

Review

Employer Brand Theory Development Review: Influencing Scholars and Theories

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CITATION

Hong W, Yu J, Cao C, et al. (2026). Employer brand theory development review-influencing scholars and theories. *Human Resources Management and Services*. 8(1): 5798. <https://doi.org/10.18282/hrms5798>

ARTICLE INFO

Received: 13 April 2026

Accepted: 6 May 2026

Available online: 18 May 2026

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Abstract: Previous literature on employer branding has examined definitions, cross-disciplinary perspectives, target groups, conceptual models, and related organizational outcomes. However, relatively limited attention has been given to how the theoretical development of employer branding has been shaped by influential scholars and major research streams. Addressing this gap, this conceptual paper adopts an integrative review approach to synthesize employer branding research, with particular attention to key authors and their theoretical contributions. The review suggests that employer branding research has drawn substantially on marketing and branding theories, including brand equity theory, signaling theory, and symbolic-instrumental perspectives, while also being increasingly connected with human resource management and organizational behavior constructs such as employer attractiveness, employer value proposition, person-organization fit, and talent management. The analysis further indicates that influential scholars have contributed to the development of employer brand knowledge, employer image, recruitment communication, employer attractiveness, and employer brand equity. This study organizes the theoretical development into streams to present an outlook of the employer branding research advancement. Further this review proposes an integrated conceptual framework for future academic inquiry. Although the review is subject to limitations related to the selection and synthesis of influential scholars' publications, it provides a useful conceptual map for understanding the evolution of employer branding scholarship and identifying directions for future theoretical and empirical research.

Keywords: Employer Brand Theories, Influential Scholars, Marketing Theory, Theoretical Development, Brand Equity

1. Introduction

Employer brand generally refers to the set of associations, perceptions, and value propositions attached to an organization as an employer, as perceived by current and potential employees (Backhaus, 2016; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Cable & Judge, 1996). As such, employer brand influences individuals' decisions to join, remain with, and recommend an organization, while also shaping employer attractiveness, employee commitment, and organizational reputation. It is important for organizations to develop and maintain a strong employer brand as it can help attract and retain high-performing employees, increase organizational commitment, and enhance the company's overall reputation. In a broader field, employer brand has been considered as a key aspect of employer attractiveness (EA) construct (Siem et al., 2025) while EA has been defined as "the envisioned benefits that a potential applicant sees in

working for a specific organization in the future” (Berthon et al., 2005). In this study, employer brand refers to the perceived value and reputation of an organization as an employer, whereas employer branding refers to the strategic process through which such perceptions are developed, communicated, and managed. However, in order to comprehensively study the term, we do not differentiate them particularly in search and research process.

The employer brand(ing) literature has continued to expand through both conceptual and review-based contributions. For instance, Theurer et al. (2018) examined equity-based literature and proposed the employer brand value chain model, which provides a comprehensive framework for understanding employer branding by identifying both overexamined areas and theoretical gaps in the field. After 2020s, literature review papers on employer branding continually increase. Reis et al. (2021) reported substantial growth in employer brand research between 2010 and 2020 and emphasized its importance as a tool for talent management. Likewise, Dassler et al. (2022) systematically reviewed 48 articles and organized the findings into an input–mediator–output model, concluding that greater attention should be given to internal employer branding, particularly in relation to current employees.

Previous review studies have identified a wide range of research gaps in employer brand scholarship. These include inconsistencies in definitions (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Theurer et al., 2018), the relationship between organizational behavior theory and employer branding (Edwards, 2010), the distinction between employer brand and employer branding (Ronda et al., 2018; Theurer et al., 2018), cross-disciplinary research opportunities (Theurer et al., 2018), and the need to address different target groups (Theurer et al., 2018; Vieira et al., 2024). Other gaps concern the study of antecedents, moderators, mediators, and outcomes in employer branding (Dassler et al., 2022; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016), as well as its connections with corporate social responsibility (Carlini et al., 2019), internal branding, talent retention, and talent management (Ahmed et al., 2022; Reis et al., 2021), internal communication (Santos et al., 2023), international and cross-cultural contexts (Graham & Cascio, 2018; Spoljaric & Dosen, 2023), bibliometric development (Tran et al., 2024), sector-specific applications such as hospitality (Kilson, 2025), HR-related constructs (Choudhary & Joshi, 2025), and critical perspectives on the employer brand concept itself (Behrends et al., 2020).

Although these reviews have advanced understanding of employer branding, most have focused on definitions, antecedents, outcomes, bibliometric patterns, or specific subthemes. Less attention has been given to the way influential scholars and their theoretical contributions have collectively shaped the intellectual stream development of employer branding research.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: Who are the influential scholars in employer branding research?

RQ2: What are their key contributions to the development of the field?

RQ3: What research streams can be traced from these influential scholars?

RQ4: What conceptual framework can guide future employer branding studies?

To address these questions and the theoretical gaps identified in prior studies, this study reviews the theoretical development of employer branding research and, within that literature, identifies recurrent influential scholars and their major conceptual contributions. By synthesizing and organizing the major streams of employer brand research, this study aims to help emerging scholars gain a clearer and more systematic understanding of the existing literature. On this basis, it also proposes a conceptual

framework and outlines several directions for future employer branding research.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, materials and methods are used to identify and select key scholars. Second, contributions from selected authors have been categorized into different research streams and organized in line with time span. Third, the findings are discussed, and a comprehensive conceptual framework of employer branding is proposed. Finally, the paper concludes with the main findings and implications and limitations.

2. Materials and methods

Literature review has played a critical role in understanding and synthesizing fragmented knowledge across fields and it supported cumulative theory development. According to Paul and Criado (2020), examining existing constructs, theoretical foundations, and methodological approaches, a rigorous review can help researchers to identify research gaps and clarify the intellectual structure of a field. In line with this purpose, the present study adopts a structured, scholar-centered review approach to examine the development of employer branding research.

In this work, we followed the identification process which attempts to target influential scholars using Web of Science database. Several criteria were applied in the search process including English-written articles, published in peer-reviewed academic journals, and addressed employer branding as a primary research focus. Consistent with established methodological guidance (Bryman, 2016), this review process aims to identify key streams of employer branding studies. It should be noted that this review paper is not intended to provide an exhaustive systematic review of all employer branding publications. Instead, it adopts a scholar-centered integrative review approach to trace how influential authors and author teams have shaped the theoretical development of the field.

As of April 2026, a keyword-based search was conducted in Web of Science Core Collection. The search query included terms such as: TS=(“employer brand*” OR “employer branding” OR “employee value proposition” OR “employer attractiveness” OR “employer image” OR “employer identity” OR “organizational attractiveness” OR “workplace reputation” OR “recruitment image” OR “employer reputation”). 211 review papers were identified from SCI-Expanded, SSCI, and A&HCI database. The review papers were then screened by title and abstract while 17 review papers were targeted because they focused on employer branding studies (Ahmed et al., 2022; Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Behrends et al., 2020; Carlini et al., 2019; Choudhary & Joshi, 2025; Dassler et al., 2022; Edwards, 2010; Graham & Cascio, 2018; Kilson, 2025; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Reis et al., 2021; Ronda et al., 2018; Santos et al., 2023; Spoljaric & Dosen, 2023; Theurer et al., 2018; Tran et al., 2024; Vieira et al., 2024). Among these 17 review papers, Tran et al. (2024) was particularly useful because it provides a recent bibliometric overview of employer branding research where key researchers are listed.

Using these 17 review papers, combined with Tran et al. (2024) citation list, this study used citation-based benchmarking and backward and forward snowballing. Backward snowballing was conducted by examining the reference lists of foundational studies, while forward snowballing involved tracing later publications that cited these works. This process helped identify both foundational contributors and scholars whose influence has remained visible in subsequent research (**Figure 1** illustrates the search process).

Researchers and their teams were assessed according to three broad

considerations: citation occurrence within the employer branding literature, continuity of contribution over time, and theoretical relevance to core employer branding themes, including employer value proposition, organizational attractiveness, recruitment signaling, and talent management. Because prior review studies were used as one input in identifying influential contributors, the selection process may still reflect visibility patterns already established in the literature. Although this risk was reduced by considering foundational conceptual works and more recent bibliometric evidence, some less-cited but potentially important contributors may remain underrepresented.

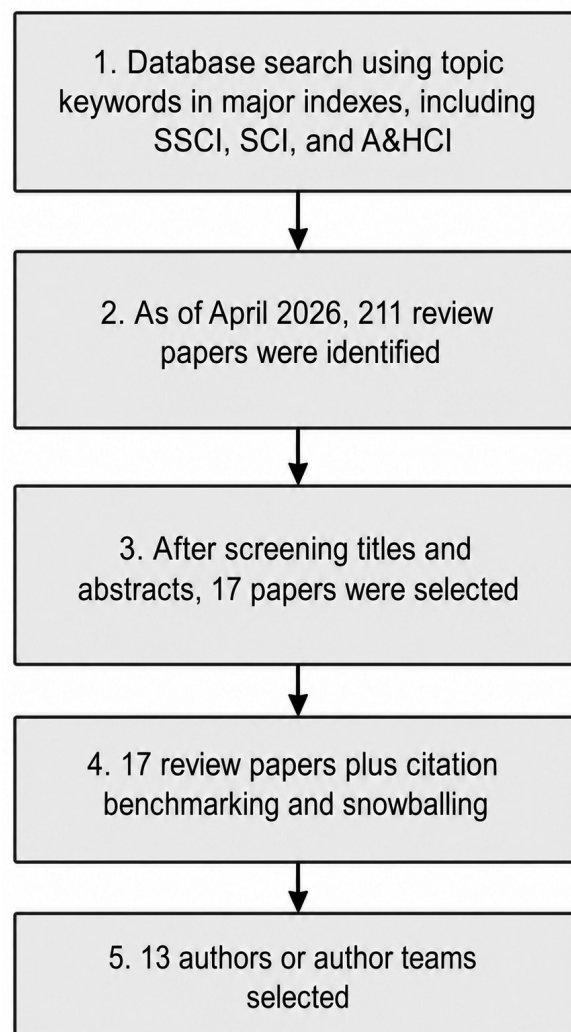


Figure 1. Systematic literature review screening process

Through this process, 13 authors (teams) were finally selected for detailed analysis of their contributions to employer branding research. Based on recurrence across review studies, conceptual relevance to core employer branding themes, and continued visibility in later scholarship, **Table 1** summarizes these core scholars and their indicative contributions to the theoretical development of employer branding research and basis for selection inclusion. It is noting that researchers and their teams are not separately working on employer brand studies and frequently, they appear in researcher teams collaboratively.

Table 1. Targeted scholars in employer brand studies

	Researchers (team)	Indicative contribution to employer branding research	Basis for inclusion
1	Ambler, T. and Barrow, S.	Introduced the concept of the employer brand and provided the foundational definitional starting point for later research	Foundational conceptual contribution; recurrent reference across the literature
2	Backhaus, K. and Tikoo, S.	Developed a foundational conceptual framework linking employer branding with employer attraction and employee productivity	Foundational framework; strong conceptual relevance; recurrent in review studies
3	Cable, D.M. and Turban, D.B.	Advanced employer knowledge, employer image, and recruitment equity perspectives	Foundational contribution to employer knowledge and signaling-related research
4	Collins, C.J.	Contributed to recruitment, employer image, and applicant attraction research	Sustained contribution to recruitment-related employer branding themes
5	Theurer, C.P.	Proposed the employer brand value chain and synthesized brand equity-based employer branding literature	Integrative review contribution; strong relevance to theoretical development
6	Cable, D.M.	Contributed to person–organization fit, organizational attractiveness, and job choice research	Foundational contribution to organizational attractiveness and fit-related themes
7	Lievens, F.	Contributed extensively to employer image, symbolic and instrumental attributes, and recruitment research	Sustained contribution to a core theoretical stream; recurrent across reviews
8	Van Hove, G.	Advanced research on organizational attractiveness, recruitment communication, and employer image differentiation	Continued contribution to employer image and recruitment communication research
9	Slaughter, J.E.	Clarified employer image and related constructs in recruitment and branding research	Strong conceptual relevance to employer image research
10	Berthon, P. and Ewing, M.T.	Developed early work on employer attractiveness dimensions and employer brand equity measurement	Foundational measurement-related contribution; enduring relevance
11	Ronda, L.	Introduced the means–end perspective into employer attractiveness and employer branding research	Conceptual contribution to value formation and employer attractiveness
12	Rampl, L.V.	Examined employer of choice and emotional mechanisms in employer brand decisions	Distinct contribution to emotional and strategic branding perspectives
13	Yu, K.Y.T.	Contributed to employer image, media credibility, job search behavior, and person–organization fit research	Continued relevance in more recent employer branding and recruitment discussions

3. Results and discussion

Based on **Table 1**, we first tracked key authors (author teams) and then we analyzed their' key publications and attempted to capture key theoretical contributions in employer brand studies. In Section 3, we synthesize work from previous literature and their employer branding studies contribution. We organize their contributions

across different research streams including conceptual foundation, employer knowledge and recruitment signaling, employer attractiveness and P-O fit, employer branding measurement, and integrated development in employer branding studies. It is noting that because researchers often work collaboratively, the discussion part does not assign scholars' intellectual separately.

3.1. Conceptual foundations of employer branding

We identify the first major stream concerns with employer branding is conceptual foundation. Reviewing previous literature works, it is found that early research established employer branding as a concept connecting marketing, human resource management, organizational identity, and employee relations. According to research from Ambler and Barrow, employer branding was previously associated with functional, economic and psychological benefits that provided by employers. They transfer branding logic from consumer markets to employment relationships, suggesting that organizations could be understood not only as product or corporate brands but also as employers with distinct value propositions (Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

Backhaus and Tikoo, drawing from marketing, organizational identity, psychological contract theory, brand loyalty, and the resource-based view, conceptualized employer branding as a strategic process with both external and internal outcomes. They further constructed employer branding into a structured theoretical framework. From external audiences' perspective, employer branding influences employer brand associations, employer image, and employer attraction. Comparatively, it shapes organizational identity, organizational culture, employer brand loyalty, and employee productivity from internal audiences' viewpoint. This distinction between external and internal employer branding remains one of the most important conceptual contributions in the field because it shows that employer branding is not limited to recruitment but also concerns employee retention, engagement, and organizational performance for existing employees (Backhaus, 2016; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Theurer et al., 2018).

Later research shifts the static employer branding foundation to a dynamic and strategic value creation process. For instance, Theurer et al. (2018) proposed an employer brand value chain model grounded in brand equity theory, synthesizing prior employer branding research into a process that links employer branding investments, employer knowledge, applicant and employee mindsets, and organizational outcomes. This contribution helped shift the field from definitional and conceptual debates toward a broader strategic perspective. Taken together, Ambler and Barrow, Backhaus and Tikoo, and Theurer et al. demonstrate the movement of employer branding research from an initial marketing-inspired idea to a multi-level framework connecting attraction, identity, loyalty, and value creation (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Theurer et al., 2018).

3.2. Employer knowledge, employer image, and recruitment signaling

Another important line of employer branding research examines how job seekers come to know, interpret, and evaluate potential employers. Cable and Turban's recruitment equity model is particularly relevant here because it explains employer knowledge through three related dimensions: employer familiarity, employer reputation, and employer image. Employer familiarity refers to whether job seekers are aware of an organization; employer reputation concerns general beliefs about the organization's standing; and employer image refers to more specific beliefs about

organizational attributes. By distinguishing these dimensions, Cable and Turban (2001) provided a useful basis for understanding employer branding as a process through which job seekers collect, interpret, and organize information about potential employers.

This stream of research is closely related to signaling theory. In recruitment contexts, job seekers often have incomplete information about organizations and employment conditions. As a result, they rely on different signals, including recruitment messages, corporate advertising, word of mouth, media coverage, organizational reputation, and other employer-related information. These signals influence employer image even before applicants have direct contact with the organization. From this view, employer branding is not simply a matter of what organizations communicate, but also how job seekers interpret and compare different information sources under uncertainty (Cable & Turban, 2001; Collins & Kanar, 2013; Lievens et al., 2005).

Collins and colleagues extended this discussion by examining the role of early recruitment practices in shaping applicant attitudes and application intentions. Their studies suggest that recruitment advertising, sponsorship, publicity, word of mouth, and corporate advertising can affect applicant attraction before direct interaction with recruiters occurs. General publicity and sponsorship may help create employer awareness and favorable attitudes, while more detailed recruitment messages allow applicants to evaluate job and organizational characteristics more carefully. This work helped connect employer branding research with recruitment communication and applicant pool development (Collins & Han, 2004; Collins & Kanar, 2013; Collins & Martinez-Moreno, 2021; Collins & Stevens, 2002).

Collins and Kanar (2013) also linked employer brand equity to recruitment decision-making. Their framework indicates that job seekers develop employer brand awareness and employer brand associations through both recruitment and non-recruitment sources. This point is important because perceptions of employers may be shaped not only by formal recruitment activities but also by corporate visibility, product experience, public reputation, media reports, and previous exposure to the organization. Employer branding, therefore, should be understood as part of a broader communication environment rather than as a recruitment campaign alone.

Yu's work further contributes to this area by examining organizational image, media richness, media credibility, electronic word of mouth, and person–organization fit. Cable and Yu (2006), for example, showed that job seekers' image beliefs are influenced by the relationship between organizations' constructed images and job seekers' construed images. More recent work on electronic word of mouth suggests that negative information can receive stronger attention than positive information when job seekers assess employer credibility and reputation (Cable & Yu, 2006; Yu, 2014; 2016; Yu, Dineen, et al., 2022; Yu, Goh, & Kawasaki, 2022).

Van Hoya's research adds another important dimension by highlighting word of mouth and recruitment communication. Her studies indicate that word of mouth may be especially influential because job seekers often regard it as more credible than organization-controlled recruitment messages. This insight is important because it shows that organizations do not fully control their employer image. Employer brand perceptions are formed through a combination of formal communication, informal social influence, media exposure, and applicant interpretation (Lievens et al., 2007; Lievens et al., 2005; Van Hoya et al., 2014; Van Hoya et al., 2022).

Taken together, these scholarly papers have moved study focus from managerial

communication perspective to a more audience-centered understandings of employer brand; therefore this research stream is important as a different viewpoint of employer branding studies.

3.3. Employer attractiveness, symbolic meaning, and person–organization fit.

A third area of employer branding research concerns the question of why particular organizations are perceived as attractive places to work. Compared with the previous stream, which explains how employer-related information is communicated and interpreted, this line of work is more concerned with evaluation. It asks how job seekers and employees decide whether an organization is desirable, compatible with their values, and meaningful for their future careers. Cable's research on person–organization fit is especially relevant here. His studies suggest that job seekers do not assess employers only through visible job attributes, such as pay, benefits, or promotion opportunities. They also consider whether an organization's culture, values, and identity are compatible with their own preferences and self-concepts. This helped connect employer branding research with broader organizational behavior theories of fit, attraction, and job choice (Aiman-Smith et al., 2001; Cable & Graham, 2000; Cable & Judge, 1996; Cable & Judge, 1997; Cable & Turban, 2001; Cable & Yu, 2006)

One limitation of early employer attractiveness research is that it tended to emphasize relatively visible employment features, such as salary, benefits, career opportunities, and job security. Lievens and colleagues added an important corrective by showing that these instrumental attributes explain only part of why an employer becomes attractive. Their instrumental–symbolic framework draws attention to the more intangible side of employer image, including associations such as prestige, sincerity, innovativeness, and excitement. From this perspective, job seekers are not simply comparing employment packages; they are also considering what association with a particular employer may signal about themselves. This contribution is especially relevant to employer branding because it connects employer attractiveness with identity, meaning, and symbolic value, rather than treating it only as a response to functional job characteristics (Highhouse et al., 2003; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Lievens et al., 2007; Lievens et al., 2005).

A related issue concerns conceptual clarity. Employer branding studies often use terms such as employer image, organizational image, employer reputation, and employer attractiveness in ways that partially overlap. Slaughter's work is useful in this context because it helped clarify the structure and measurement of employer image. This clarification matters because unclear construct boundaries can make it difficult to compare findings across studies or accumulate knowledge systematically. Later, Lievens and Slaughter developed a broader heuristic model that connected antecedents, employer image, moderators, and outcomes. Their work therefore provides a more organized basis for understanding how employer image functions within recruitment and branding research (Kausel & Slaughter, 2011; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Slaughter et al., 2014; Slaughter et al., 2004).

Van Hove's studies further demonstrate the usefulness of the instrumental–symbolic distinction in different recruitment and educational contexts. Her research indicates that symbolic image attributes often add explanatory value beyond instrumental attributes. This suggests that job seekers' evaluations of employers are not purely economic or rational calculations. They may also be shaped by whether an employer appears to represent values, identities, and meanings with which they want

to be associated. Her later work on points of relevance and points of difference also links employer attractiveness to marketing ideas of positioning and differentiation. In this view, employers need not only meet common expectations in the labor market but also develop distinctive associations that separate them from comparable organizations (Van Hoyer et al., 2014; Van Hoyer et al., 2022).

Ronda's means-end chain approach offers another way to understand the value behind employer attractiveness. Rather than assuming that employer attributes directly produce attractiveness, this approach examines how people connect attributes with benefits and, ultimately, with personal values. For example, career development opportunities may be meaningful not only because they offer training or promotion, but also because they support security, self-fulfillment, professional identity, or personal growth. This perspective is useful because it shifts attention from isolated employer attributes to the deeper value structures through which job seekers interpret employment opportunities (Petry et al., 2020; Petry et al., 2021; Ronda et al., 2018; Ronda et al., 2020).

Rampl's research adds a more explicitly emotional dimension to this discussion. Her work on employer-of-choice decisions suggests that an attractive employer is not necessarily the same as a first-choice employer. To become a preferred employer, an organization may need to generate stronger emotional associations than its competitors. Her studies highlight the role of affect, emotional attachment, and reward-related responses in employer brand decision-making. This is important for employer branding research because it shows that employer evaluation involves not only cognitive judgments about job and organizational attributes, but also emotional and experiential responses to the employer brand (Rampl et al., 2011; Rampl, 2014; Rampl et al., 2016).

Overall, this body of research shows that employer attractiveness has become a more psychologically complex construct. Earlier studies emphasized job characteristics, organizational attributes, and fit, while later work placed greater emphasis on symbolic meanings, emotional associations, and personal values. The contributions of Cable, Lievens, Slaughter, Van Hoyer, Ronda, and Rampl contend that employer evaluation involves both rational assessment and deeper psychological interpretation. For the purpose of this review, this stream is important because it shows that employer branding cannot be understood only as recruitment communication. It also concerns how individuals connect employers with identity, values, emotional attachment, and imagined career futures (Cable & Judge, 1996; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens et al., 2007; Rampl et al., 2016; Ronda et al., 2018).

3.4. Employer brand equity, measurement, and value creation.

Fourth research stream concerns how employer branding can be measured and how its value can be assessed. As the field developed, scholars increasingly moved beyond defining employer branding and began to ask how employer attractiveness, employer brand equity, and employer-related outcomes could be captured empirically. Berthon and Ewing's work is central to this development. Their employer attractiveness scale, commonly known as the EmpAt scale, identifies five value dimensions: economic value, social value, interest value, development value, and application value. By offering a measurable structure for employer attractiveness, this scale helped shift employer branding research from mainly conceptual discussion toward more systematic empirical investigation (Berthon et al., 2005).

At the same time, the EmpAt scale has not been without limitations. Later

studies have noted that the scale may not always clearly separate employer attributes from employer benefits. Its original development based on student samples also raises questions about whether the same dimensions apply equally to experienced employees, different occupational groups, or diverse labor-market contexts. These limitations do not reduce the importance of Berthon and Ewing's contribution, but they do suggest that employer attractiveness measurement requires continued refinement. Their work remains influential because it gave researchers a practical instrument for examining employer brand value and encouraged further empirical testing of employer attractiveness across different settings (Benraïss-Noailles & Viot, 2021; Berthon et al., 2005; Ronda et al., 2018).

Collins and Kanar brought employer brand equity more directly into recruitment research. In their framework, employer brand equity is reflected in employer brand awareness and employer brand associations, both of which shape how job seekers process information about organizations. This approach is useful because it connects recruitment outcomes with brand equity theory and explains why employer branding may influence applicants even before they interact directly with recruiters. It also implies that employer-related perceptions are built through accumulated exposure to organizational information, rather than through isolated recruitment messages alone (Collins & Kanar, 2013).

Theurer et al.'s employer brand value chain further broadened this discussion by linking employer branding activities to a wider set of outcomes. Their model encourages researchers to examine employer branding not only through applicant attraction or employee attitudes, but also through recruitment effectiveness, retention, employee behavior, reputation effects, and organizational performance. This represents an important development in the literature because it places employer branding within a broader value-creation process. In doing so, it asks whether employer branding produces outcomes that are meaningful not only for individuals, but also for organizations (Theurer et al., 2018).

Ronda's means–end approach also has implications for measurement and value creation. By distinguishing among employer attributes, benefits, and higher-level personal values, this approach helps explain how individuals translate employer offerings into perceived value. This distinction is useful for future measurement work because employer branding studies sometimes treat attributes, benefits, and values as if they were the same. A more precise separation among these levels may help researchers develop instruments that better capture how job seekers and employees understand employer value propositions (Ronda et al., 2018).

Put it together, this stream shows that employer branding research has become increasingly concerned with measurement, outcomes, and value creation. However, important challenges remain. Many existing measures continue to focus on applicants, students, or early-career job seekers, while less is known about experienced employees, internal employer branding, and cross-cultural validity. In addition, relatively few studies connect individual-level employer brand perceptions with long-term organizational outcomes. Future research therefore needs stronger measurement designs that can link employer image, attractiveness, and brand equity with retention, performance, and organizational value over time (Benraïss-Noailles & Viot, 2021; Berthon et al., 2005; Collins & Kanar, 2013; Theurer et al., 2018).

3.5. Integrated synthesis of employer branding research.

The value of organizing the literature into these four streams is that it shows employer branding as a cumulative theoretical field rather than a collection of separate

studies. Each stream builds on the previous one: conceptual foundations define the field, signaling and image research explain perception formation, attractiveness and fit research explain evaluation, and brand equity research connects these perceptions to organizational value.

When the four research streams are considered together, employer branding can be seen as a field that has gradually moved beyond its original marketing roots. The concept was first developed by transferring branding logic into the employment context, but later research has connected it with human resource management, organizational behavior, recruitment, and strategic management. As a result, employer branding is no longer treated only as a communication activity aimed at attracting applicants. It is increasingly understood as a wider process through which organizations develop, communicate, and manage their identity and value as employers among both external and internal audience (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Berthon et al., 2005; Cable & Turban, 2001; Theurer et al., 2018).

A clear pattern in this development is the movement from conceptual definition to theoretical modeling. Ambler and Barrow's early work provided the field with its starting point by introducing the employer brand as a way to understand the employment relationship through branding principles. Backhaus and Tikoo then gave the concept a more systematic structure by linking employer branding with employer attraction, employer brand loyalty, organizational identity, and employee productivity. Theurer et al. later extended this logic by presenting employer branding as part of a value-chain process. This progression is important because it shows that the field has moved from asking what employer branding means to examining how it operates and what kinds of outcomes it may generate (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Theurer et al., 2018).

Another important development concerns the formation of employer image. Research by Cable and Turban, Collins and Kanar, Yu, and Van Hoya indicates that employer image does not arise only from formal recruitment messages. Job seekers form impressions through a wider set of sources, including recruitment advertising, corporate reputation, word of mouth, media credibility, product awareness, and electronic word of mouth. This finding complicates a purely managerial view of employer branding. Organizations may design recruitment campaigns and communicate employer value propositions, but they cannot fully control how employer information circulates or how it is interpreted by potential applicants. Employer image is therefore partly constructed by organizations and partly co-produced by audiences, media, social networks, and prior experiences with the organization (Cable & Turban, 2001; Cable & Yu, 2006; Collins & Han, 2004; Collins & Kanar, 2013; Collins & Stevens, 2002; Van Hoya et al., 2022; Yu, Dineen, et al., 2022; Yu, Goh, & Kawasaki, 2022).

A further shift is visible in the way employer attractiveness has been explained. Early discussions of attractiveness often emphasized functional job and organizational attributes, but later studies paid greater attention to symbolic meanings, emotional responses, and personal values. Lievens' instrumental-symbolic framework shows that intangible image attributes may influence employer attractiveness alongside tangible employment benefits. Cable's work on person-organization fit highlights the role of value congruence. Ronda's means-end perspective explains how employer attributes may be connected to deeper personal values, while Rampl's work on employer-of-choice decisions emphasizes emotional attachment and affective

responses. These studies make clear that people do not evaluate employers only as providers of pay, benefits, or career opportunities. They also ask whether an employer fits who they are, what they value, and how they imagine their future professional identity (Cable & Judge, 1996; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens et al., 2007; Rampl et al., 2016; Ronda et al., 2018).

The literature has also become more attentive to measurement and value creation. Berthon and Ewing's EmpAt scale provided an early empirical basis for measuring employer attractiveness, while Collins and Kanar connected employer brand equity with recruitment outcomes. Theurer et al. further extended this discussion by linking employer branding activities to broader organizational outcomes, including recruitment, retention, employee behavior, reputation effects, and organizational performance. This development is valuable because it pushes employer branding research beyond individual perceptions and encourages researchers to examine whether employer branding creates measurable value for organizations. At the same time, it also exposes a continuing weakness in the literature: many studies still rely on applicant or student samples and short-term perceptual measures, while fewer studies examine experienced employees, internal employer branding, cross-cultural validity, or long-term organizational outcomes (Benraïss-Noailles & Viot, 2021; Berthon et al., 2005; Collins & Kanar, 2013; Theurer et al., 2018).

Several gaps remain visible across these streams. First, employer branding research still gives more attention to external applicants than to current employees. Although internal employer branding is widely acknowledged, empirical research on employees' lived experiences, internal brand authenticity, and employee-generated word of mouth remains comparatively limited. Second, many studies continue to rely on student samples or early-career job seekers, which may not fully reflect how experienced professionals evaluate employers. Third, employer branding research remains relatively concentrated in Western contexts, even though cultural and institutional differences may affect how people interpret employer attractiveness, reputation, and value propositions. Fourth, digital employer branding requires further development, especially in relation to online reviews, social media, electronic word of mouth, and algorithmic recruitment platforms. These developments have made employer image more transparent, more dynamic, and less controllable by organizations than earlier models may have assumed (Benraïss-Noailles & Viot, 2021; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Theurer et al., 2018; Van Hoyer et al., 2022; Yu, Dineen, et al., 2022).

Overall, the reviewed literature suggests that employer branding has become a more complex and interdisciplinary field. Its development has moved from concept formation to image formation, from functional attributes to symbolic and emotional value, and from attraction-focused research to broader questions of equity, measurement, and organizational value. For this review, the most important implication is that employer branding should not be understood as a single recruitment technique or communication strategy. It is better understood as a multi-level process through which organizations and stakeholders jointly shape the meaning, credibility, and value of the organization as an employer.

3.6. Theoretical development of employer brand with timeline

The selected scholars collectively show that employer branding research has evolved through four interconnected streams: conceptual foundation, employer image formation, employer attractiveness, and employer brand equity. These streams are not independent; rather, they form a cumulative theoretical structure. Employer

branding activities generate signals, signals shape employer knowledge and image, employer image influences attractiveness and fit perceptions, and these perceptions may ultimately contribute to recruitment, retention, and organizational value (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Cable & Turban, 2001; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Theurer et al., 2018).

Evolution from foundational conceptual work to recent integrative and digital-oriented advancements

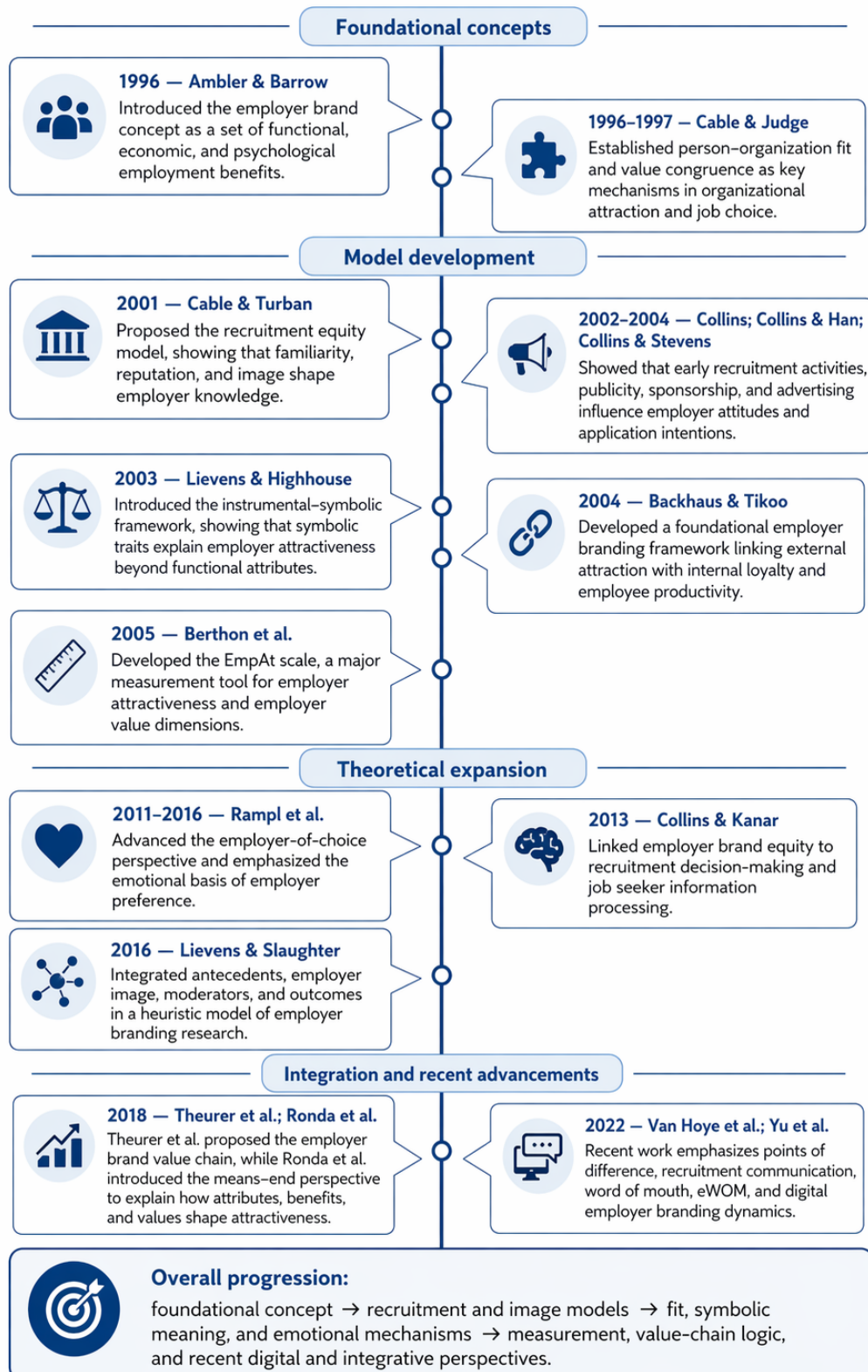


Figure 2. Theoretical development timeline of employer branding research

Figure 2 provides a chronological overview of how employer branding research has developed from its early conceptual foundations to more recent integrative and digitally oriented direction. The starting point is Ambler and Barrow's (1996) introduction of the employer brand concept, which framed employment as a package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits. Around the same period, research on person–organization fit and value congruence, particularly the work of Cable and Judge, helped explain why individuals are attracted to organizations that appear compatible with their values and preferences.

In the early 2000s, employer branding research became more model-oriented. Cable and Turban's recruitment equity model explained employer knowledge through familiarity, reputation, and image, while Collins and colleagues examined how early recruitment activities, publicity, sponsorship, and advertising shape applicant attitudes and application intentions. Backhaus and Tikoo further advanced the field by proposing a framework that connected external employer attraction with internal outcomes such as employer brand loyalty and employee productivity. Berthon et al.'s EmpAt scale also contributed to this period by offering a measurement basis for employer attractiveness.

Later developments broadened the field by introducing symbolic, emotional, and value-based explanations of employer attractiveness. The instrumental–symbolic framework, employer-of-choice research, and heuristic models of employer image helped show that employer attractiveness involves more than functional job characteristics. More recent studies, including Theurer et al.'s employer brand value chain, Ronda et al.'s means–end perspective, and the work of Van Hoya and Yu, have shifted attention toward value creation, recruitment communication, word of mouth, electronic word of mouth, and digital employer branding. Overall, **Figure 2** summarizes the discussion in Sections 3.1 to 3.5 and illustrates how employer branding research has progressed from concept formation to recruitment and image models, and then toward fit, symbolism, emotional mechanisms, measurement, value-chain logic, and integrative perspectives.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1. Summary of development of employer brand theories

Research on employer branding has expanded considerably and continues to attract increasing attention from scholars in organizational behavior, marketing, and management. It has gradually developed into an established field of inquiry. A review of prior scholars and their contributions indicates that the main mechanisms used to examine employer branding are largely derived from marketing and branding theories and subsequently applied to human resource management contexts. Frequently adopted perspectives include brand equity Berthon et al. (2005), signaling theory by Collins and Kanar (2013), social identity theory by Cable and Graham (2000), means-end theory by (Ronda et al., 2018), reasoned action by Highhouse et al. (2003), points-of-relevance and points-of-difference by Van Hoya et al. (2022) and value chain theory by Theurer et al. (2018). The application of these marketing and branding theories in human resource management is consistent with Ambler and Barrow (1996) argument that marketing techniques can be meaningfully applied to employment contexts. Some theories were not included in the present review. Although related perspectives such as employer value proposition (Xu et al., 2019), psychological contract (Deepa & Baral, 2021), and organizational citizenship behavior have also

appeared in employer branding research, they are treated here as adjacent constructs rather than core theoretical foundations. This does not mean that these theories are unimportant or not related, but they interact with employer branding and help explain specific mechanisms or outcomes within the broader field in management field.

Extant employer branding research has tended to focus on individual-level perceptions and outcomes, especially those of job seekers, applicants, and current employees (Dassler et al., 2022). Much of this work asks how people perceive an organization's attractiveness, how prospective employees choose among job offers, and why employees decide to stay with an organization. These questions have most often been examined through studies of employer attractiveness and employee retention. Reis et al. (2021), found that 51 of the 60 articles they reviewed on employer branding and talent management focused on employer attraction and employee retention. Although scholars have encouraged more attention to outcomes such as organizational and financial performance, there remains considerable scope for future research to examine how employer branding contributes to broader business value.

Prior studies also show that empirical research in employer branding relies heavily on self-report methods. Less common approaches, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) (Rampl et al., 2016), are still rare in this field. Quantitative methods remain dominant, particularly in studies that measure employer attractiveness and job choice through self-administered surveys and established scales. Qualitative approaches, including interviews and content analysis, have also been used, along with choice-based conjoint analysis and, in fewer cases, mixed-method designs. Longitudinal designs can be found in studies such as Cable and Judge (1997), Kanar et al. (2010), Yu (2014), and Collins and Martinez-Moreno (2021). However, these studies usually depend on repeated self-report measures collected at different points, such as before and after recruitment, rather than on true time-series data. They therefore follow participants over time, but still remain close to the logic of survey-based research.

Reviewing employer branding research is not straightforward, partly because the field overlaps with several related areas. During the review process, some studies seemed only indirectly connected to employer branding at first. However, themes such as person–organization fit, recruitment information and signaling, and brand equity in recruitment contexts can still be reasonably treated as part of the wider employer branding literature. This overlap makes it difficult to draw clear boundaries around what should be included and how studies should be classified. As suggested by the employer brand value chain model (Theurer et al., 2018) and the employer knowledge framework of Cable and Turban (2001), theories related to recruitment messages and person–organization fit can be meaningfully incorporated into employer branding research. Thus, employer branding overlaps with several neighboring theoretical perspectives. This conclusion is broadly consistent with Dassler et al. (2022) who argued that employer branding and employer attractiveness are closely related constructs in the literature.

4.2. Employer brand comprehensive conceptual framework

Building on these four streams, this study proposes an integrated conceptual framework that brings together the main theoretical foundations, target audiences, branding dimensions, and outcomes of employer branding research. The purpose of the framework is not to replace existing models, but to synthesize them into a broader structure that can guide future research.



Figure 3. Conceptual framework of employer brand studies

Figure 3 positions employer brand as the central construct that connects organizational identity, value communication, stakeholder perceptions, and employment-related outcomes. It conceptualizes employer brand as the reputation and value of an organization as an employer, as perceived by both internal and external stakeholders. In doing so, the framework emphasizes that employer branding is not limited to recruitment communication but functions as a broader strategic mechanism through which organizations shape perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions among different audience groups.

A key feature of the framework is the distinction between internal employer branding and external employer branding. Internal employer branding is directed toward current employees and is created through employee experiences, organizational culture, identity, the fulfillment of the employer value proposition and so on. Its main outcome is employee retention, while related outcomes include employee commitment, satisfaction, performance, loyalty, and engagement, which can be seen as peripheral outcomes. This internal dimension highlights that employer branding should not only attract new talent but also strengthen existing employees' psychological attachment to the organization.

By contrast, external employer branding targets wider labor-market audiences, including job seekers, applicants, applicants' family members or friends, competitors, job hunters, media, shareholders, and other peripheral stakeholders. This dimension is communicated through recruitment messages, organizational signals, reputation, and brand-related information. **Figure 3** shows that external employer branding influences employer attraction, applicant pool quality and quantity, competitive advantage of employers, and job application intention. These outcomes collectively explain how

organizations compete for talented people and develop a favorable position in the labor market using employer branding strategies.

The framework also highlights the close relationship between internal and external employer branding. Employees' experiences in the workplace can influence how the organization is viewed externally, especially through word of mouth and digital communication. At the same time, external employer branding can shape applicants' perceptions of the organization and their expectations before they join. In this sense, employer branding should be seen as an ongoing and integrated process, in which employees' internal experiences and the organization's external image continue to influence and strengthen each other.

The ultimate outcome of the framework is the job choice decision, or the organization becoming an employer of choice. This suggests that successful employer branding affects not only whether applicants intend to apply, but also whether they accept job offers and remain with the organization. In this sense, employer branding contributes to both recruitment effectiveness and long-term human resource sustainability.

Figure 3 also highlights the theoretical contribution of this conceptual work by bringing together several major theories, including brand equity theory, signaling theory, the instrumental-symbolic framework, means-end theory, value chain theory, social identity theory, reasoned action theory, and person-organization fit theory. By combining these perspectives, the framework offers a grounded explanation of how employer brand perceptions are formed, interpreted, and translated into organizational outcomes.

Overall, the conceptual framework contributes to the employer branding literature by offering an integrated structure that connects theories, audiences, branding dimensions, and outcomes. It provides future researchers with a clear roadmap for examining antecedents, mediators, moderators, and boundary conditions in employer branding studies. It also offers practical guidance for organizations seeking to strengthen employee retention, talent attraction, and competitive advantage.

5. Conclusion

This review set out to answer four research questions concerning the intellectual development of employer branding research. First, regarding who the influential scholars in employer brand research are, this study identifies several major scholars and author teams whose work has shaped the development of the field, including Ambler and Barrow, Backhaus and Tikoo, Cable and Turban, Collins, Berthon and Ewing, Lievens, Van Hove, Slaughter, Theurer, Ronda, Rampl, and Yu. These scholars were selected because of their foundational conceptual contributions, citation visibility, recurrence in prior review studies, and relevance to core employer branding themes, including employer image, employer attractiveness, employer knowledge, employer brand equity, and talent attraction.

Second, concerning scholars' key contributions to the development of employer branding research, the review shows that these scholars contributed in different but complementary ways. Ambler and Barrow introduced the employer brand concept and established the connection between branding logic and employment relationships (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). Backhaus and Tikoo developed a foundational framework linking employer branding with employer attraction, employer brand loyalty, organizational identity, and employee productivity (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Cable

and Turban advanced the employer knowledge and recruitment equity perspective by explaining how job seekers form employer familiarity, reputation, and image during recruitment (Cable & Turban, 2001). Collins and colleagues extended this perspective by examining recruitment communication, early recruitment activities, and employer brand equity in applicant attraction (Collins & Han, 2004; Collins & Kanar, 2013; Collins & Stevens, 2002). Berthon and Ewing contributed to measurement development through the employer attractiveness scale, while Lievens, Van Hove, and Slaughter advanced understanding of employer image, instrumental and symbolic attributes, organizational attractiveness, and recruitment communication (Berthon et al., 2005; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Van Hove et al., 2022). Theurer and colleagues integrated brand equity theory into the employer brand value chain model, Ronda introduced a means–end perspective to explain employer attractiveness, Rampl highlighted the emotional mechanisms underlying employer-of-choice decisions, and Yu contributed to research on organizational image, media credibility, electronic word of mouth, and person–organization fit (Rampl, 2014; Rampl et al., 2016; Ronda et al., 2018; Theurer et al., 2018; Yu, 2014; Yu, Dineen, et al., 2022).

Third, in response to what research streams can be tracked from these influential scholars, this review identifies four major streams. The first stream concerns the conceptual foundation of employer branding, including its definition, internal and external dimensions, and strategic role. The second stream focuses on employer knowledge, employer image, and recruitment signaling, explaining how job seekers form perceptions of employers through organizational and non-organizational information sources (Cable & Turban, 2001; Collins & Kanar, 2013). The third stream examines employer attractiveness, symbolic meaning, emotional attachment, and person–organization fit, showing that employer evaluation involves both functional and psychological dimensions (Cable & Judge, 1996; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Rampl et al., 2016; Ronda et al., 2018). The fourth stream focuses on employer brand equity, measurement, and value creation. It highlights how employer branding can influence recruitment outcomes, employee retention, and broader organizational performance (Berthon et al., 2005; Theurer et al., 2018). This study organizes these research streams according to their chronological development.

Fourth, this study also considers what kind of conceptual framework can guide future employer branding research. The proposed framework further shows that employer branding should be understood as an integrated process linking internal employee experience and external labor-market perception. Internal employer branding influences employee commitment, engagement, retention, and word of mouth, while external employer branding shapes employer attractiveness, applicant perceptions, and job choice decisions. Together, these two domains explain how employer branding contributes to both talent attraction and long-term human resource sustainability.

The review proposes the employer branding research agenda. First and foremost, employer branding studies should give greater attention to current employees and internal employer branding, as existing research remains strongly focused on applicants and job seekers (Dassler et al., 2022; Reis et al., 2021). Future studies could examine how employees' actual work experiences shape employer brand authenticity, word-of-mouth behavior, innovation behavior, engagement, and long-term retention. Second, future research can examine employer branding across different industries, countries, and cultural contexts, since employer attractiveness

and employer value propositions may vary across institutional, cultural, and labor-market environments (Graham & Cascio, 2018; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Spoljaric & Dosen, 2023). Third, digital employer branding requires further investigation, particularly in relation to social media, online employer reviews, electronic word of mouth, recruitment platforms, and algorithmic recruitment communication (Van Hoye et al., 2022; Yu, Dineen, et al., 2022; Yu, Goh, & Kawasaki, 2022). Fourth, methodological development remains necessary. Employer branding research has relied heavily on self-report surveys, while future studies could benefit from longitudinal designs, experiments, computer-aided text analysis, eye-tracking, neuroscience methods, case studies, and mixed-method approaches (Theurer et al., 2022).

This study has several methodological limitations. First, given the substantial number of scholars and publications in employer branding research, it was not feasible to identify and analyze all relevant sources and authors comprehensively. Second, because the selection of scholars was primarily based on prior review articles, citation-based evidence, and snowball sampling, the analysis may underrepresent scholars whose contributions appear mainly in empirical, conceptual, regional, or non-English publications. Third, reliance on English-language and peer-reviewed journal publications may introduce language and publication bias. Finally, due to time and scope constraints, this review could not fully synthesize the complete body of work produced by each selected scholar. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as an indicative rather than exhaustive mapping of influential scholars and theoretical developments in employer branding research.

This literature review has analyzed, summarized, and synthesized influential researchers and key publications in employer branding studies. It offers a useful starting point for novice scholars by providing a holistic conceptual overview, including the historical development of employer branding and a comprehensive conceptual framework. These elements are important for guiding new researchers to quickly understand and engage with employer branding research. From a practical perspective, employer branding remains a critical dimension of organizational competitiveness, particularly in attracting, retaining, and engaging talent. Therefore, this review paper also contributes to a fuller understanding of employer branding theory.

Conflict of interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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