

The Impact of Employer Brand Equity Elements on Consumer Attitude to Service Brand

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Abstract. Increasing competition means that organisations are looking for new ways to ensure the equity of their brands, and due to the specifics of services, employees are undoubtedly one of the most important links in service brand equity creation, therefore consumer knowledge of employer brand and its equity elements can contribute to the perception towards it, change it and influence behavioural intentions. According to the theory of reasoned behaviour, attitude is an important determinant of behaviour, so the purpose of this article is to assess how elements of an employer's brand equity influence attitude toward a service brand. After the exploratory factor analysis, 3 main elements of the employer's brand equity were identified. An analysis of the empirical study also found that the employer brand image has the strongest effect on attitudes towards a service brand, while the effect of employer brand awareness and reputation has a weaker effect.

Keywords: *employer brand, employer brand equity, impact, attitude, consumer perspective*

Introduction

Relevance of the article

Brand management is widely discussed by scholars and is no exception to the increasingly prominent concept of employer brand where traditional brand theories and practices are applied in the context of human resource management and thus create value for employees. There is no doubt that an employer's brand and a service brand are integral parts of an organisation's brands but there is a lack of research on interrelated relationships. Thus, determining the impact of an employer's brand equity elements on a service brand from a service brand user's perspective would reveal new opportunities for creating synergies for the organisation.

Level of problem investigation

Researchers examine the concept of employer brand in a variety of ways, both through its concept and management (Backhaus, & Tikoo, 2004; Collins, & Kanar, 2013) and through employer brand equity (Alshathry, Clarke, & Goodman, 2017; Theurer et al., 2016) or through individual equity elements (Collins, & Kanar, 2013; Jiang, & Iles, 2011; Minchington, 2011), but such research which lets to assess how the elements of an employer's brand equity are related to the service brand developed by those organisations from their consumers perspective is lacking. Elements of the employer brand equity are analysed from the perspective of employees, and attitude towards the brand most often is analysed as a factor of consumer behaviour (Torres, & Augusto, 2019; Andrade, 2005). This suggests that a more detailed examination of the relationship between the elements of the employer's brand equity and the attitude to the service brand is needed.

Scientific problem – how the elements of employer brand equity impact the attitude of consumers of service brands?

Object of the article – the impact of employer brand equity elements on the attitude of consumers of service brands.

Aim of the article – to substantiate the impact of employer brand equity elements on the attitude of consumers of service brands.

Objectives of the article:

1. To analyse the concept of employer brand equity, its elements and attitude towards brand.
2. To identify the relationship between employer brand equity elements and service brand consumers' attitude.
3. To evaluate the strength of relations between employer brand equity elements and service brand consumers' attitude.

Methods of the article: systematisation, a comparative synthesis, analysis, exploratory factor analysis, multiple regression analysis.

1. Literature review

1.1. The concept of employer brand equity

The concept of employer's brand equity is based on parallels from the broadly analysed brand equity concept, only the customers of this brand are identified as existing and potential employees, therefore the target group and the value creation process and tools are different. It is important to distinguish between employer branding and the employer branding process (Theurer et al., 2016). The employer brand is understood as an offer of employer value, and the employer brand process is designed to create an identifiable and unique employer identity (Edwards, 2010). The employer brand also presents a further expansion of branding theory and research, including efforts to communicate to potential and existing employees of an organisation that it is the desired workplace by creating compelling, exceptional employee value propositions (Jiang, & Iles, 2011).

The equity of an employer's brand was described by Backhaus, & Tikoo (2004, p. 504) as "the effect of brand awareness on potential and existing employees of the company <...>, the desired outcome of the employer's brand process". Collins, & Kanar (2013, p. 288) identified employer brand equity as "the current or potential future employee's employer's brand perception of his or her behaviour, emotions, and associations in relation to the work decisions of a particular organisation". All information related to the employer's brand is named the employer's brand knowledge and consists of the employer's reputation, image, and reputation, and "the added value of an employee's favourable response to the employer's knowledge is usually expressed as "brand equity" <...> (Theurer et al., 2016).

Consequently, the equity of an employer's brand can be understood as all the knowledge and perceptions about an employer that creates a compelling, exceptional value in the minds of potential and existing employees about the work in that organisation. This approach is in line with the consumer perception aspect of the concept of brand equity in the context of decision-making, only, in this case, the knowledge is not related to the product or service but the employer.

1.2. The elements of employer brand equity

Yu and Cabel (2012) examined recruitment as a key component in equity creation that leads to competitive advantage and relied on the employer brand, which they argue is related to faith or knowledge of potential employers, and the employer brand equity is created on the assumption that organisations manage their images in such a way that job seekers develop a certain type of belief about them. In this perspective, the elements of an employer's brand equity according to the authors are employer brand awareness, image, and reputation. These elements are consistent with the consumer perception group in the decision-making context, while Minchington (2011) suggested that employer brand equity consists of 4 key dimensions instead of 3 (Employer Brand Awareness, Perceived Work Experience, Employer Brand Associations, and Employer Brand Loyalty). He included one component related to consumer behaviour – brand loyalty. This equity's component means that the person is committed to joining or working with the organisation and this is the result of positive associations with the organisation (Minchington, 2011). Many elements of an employer's brand value are presented by researchers differently, thus in Table 1, they are categorised by similar constructs.

Table 1

The elements of employer brand equity

Element	Explanation
Employer Brand Awareness (Yu, & Cabel, 2012; Collins, & Kanar, 2013; Minchington, 2011)	"Awareness is fundamental to employer brands because it is the memory node in which applicants can store more specific associations." (Collins, & Kanar, 2013, p. 287);
Familiarity with employer brand (Alshathry, Clarke, & Goodman, 2017)	"It reflects the knowledge level of, and familiarity with, an employer and forms the basis for other elements of EBE" (Alshathry, Clarke, & Goodman, 2017, p. 416); People's level of recognition about the positive and negative signs of work in an organisation (Minchington, 2011).

The elements of employer brand equity

<p>Employer brand associations (Minchington, 2011; Collins, & Kanar, 2013; Alshathry, Clarke & Goodman, 2017)</p>	<p>“Surface brand associations refer to attitudes and overall evaluations of an employer brand.” “Complex brand associations are any perceived characteristic regarding specific elements of what it is like to work at particular organization and are used to make employer decisions.” (Collins, & Kanar, p. 287). “Employer brand associations consist of anything linked in memory to a company and may contain the underlying meaning of an employer brand for employees” (Alshathry, Clarke, & Goodman, 2017, p. 417). Thoughts and ideas, the name of certain organisations in the minds of current and future employees (Minchington, 2011).</p>
<p>Experience with the employer (Alshathry, Clarke & Goodman, 2017) Suvokta darbo patirtis (Minchington, 2011)</p>	<p>“Experience of an employee differs from employer brand associations in that it is employment-specific and normally occurs inside the organization through interactions with the employer<...>” (Alshathry, Clarke, & Goodman, 2017, p. 418); Current and prospective employees’ perceptions of working in the organisation (Minchington, 2011).</p>
<p>Employer brand loyalty (Alshathry, Clarke, & Goodman, 2017; Priyadarshi, 2011; Minchington, 2011)</p>	<p>“Employer brand loyalty is shaped by behavioral element relating to organizational culture and attitudinal element relating to organiational identity.” (Priyadarshi, 2011, p. 513); A person’s commitment to join or work with an organisation because of positive associations about the organisation (Minchington, 2011). „Employer brand loyalty is relevant only for individuals who have experienced the employer brand (i.e. existing employees), which they develop through their overall attitudes towards the employer“ (Alshathry, Clarke, and Goodman, 2017, p. 418).</p>
<p>Employer Brand Image (Priyadarshi, 2011; Yu, & Cabel, 2012)</p>	<p>“The employee’s perception of his/her employer’s image is shaped by personal and professional experiences and this in many ways determines his attitude and consequently his behaviour” (Priyadarshi, 2011, p. 519). Those are beliefs about the employer. Employer brand images interact with various individual differences to attract certain types of job seekers (Yu, & Cabel, 2012, p. 207).</p>
<p>Employer reputation (Yu, & Cabel, 2012)</p>	<p>An individual’s perception of how other individuals value an employer. “Reputation influences the result of a job seeker, in the absence of individual job choices as ways to establish their social identity.” (Yu, & Cabel, 2012)</p>
<p>Employer brand trust (Jiang, & Illes, 2011)</p>	<p>“Employer’s perceived honesty, credibility and ability to satisfy applicant/employee demands” (Jiang, & Illes, 2011, p. 107)</p>

Source: created by the author.

As can be seen from Table 1, employer brand awareness is related to the level of knowledge about the employer. This is a prerequisite for the job seeker to discover and remember information related to the other two dimensions of an employer’s brand – image and reputation (Yu, & Cabel, 2012). As Collins, & Kanar (2013) point out, there are more specific associations in our awareness and the awareness itself, according to Alshathry, Clarke, & Goodman (2017), forms the basis for other elements of an employer’s brand equity. This shows the relationships between these elements and their impact on the brand equity of the employer, emphasising the importance of the element of awareness. Another dimension of an employer’s brand equity, the employer’s reputation, is related to the job seeker’s belief in society’s emotional assessment of the organisation as an employer (Yu, & Cabel, 2012). It should be noted that image and reputation are distinguished in brand equity theory because, according to Cable, & Turban (2001), image is related to the individual evaluation of a potential employee and reputation includes the individual’s own perception of how others value the employer. In summary, the most often mentioned elements of an employer’s brand equity are employer brand awareness, image, reputation, and associations. Some authors also pay attention to loyalty, trust, and experience with the employer.

1.3. The concept of consumers brand attitude

The construct brand attitude is often used in consumer behaviour or marketing research to assess the intent of consumer behaviour that reveals the likelihood of consumer buying (Wang et al., 2013). Attitude as an individual's internal evaluation of an object is considered important in marketing research because it is considered relatively stable and useful in predicting consumer behaviour related to a good or service (Mitchell, & Olson, 1981). These are the efforts a consumer makes to purchase a product or service, and attitudes, evaluations, and perceptions of brands can motivate purchase intentions (Moreira et al., 2017). Voester et al. (2017) argue that if a consumer has a more favourable attitude towards a brand than a competitor, it will have an impact on the consumer's intention to buy that brand. According to Spears, & Singh (2004, p. 56), this is "a relatively long-term, non-dimensional summative assessment of a brand that is thought to invigorate behavior". It is considered important for behaviour formation and the ability to predict purchasing intentions, purchasing behaviour, and brand choice (Priester et al., 2004; Voester et al., 2017).

In the scientific literature, attitudes towards a brand are also referred to as a tendency to respond favourably or negatively to a brand (Phelps, & Hoy, 1996), where a positive attitude leads to favourable behaviour (e.g., more frequent purchases) and a negative attitude leads to negative outcomes (Andrade, 2005). In summary, the formation of consumer attitudes is necessary to influence consumer behaviour.

2. The interaction between the employer's brand equity elements and attitude toward the service brand

According to Gehrels, & De Looij (2011), the full integration of the employer brand concept into a labour-intensive service company has a significant impact on overall service delivery and suggests that the employer brand should be treated as a strategic concept in the company management philosophy. Also, Yu, & Cabel (2012) in examining the factors that affect an employer's brand drew attention to the awareness of the employer's products and services to the employer's brand equity and argue that managing their image in the recruitment process is also possible through company and product information sources.

Since purchasing behaviour is based on an attitude to the brand being purchased, it is assumed that the value elements of the employer's brand also affect it but the studies focus on the relationship between the employer's brand and the corporate brand or a specific brand equity element but not on the service brand consumer attitude.

One study showing the possible interrelationships between an employer brand and a product brand was conducted by Banerjee, Saini, & Kalyanaram (2018), which revealed how a corporate brand has an impact on an employer's brand (and this impact on intent to apply). It was found that the corporate brand has no direct effect on the intention to apply, which showed that the employer's brand fully mediates between the corporate brand and the intention to apply. Also, this study did not look at how an employer's brand helps make product decisions but how a product's brand affects both the equity of the employer's brand and the employees' intention to apply for a job. The hypothesis that the product brand significantly influences the organisation's employer brand was not confirmed: the correlation with the employer's brand equity dimensions (employer brand awareness ($r = 0.58$), employer brand attractiveness ($r = 0.59$), perceived job attributes ($r = 0.67$) was positive and statistically significant, but both SEM models did not confirm the hypothesis (Model 1: SPC -0.92 , t-value -0.85 , Model 2: SPC -0.067 , t-value -0.63). As these authors pointed out, these results contradict a previous study that found that "product brand plays a critical role in the recruitment process." (Kim, York, & Jeon-Su, 2011, p. 176) This study reveals conflicting results in the context of an organisation's brands, also the brand attitude construct is not included in the study. However, the attitude towards the brand is examined as influencing the intention to purchase (Spears, & Singh, 2004; Pradhan et al., 2016, Singh, & Banerjee, 2018; Torres, & Augusto, 2019), a willingness to pay more (Augusto and Torres, 2018) and as a mediator between brand equity and intent to purchase (Liu et al., 2017) but all these studies are not from an employer's brand perspective. Thus, a study that would assess whether there is a possible link between an employer's brand and a service brand attitude would provide a broader understanding of such interactions.

3. The evaluation of the impact of employer brand equity elements on services brand consumer attitude

Research methods.

Aim of the research – to assess the impact of the employer brand equity elements on services brand consumer attitude.

Objectives of the research:

1. To define how the elements of employer brand equity can be grouped.
2. To assess the strength of the impact of the employer brand equity elements on services brand consumer attitude.
3. To compile the forecasting model of services brand consumer attitude regarding the elements of employer brand equity.

Research methods. The instrument chosen was a standardized questionnaire based on Collins (2007), Banerjee et al. (2018), Saini, & Gupta (2018), Kashive, & Khana (2017), Alshathry (2015) scales used by mentioned researchers to assess elements of employer brand equity, and Torres, & Augusto's (2019) statements about attitude to the service brand. It should be noted that although more elements of the employer's brand equity were found in the literature review, the aim of this study sought to evaluate the elements from a consumer perspective, and this required to eliminate such elements like Employer Brand Trust, Perceived Work Experience and Loyalty to the Employer Brand from this research as they are more suitable for analysis from an employee perspective. The obtained data were processed in IBM SPSS23 statistical program and exploratory factor and multiple regression analysis were performed.

Survey sample. The research was conducted in 2020. June 5–19 by interviewing potential and existing consumers of selected service brands (Tele2, Telia and Bitè) in Lithuania through the online consumer panel (CAWI) of the market research company 'Norstat LT' UAB. According to the Lithuanian population, the minimum scope of the survey should have been 389 respondents but the total number of respondents eligible for the analysis was 526. 54.8% of respondents were women, 45.2% were men, and most of them lived in big cities (47.9%).

The research data analysis and the discussion of the results

The first stage of the study was to assess whether the data on the elements of the employer's brand equity are suitable for factor analysis. The value of the Kaiser – Meyer – Olkin (KMO) test criterion was 0.964, which is more than 0.9 and means that data is suitable for factor analysis (Čekanavičius & Murauskas, 2002)), and Bartlett's sphericity test was also statistically significant ($p = 0.000 < 0.050$).

The *principal axis factoring* method was chosen for the investigative exploratory factor analysis because it is one of the most frequently used (De Winter & Dodou, 2012) and aims to reflect latent factors. The factor oblique method was chosen for the reason of the factor correlation, the Direct *Oblimin* rotation, and it was instructed to single out 5 factors in the case of employer brand equity constructs chosen for the research. Assessing the communalities of the variables, it was found that not all variables exceeded the 0.4 threshold, although the data explained 70.64% of the variance, and the rotated factor weight matrix showed that some factors belong to several constructs. After re-performing the exploratory factor analysis, variables that were assigned to multiple constructs or had a value less than 0.4 were discarded. In this way, the variables related to employer attractiveness and associations were abandoned and the three constructs of employer brand equity (employer brand image, employer brand awareness and employer brand reputation) were used for further analysis. It is worth mentioning that these constructs were most used in the scientific research of other scholars (Collins, 2007; Banerjee et al., 2018, Saini and Gupta, 2018, Kashive and Khana, 2017). The resulting explanatory factor analysis weights, Cronbach's alpha, and model matrix are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Exploratory factor analysis

Cronbach alfa	The element of employer brand equity		
	Image	Awareness	Reputation
	0,945	0,836	0,936
DR1			-0,678
DR2			-0,971
DR3			-0,885
DR4			-0,731
DPŽŽ1		0,654	
DPŽŽ2		0,675	
DPŽŽ3		0,835	
DPŽI1	0,707		
DPŽI2	0,793		
DPŽI3	0,766		
DPŽI4	0,928		
DPŽI5	0,802		
DPŽI6	0,817		
DPŽI7	0,840		
DPŽI8	0,774		

Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.

Rotation Method: Oblimin with Kaiser Normalisation.

a. Rotation converged in 7 iterations.

Source: created by the author.

In the exploratory factor analysis, the 3 extracted constructs explained 70.99% of the data. Also, for each construct listed in Table 2, the Cronbach's alpha exceeds 0.7, and the attitude to the service brand Cronbach's alpha exceeds 0.837. Such data show good internal coherence of the question scale (Aiken, 2002 op. Cit. Pakalniškienė, 2012).

The next step was to assess the strengths of the relationship, the impact between the distinguished elements of the employer's brand equity, and the attitude to the service brand. To achieve this goal, a multivariate regression model was developed, where the dependent variable is the attitude towards the service brand and the independent variables are the image, reputation, and awareness of the employer brand. The results obtained are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Regression model and model coefficients of the effect of employer brand equity elements on the service brand attitude

Model 1	Unstandardised Coefficients		Standardised Coefficients	t	Sig.	Collinearity Statistics	
	B	Std. Error	Beta			Tolerance	VIF
(Constant)	2,377	,205		11,609	,000		
ImageEB	,395	,062	,338	6,340	,000	,500	2,001
ReputationEB	,122	,063	,123	1,938	,053	,354	2,828
AwarenessEB	,105	,051	,111	2,053	,041	,488	2,048
Model Summary ^b							
Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson		
1	,510 ^a	,260	,256	1,18810	2,044		
a. Predictors: (Constant), AwarenessEB, ImageEB, ReputationEB							
b. Dependent Variable: AttitudeSBrand							

Source: created by the author.

Regression analysis showed that there is a statistically significant relationship between the elements of the employer's brand equity and the attitude towards the service brand. The greatest impact is on the

employer's brand image ($\beta = 0.395$, $p = 0.00$), the weakest is on reputation ($\beta = 0.122$, $p = 0.05$) and awareness ($\beta = 0.105$, $p = 0.04$). Model's $R^2=0,26$, which is more than $R^2>0,20$ (Čekanavičius, & Murauskas, 2002) and means the generated regression model ($\text{AttitudeSBrand}=2,377+0,395*\text{ImageEB}+0,122*\text{ReputationEB}+0,105*\text{AwarenessEB}$) is suitable for explaining the dependent variable.

Such results show that for both existing and potential consumers of services brands (Telia, Tele2 and Bitė) there is an impact on their attitude about services brands. This confirms previously analysed scientific literature about the need to treat the employer brand as a strategic concept in the company's management philosophy (Gehrels, & De Looij, 2011). Wider inclusion of employer brand equity elements in an organisation's communication would allow external audiences to develop a more favourable attitude not only about the target primary group of potential employees but also a more favourable attitude towards the service brand potential and existing consumers, which leads the desired consumer behaviour in relation to that brand.

Conclusions

1. Employer Brand Equity is understood as a concept parallel to traditional brand equity but the main target audience is potential and existing employees. This equity is defined as all the knowledge and perception about the employer and may be assessed through different elements such as employer brand awareness, image, reputation, associations, loyalty, trust, and experience with the employer.

2. Brand attitude is one of the most important constructs in marketing research to assess and predict consumer behaviour. As most of the research examines its impact from the brand consumers perspective there is a lack of research that assesses the interaction between employer brand equity elements and attitude towards service brand and even relations between employer brand and product or corporate brand are contradictory.

3. After the exploratory factor analysis, 3 main elements of the employer's brand equity were identified. An analysis of the empirical study also found that the employer brand equity elements have a statistically significant positive effect: employer brand image has the strongest effect on attitudes towards a service brand, while the effect of employer brand awareness and reputation has a weaker effect.

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