medium for sharing information to the outside employment world about the benefits and offering provided by the employers to its employees to make the firm a 'great place to work'. These sites allow both the parties to share their views and opinions about each other (Dholakia et al., 2004)

[38]. Social networking sites are characterized by real-time interaction, less anonymity, short-reply time, authenticity and it also serves as an important public relation tool (Kent, 2010) [39].

7. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND PROPOSITION BUILDING-



(Fig1- Conceptual Model Showing relationship between Employee's Benefit Leading to Building an Employer Brand Via Social Media)

7.1. LINKING EMPLOYEE'S BENEFIT WITH EMPLOYER BRAND-

Digital transformation and growth in internet facilities has expected to reduce a large and vast gap in the demand and supply ratio of the skills needed in the employment market. Organizations are quitting the traditional method of hiring and are moving towards technology for attracting and retaining employees. Similar is the case for potential as well as present employees who are now considering benefits provided by the employer as an important factor to choose a firm to join via technology. Firms that offers great benefits to its employees are considered as one of the most deserving firms who have successful attraction and retention rate. Having strong EB is considered as a new age essential to attract and retain top talents. A powerful employer brand is considered as an important part of any business to have a strong recruitment and retention strategy. As per a research 70% of the active potential candidates are more likely to join a firm that have an active and engaging employer brand. In case of existing employees, they are considered as the first customer of a firm, so they are considered as the first to experience the benefits offered.



Successful management and delivery of benefits would lead to a high preference for the firm by the employees (potential and current) and leverage employment-related beliefs about the organization as a good place to work, which will help to build a strong employer brand to achieve a competitive advantage in the employment market. Having a good work-life balance, providing opportunity for growth, providing compensation matching their work and experience and providing training and development make up for a good benefit offered in the firm.

Ambler and Barrow (1996) suggested a combination of functional, economic and physiological benefits contributes to employee's benefit offered by the employer. This combination constitutes a complete employment experience to satisfy the needs of the potential and existing employees (Gardner, Erhardt & Martin-Rios, 2011). The existing employee uses these benefits as information to create employer image which they gradually share with prospective candidates as well as existing candidates by the help of the social networking sites which helps them in taking an joining and continuing decision (Priyadarshi, 2011). Thus, it can be proposed that:

Proposition 1: Employees' perception of benefit provided by the employer has a positive influence on building a strong employer brand.

7.2. LINKING EMPLOYEE'S BENEFIT WITH SOCIAL MEDIA-

Candidates develop an organization's image through the information that they perceive about the organization (Highhouse et al., 2009) [40]. The exposure and lucidity of an organization within the market have increased largely with development of social media, it empowers people to communicate and influence specific features of the reality around them (Sigala&Marinidis, 2009) [41]. Since, we know that an employer brand and employer image is formed by some certain specific cues (Highhouse et al., 2009), social media have resulted in increase in potential influences on the employer brand. Similar to the marketing concept, which includes the firms' products and services, currently the internet has engendered social media committed to rating the employer's role, describing its features, advertising the brand of the firm. These sites help to present the views, opinions, offerings of the firm by the employees and other individuals as well as by the employer itself. Due to its content, social media in the present situation is considered as a prime and vital cue for building an employer brand, when everyone is living in a virtual world (Cable & Yu, 2006) [42].

Every firm now a days are using strong strategy (i.e benefits offered) to provide employees a good job experience. These benefits were then studied by Tanvar and Prasad (2017) [43] and Amble and Barrow (1996) categorized it into three benefits functional, psychological and economic benefit. The result showed that these three benefits functional, psychological and economic benefits are considered vital by every individual to make a joining or staying decision. As said by Branham (2001) that these benefits influence an individual to spread information about the firm in the employment market to attract and retain talent. Thus, from the above statement the proposition can be formed as:



Proposition 2: Benefits provided to the employees have a positive effect on spreading information about the firm via social media.

7.3. SOCIAL MEDIA AS INFLUENCER FOR BUILDING AN EMPLOYER BRAND-

From the development of computers in 1980s to development of internet in 1990s, human connectivity with each other has moved beyond the physical boundaries to cyberspace. The capability to communicate globally is considered to be a prime tool for the firms who wants to expand themselves and want to stand out in the competition (Martin & Hetrick, 2009) [44]. This interconnected world of web has given the individuals as well as the firms with the power to express their view to each other without even physically seeing each other (Breazeale, 2009). Social media consists of a bundle of information that every individual wants to know for taking any decision. Virtual communities present in social media brings individuals together by sharing common interest and goals (Wagner, 1995) [45]. Shared vision constitutes the collective goals of the firm members as well the firm itself which can be achieved by collaborating together (Wagner, 1995). Social media provides independency in space and time as well as provides opportunity for open communication which gives a chance to every firm to advertise itself and also being advertise by others. Thus, from the above statement the proposition can be formed as:

Proposition 3: Social media works as an influencer between employee's benefit and employer brand to build a strong employer brand.

8. CONCLUSION-

This paper presented a conceptual framework that explains the effect of employee's benefit in the employment market. The paper explains the role of employee's benefit provided by the employer in employee attraction and retention. By integrating the HRM and marketing literatures, the framework apprehend the interactive nature of the employment relationship between employees (potential and existing) and employers beginning in the recruitment phase and continuing throughout the employment contract.

The framework has theoretical and practical value. The framework provides a theoretical rationale for a set of propositions that can be examined empirically in future research. . The framework is built on established concepts (for example Keller's CBBE model and Ambler and Barrow's EBBE) and also incorporates additional concepts (such as employee's benefit), that will help advance our understanding of key variables in employer branding, an important tool in the war for talent. In the present Covid-19 situation social media is playing a prime role in every individual's life and has taken a trajectory growth from past few months. In relation to the statement this paper has tried incorporating social media as a tool that is used to building a strong employer brand to achieve a competitive advantage.



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