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Attributes which Improve the Employer Brand of Private Universities in Afghanistan: An Instrumental-Symbolic Perspective

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Abstract: Employer brand has become a topic of concern for scholars and policymakers recently. The primary aim of this study is to unveil attributes that constitute a higher education institution as an employer brand. The study at hand is a qualitative inquiry designed to unveil an employer brand's instrumental and symbolic components. This study was conducted in the context of private universities in the eastern zone of Afghanistan. Data was collected from the faculty members of seven private universities by conducting semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions of lecturers working in various departments of the selected institutions. Thematic analysis was performed using NVivo-12 for data analysis. The findings revealed eight instrumental or job-related and eight symbolic or trait-related themes perceived to represent a university as an employer brand. Moreover, the study offers recommendations for university administration and human resource officials engaged in policy formulation.

Key Words: Attributes, Employer Brand, Instrumental-Symbolic, Private Universities

JEL Classification:

Introduction

In recent two decades, Employer Branding has become a commonly understood and highly valued term, particularly among human resource management experts (Behrends, Baur, & Zierke, 2020). Across many firms, the development, execution, and promotion of a distinct and exclusive employer brand is regarded as a crucial element for achieving an edge over its competitors. Similarly, this study focuses on understanding the attributes of a higher education institution being an employer brand. So much work has already been done

on the attributes of an employer brand with the application of other theories (Ambler et al., 1996; Moroko & Uncles, 2009; Ambler et. al., 1996; leveraging, 1996; Woodruffe, 2006; Turban & Cable, 2003) but the identified attributes in this study are based on the prominent theory of brand management namely the instrumental-symbolic framework developed by Ambler and Barrow (1996). Practitioners have recently focused their attention on the employer brand construct however, academics have recognized very little about the multidimensional phenomenon of the employer brand (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

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Identifying the main attributes of the organization that attract applicants and current workers to the organization as the best place to work is one of the most significant tasks for recruiters. Attributes could be of various types such as practical, economical, psychological, instrumental and symbolic (Ambler and Barrow (1996). For instance, according to Jain and Bhatt (2015), a potent employer brand should include rewards, compensation, perks, career growth, and opportunities for the additional value; hence, it contains both instrumental and symbolic elements. There has been an increasing curiosity in the topic, and research confirms that a company's performance can rely on its potential to hire and keep talent, thereby recognizing the increasing importance of employer branding (Gilliver, 2009; Sengupta, Bamel, & Singh, 2015). Similarly, private sector universities in Afghanistan regularly face such issues as employee turnover due to the mismatch of the employee's desires and work environment or other job-related variables. On a similar note, universities are too uninformed about the exact attributes that have the potential to establish them as employer brands or desirable working place for employees. So, the focus of this research is on comprehending the instrumental and symbolic attributes that form the foundation of an employer brand in the context of universities. This study addresses the employer brand from the perspective of the current employee. However, most the studies that have used the instrumental-symbolic framework are based on the perception of the potential employees, with a lack of focus on the experiences of current employees, which has been addressed by the study at hand.

Research Question

What are the attributes of higher education institute which makes them desirable employer brand in Afghanistan?

Literature Review and Theoretical Orientations

Employer Brand

Employer branding is a comparatively new strategy for attracting and keeping the finest possible human talent in an increasingly competitive job environment (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). The basis of employer brand goes back to Ambler and Barrow (1996) who describe Employer Brand as "the practical, economic and psychological benefits that jobs offers and associates with the employer" p.187. According to Backhaus and Tikoo, (2004), being an ideal employer and creating a brilliant picture in the eyes of workers is not an easy job, but requires commitment and sound strategies.

In addition, according to human resource professionals, the employer brand has strategic importance and is considered as a way forward to acquire qualified, dedicated, and well-enough people that ultimately give a firm a competitive edge and lead a firm to ultimate success. To this end, companies are bound to make it easier for workers to have a favourable working environment (Cheese, Thomas & Craig, 2008). Regarding the existing range of evidence, workers who work wholeheartedly are more distinctive in their results than those who are not satisfied with the job. In brief, employee loyalty and customer satisfaction have a strong and significant relationship. Therefore, according to Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), companies are highly interested in expanding efforts to have the best employer brand that has the end effect on their profitability in attracting potential customers to the firm. Similarly, according to Barrow and Mosley (2011), with the aid of a stronger and more trustworthy employer brand, a company would have a pool of qualified workers, increased efficiency, decreased turnover of employees, and will easily attract, engage, inspire and grow high-quality business people. A work-friendly environment ensures that workers can offer services to clients with their souls, autonomy, and pride. Likewise, employee branding initiatives are practiced to identify, control, manage, and incorporate all the

dimensions relevant to employee experience at work.

There have been several studies that attempted to figure out the factors that play a crucial role in designing a stronger employer brand to acquire potential and retain current employees within a firm. There are five views regarding the contributable factors to organization attractiveness noted by Aboul-Ela (2016). He further reported the factors from the current body of literature regarding the driving forces in form of attributes behind

the selection of an organization to work with. For instance, a *Prestigious employer* (Ambler et al., 1996), an employer that can reflect the self-image "who I am?" (Aaker, 1997), *Attractiveness and comprehensiveness of the Company's website* (Sarabdeen, El-Rakhawy, & Khan, 2011), *a good working place* (levering, 1996; Woodruffe, 2006), and *Organizational corporate social responsibility practices* (Turban and Cable, 2003). Moreover, these factors are thematically cited by Aboul-Ela (2016) in his exploratory analysis of the literature given below in table 1:

Table 1. Factors/Themes Derived from Relevant Publications Aboul-Ela (2016)

Factor/Theme	Author
Employer attractiveness	(Ambler et al., 1996; Moroko and Uncles, 2009)
Prestigious employer	(Ambler et al., 1996)
An employer that can reflect self-image "who I am?"	(Aaker, 1997),
A good working place ---	(levering, 1996; Woodruffe, 2006)
Organizational corporate social responsibility practices	(Turban and Cable, 2003)
Dynamic business process, the organization cares about the well-being of employees, task variety, clear opportunities for long-term career progression	(Terjesen, Vinnicombe, and Freeman, 2007)
Organizational Image	(Belt and Paolilo, 1982; Gatewood, Gown and Lautenschlager, 1993; ; Knox and Freeman, 2006; Martin and Hetrick, 2006; Tom, 1971; Turban and Greening, 1997)
Personality fits within a given organization's brand	(Byrne and Neuman, 1992; Cable and Judge, 1996)
Positive reputation and profitability	(Cable and Turban, 2003; Pretson and O'Bannon, 1997)
The type of industry or sector of operation	(Burman, Schaefer and Maloney, 2008)
Work-life balance and compensation benefits (EBI'S branding global research), industrial health and safety programs	(Watson, 2010)
Organizational rewards packages	(Bretz, Ash, and Dreher, 1989)
Training and development opportunities as well as global assignment opportunities	(Jain, Bhalt, 2015)
Fulfilling promises and obligations towards employees	(Barrow and Mosley, 2007)
Organizational ability to differentiate itself from competitors	(Backhaus et al., 2004; Erlenkaemper, Hinzdrof, Priemuth and Thaden, 2003)
Attractiveness and comprehensiveness of the Company's website	(Sarabdeen, El-Rakhawy, and Khan, 2011)
The interaction between existing employees and the general public in the form of word of mouth especially if the existing employees interact regularly with a social group of friends and relatives	(Dowling, 2001)

Kucherov and Zavyalova, (2012) categorize employer brand traits into four groups: appropriate remuneration, work schedule, fair

rewards, and bonus schemes. McKinsey and Company (2001) suggested four forms of benefits, emotional, rational, tangible, and

intangible benefits, that should be provided to current and potential workers by companies. Leekha and Sharma (2014) reported career opportunities, benefits, brand identity, employer empowerment, work role, quality culture, supportive colleagues, job stability, and training and development as the key attributes for employer brands. The commonalities of these taxonomies could be divided into organizational factors and individual factors.

Theurer, Welpel, and Lievens (2018) have outlined a variety of concepts, models, and frameworks that incorporate all pertinent employer brand constructs. Theurer et al. (2018) analyzed 187 relevant scholarly publications, from which they extracted a variety of themes and models utilized by various academics. For instance, brand equity theory (Aaker 1991; Keller, 1993), social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Ashforth and Mael, 1989), Spence (1973) and Rynes (1991) proposed the signalling theory, theory of psychological contract (Hendry and Jenkins 1997) and the theory used in this study, the Instrumental-symbolic framework by Lievens and Highhouse (2003). According to Collins and Stevens (2002), the employer

brand is comprised of two dimensions: perceived job characteristics and attitude toward the employer.

Moreover, among the aforementioned models and elements, the theory and instrument used in the study is the conceptualized framework presented by Lievens and Highhouse (2003) and titled the "Instrumental-symbolic framework" of the employer brand. It includes a measuring scale developed by Ambler and Barrow (1996) and Highhouse (2003), as well as several factors and sub-factors that can be ascribed to any organization being a desirable workplace. According to the study of Lievens and Highhouse (2003), the instrumental or functional attributes include compensation, development, job security, job demands, and location, while the symbolic attributes include sincerity, innovation, competence, and robustness. Certain aspects of this framework are instrumental (functional or job-related), while others are symbolic or not-job-related to the job. This framework serves as the conceptual and theoretical framework that informs the objectives and design of the study. This framework is presented in Figure 1 below:

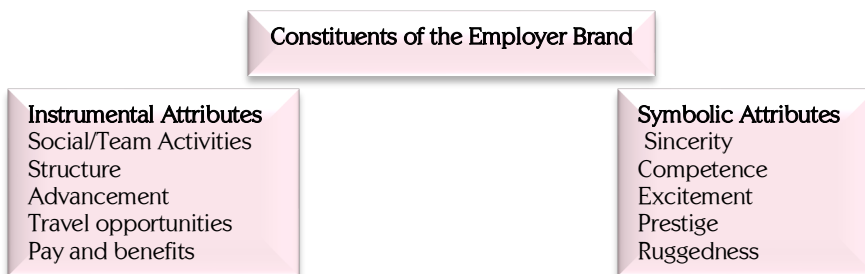


Figure 1: A Conceptual Framework Proposed by Lievens and Highhouse (2003) and Lievens (2007)

Research Methods

A qualitative research design was adopted, allowing the researcher to get engaged with a participant in the exploration of a subjective phenomenon (Flick, 2018). From the perspective of ontological and epistemological assumptions, the study was

intended to have multiple participants' views (Lewis 2015; Rahi 2017) regarding the phenomenon of the study. These philosophical assumptions direct the research design towards an interpretive paradigm where exploration of the reality is informed by the broader worldview of the respondents (Rahi 2017; Wright et al. 2016).

The data were analyzed in terms of contextual commonalities in respondents' perceptions of employer brand attributes, as well as to understand what are the identified instrumental and symbolic attributes of employer brand that help higher education institutions make it practical at work. Since the practices of employer branding are more relevant to the working place, therefore, the informants of this study are the employees of multiple private universities in the eastern zone of Afghanistan. Moreover, the present study has selected participants based on the study's design and purpose. Same as Kruger (1988) stated that "I am looking for those who have had experiences relating to the phenomenon to be researched" (cited in Groenewald 2004, p. 150). The inclusion criteria were to collect data from those individuals to whom the phenomenon under the study is concerned which were the permanent faculty members of the private universities. Moreover, heterogeneity and diversity in a sample are a greater concern for ensuring a study's validity and reliability. Thus, data were collected from all available age groups, with faculty members holding a permanent lectureship with at least one year of experience, with gender equality, including males and females, and with faculty members representing a variety of educational backgrounds and fields of study such as lecturers of management sciences, Sharia and law, political science, medicine, journalism and mass communications, and the English language and literature department.

Purposive sampling was used to determine the unit of observation, which is particularly appropriate for studies that require the opinions of experts and practitioners, as well as when multiple participants' perspectives are necessary, as Roubille et al, (2015) reported in their study. A total of eight interviews and one focus group discussion were conducted. The researcher reached the eighth interview to the point where all the properties of the phenomenon of employer brand have been identified and covered satisfactorily from a heterogeneous group of participants which is called the saturation point in data collection. Higher

education institutions especially private sector universities provide a great number of job opportunities to the people of Afghanistan as well as competition is higher than ever before where every single institute tries to recruit the best possible human capital. Therefore, Afghanistan has been selected as a site for this study to have the essential attributes that faculty members of the sampled universities are inclined to attach to higher education institutions in Afghanistan. Thus, the sample has been taken from the private universities of the eastern zone particularly, from the faculty members of Alfalah University, Khurasan University, Ariana University, Al-Taqwa Institute of Higher Education, Spenghar Institute of Higher Education, Rokhan Institute of Higher Education and Tanvir Institute of Higher Education.

The interviews were conducted to get a comprehensive view of the participants about the phenomena of the study. Furthermore, focus group discussion (FGD) has also been conducted to have a group response on the phenomenon of the employer brand. The FGD participants were six faculty members who taught different academic programs at sample universities. Moreover, some of the FGD members were permanent lecturers of only one university and others were permanent faculty with one university as well as visiting with others. Hence, in this study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions as the appropriate methods and primary sources of data collection. Some interview questions were adapted from Lievens et al. (2007) such as "What attributes do you care about while applying for a job/organization?" and the rest were developed by the researcher. For some participants who were unable to talk in English, the questions were translated into their native language typically Pashto because the context for this study is the eastern zone of Afghanistan where most of the people speak the Pashto language.

Findings

The first part of the interview questions was to probe participants regarding the different

attributes that constitute an employer as a brand. The first question was general; "*What kind of attributes will you care about when choosing an employer to work with and why?*" So, the responses of all participants were much closer to each other to a greater extent however, certain differences have been noted in their answers. Some participants believed that they mostly liked those universities that have a good public image and are considered to be socially responsible organizations, as well as they, were in favour of those organizations where the fair distribution of burden and benefits is prevailing.

Accordingly, the participant stated:

According to my perception, I mostly apply to those organizations that have a good public image and consider a socially responsible organizations in the market since most of the universities are just messing up the students' academic life by offering completely counter-quality education and having a bad image (Participant 05, 2022).

Another participant added:

Value to the employee, learning and development, knowledge sharing, and being responsible are the factors that should be considered when selecting a specific employer. (Participant 02, 2022).

Similar ideas have been shared by P04, P01, and P03. However, such attributes were considered while choosing an employer like procedural justice, good location, competitive salary, proper working conditions, fair division of work, and so on. For further support of this question, the females' intercepts are necessary to consider as they were more inclined to work with an employer where they feel relaxed and comfortable in terms of negativity avoidance, best working location, and relaxation at work.

In the case of females, we are happy to work in an area where it is possible to keep ourselves away from negative thoughts of people. The most important factor that I consider is relaxation at the job. I have done all of my jobs based on the factor of relaxation as well as the notable thing is the location of the organization (Participant 07, 2022).

The first question asked was the restated

form of the research question and the answers were general rather than the specific properties/categories of instrumental and symbolic attributes. Along with the first general question, one other question has been asked from all interviewees "*Which university is your ideal employer? And what aspects of that university attract you the most?*" The rationale behind this question was to probe their favourite universities and the attributes that attract them the most. So, the perceptual differences were there since some of the respondents named the universities along with the attributes that attract them to work with, while others just mentioned the attributes without naming any particular university. As P01 shared his view in the following words:

Kardan University and the American University of Afghanistan are my favourite institutions because of their foreign links and affiliations, training and development opportunities, and most importantly their higher academic ranking. The attraction force of these higher education institutions is their brand equity and influence (Participant 01, 2022).

The same question has been answered in the following way by another participant as he was focusing on the attributes rather than naming the university.

For me, the ideal employer should have the following attributes such as good location, transportation facilities, and security is an essential country-specific issue especially in Afghanistan (Participant 06, 2022).

Some respondents preferred to work with public universities where job security and highly qualified faculty are available to advance their knowledge with the help of senior professors. In this regard, P02 stated:

My bigger dream is to get a lectureship at a public university because working along with academic personalities and professors will polish our knowledge and understanding more and more. Job security is another important factor that attracts me more. Overall we can learn a lot from those employers who have expertise in their workforce as well we feel secure at our job (Participant 02, 2022).

This part of the data analysis reports, displays and verifies the data generated from a focus group discussion conducted during the study. Lecturers from different backgrounds appeared in this focus group discussion (FGD) such as Engineering, Law and Political Sciences, and Management Sciences. This discussion aimed to triangulate, verify and support the findings revealed by individual interviews. As compared to interviews, few questions but the most comprehensive ones have been put forward to FGD members to get a comprehensive view of the phenomenon under study. The first question was about the general attributes that they prefer during employer selection regardless of specifying instrumental or symbolic. So, their responses are reported in the following way:

According to a faculty member of the law and political sciences, to become an employer brand, universities need to adopt some features such as having a good public image, and goodwill as he stated that:

According to my experience, I prefer an organization that has goodwill, for example, if someone provides me with two different universities I would choose the one that has goodwill and I would take such a decision based on the credibility of the concerned universities (FGD P01, 2022).

In the meantime, he has noted some other essential attributes that help universities to become the best working places as he added: I'd like to pursue where my career matches it and see how this university will develop and

empower my career in the future. Furthermore, I would check to see if my field of study is considered a supplementary area for main services or if it is considered a core service. In my opinion, employee growth and improvement are desirable qualities (FGD P01, 2022).

A faculty member who has plenty of experience in teaching at higher studies institutions reported that:

Salary and privileges are well-known factors that people and I prefer. Along with the proper salary, another imperative attribute should be the dignity of labour, for example, a well-paid job with zero levels of dignity will not be considered a job for me. Moreover, that organization I would prefer where I can improve my skills and knowledge. Employee participation and valuing their ideas are important things that should be considered (FGD P02, 2022).

The findings of the FGD corroborate with the major findings of interviews, it helped the study to triangulate and support findings produced by the interviews' data.

The table below depicts the study's outcomes and findings that were found using the thematic data analysis approach. The following table has been generated with the help of NVIVO-12, a data management software and then converted to a readable document. The following table has been formed with the support of the participant's voices.

Table 2. Themes Identified and Emerged from the Data

Instrumental Attributes	Symbolic Attributes
<p>Organization Justice "I would like to join an employer where equality in decision making is prevailing as well as where the contribution of an employee is considered in terms of performance standards and work burden because I feel completed where people do not underestimate the capabilities of committed employees"</p> <p>Location and Security For me, the ideal employer should have the following attributes such as good location,</p>	<p>Organization Prestige/Identity "I prefer universities that people love and have a good public image. Another thing is that universities should provide a stress-free environment for the employee. So good public image communicates the message of being the best employer among others"</p> <p>The dignity of Labor and Sincerity "Based on my experience, one of the important points to consider for becoming an employer brand is the value and the dignity of labour. I enjoy working in an environment</p>

Instrumental Attributes	Symbolic Attributes
transportation facilities, and security is an essential country-specific issue, especially in Afghanistan.	where I am valued and respected". (Participant 08)
Work-Life-Balance "I think for us (female), the issue of time is much more important. We are unable to work all day since we must have a balance in our work-life".	Global Exposure and Foreign Links "I would like a job in which I face new challenges because I like challenges and creativity and don't like to be always tied to mundane activities. Moreover, the challenges should be according to the area of my specialization to be comfortable with.
Autonomy "Based on my lived experience, such attributes like,... autonomy in my job truly match my values, for example, the organization should allow me to openly express my opinion regarding my decision whether that could be related to my lecture in class or any other area of my job"	Corporate Social Responsibility "the first thing that comes to my mind is the credibility of the organization and most importantly the university which is culturally and socially responsible through the provision of quality education and employment platform
Proper Working Condition In the case of females, we are happy to work in the area where to keep ourselves away from the negative thoughts of people. The most important factor that I consider is relaxation at the job. I have done all of my jobs based on the factor of relaxation..."	Robustness "...good relationship of management with lecturers, providing a legal platform for employee knowledge development, and assistance of organization in crisis"
Total Rewards "Employee benefits and on-time remuneration are considerable things. Personally, I enjoy working in a university where employee motivation and recognition programs are considered to be the foremost important initiatives"	Competence "...I found interest in this organization (current employer) due to the presence of highly competent and talented employees that's why I applied and got a job here so it was the blessing of talented personnel and willingness to learn more and more with such competent lecturers"
Advancement "To learn social skills, to become a social activist, and to participate in different workshops and seminars, certain universities offer such platforms and" (Participant).	Employee Involvement I want to be independent and autonomous and have authority in decision making and I don't prefer an organization where rigidity is dominant in terms of repetitive reminders of policy and rules compliance
Job Security "Job security is another important factor that attracts me the more. Overall we can learn a lot with those employers who have expertise in their workforce as well we feel secure at the job"	Innovativeness Ideas can be generated from talented employees; expert opinions help the organization in taking new initiatives. In short, problems solving and creativity will come along with talent

Discussion

This part of the study discusses the findings in light of current literature to compare, confirm, and contrast the outcomes of this study with previous research. It provides insights into the instrumental or job-related attributes of the employer brand and also elaborates on the

symbolic attributes of the employer brand. According to Lievens and Highhouse (2003), instrumental refers to such attributes that describe a job or organization in terms of objective, concrete, and factual features embedded in the job or organization. So, the overall data analysis reveals eight different instrumental attributes that an employer brand

will have: Work-life-balance, Advancement, Job Security, Proper working conditions, Total rewards, Autonomy, Location and Security, and Organizational. These attributes are described in light of the available literature. Work-life balance is the first instrumental attribute having different meanings for different people. For some people, it is a balance between their job and child care; for others, it means having time for family members. However, in academic contexts like universities, participants believed that a university should have proper work-life balance (WLB) policies to ensure the social as well as professional desires of the employees. The same attribute has been noted in previous studies as reported by Watson (2010), and Aboul-Ela (2016), Highhouse et al. (1999). Employee advancement as the other major finding of the study includes learning opportunities in which employees can excel their skills in multiple forms such as training and development, knowledge sharing, assistance in facilitating higher education, and personal and professional growth. This is in line with the study of Chhabra and Sharma (2014). (Judge, Bono, Locke (2000), Fulmer et al. (2003), Highhouse et al. (1999), and Lievens et al. (2005). Another theme that emerged from the data was job security. Job security is critical for employees working in the private sector. In a comparative study, Arachchige and Robertson (2013) have identified job security as the most preferred employer attribute among graduating and MBA students. Furthermore, proper working conditions have been reported by the study participants. Different codes have been used by the participants of this study for the issue related to the proper working conditions such as a good environment, pleasant working place, relaxation at work, and separate staff rooms for lecturers (females' view). Similarly, some scientific studies as have also used working conditions in different terms that all show the importance of proper working conditions such as a happy environment, an exciting environment (Arachchige and Robertson, 2013), and fun at work (Karl et al., 2007; Lievens et al., 2005). As a common instrumental attribute, total rewards have also

been noted by this study's respondents and mentioned many times in previous studies. Rewards and compensation are the leading motivational factors based on which an applicant decides to apply. Moreover, good salary and benefits programs, including allowances and bonuses, are employer brand attributes reported by studies like Lievens et al. (2005) and Watson (2010), Aboul-Ela (2016), Kucherov and Zavyalova (2012), Chhabra and Sharma (2014) and Berthon et al. (2005). Moreover, having freedom in task-related decisions plays an essential role in becoming an employer of choice. Certain lecturers believed that private universities as an employer ignore employees' input and their involvement in the decision-making process. Autonomy as an instrumental attribute has also been noted in a study conducted in the military context by Lievens et al. (2005). Similarly, location and national stability of the country are important instrumental attributes for some participants, and location is especially more imperative for female faculty. Location as an attribute has little Support in scientific studies conducted on employer brand and organization attractiveness. However, scholars have demonstrated the role of location in employee attractiveness, as Highhouse et al. (1999) noted. Working in Afghanistan is difficult due to severe insecurity and political instability, particularly for females. Therefore, the location could be an essential factor for employees due to political instability. Another major theme of the study is organizational justice. According to the participant of the study, distributive justice is missing in most of the universities as not all the employees have been assigned to jobs where fairness in work and benefits is ensured. It's worth mentioning that distributive justice has not yet been identified by other studies as an attribute for becoming an employer brand. The findings of this study add organizational justice as an instrumental attribute to the conceptual framework of the study.

Symbolic traits are the secondary constituents of the employer brand. "Symbolic attributes are abstract, intangible, and subjective that are built up from people's perception and inferences about the product"

(Rai, [2019](#)). In the hiring context, symbolic attributes are the aspects that show an organization's personality abstractly and subjectively. Attributes that represent an organization's personality are symbolic information made by the employees of an organization (Lievens & Highhouse, [2003](#); Lievens, [2007](#); Van Hoye et al., [2013](#)). Organizational prestige as the first symbolic attribute has been interchangeably used with the external organizational image which refers to the same beliefs reported by Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail ([1994](#)). Moreover, trust, high ranking, and brand equity or quality services have been predominantly mentioned by multiple lectures as the most triggered factors towards becoming an employer brand, especially in higher education institutions. The "Prestigious employer" has been noted by Ambler et.al ([1996](#)). Lievens and Highhouse ([2003](#)), and Sarivastave and Bhatnagar (2010). In addition, the dignity of labour or sincerity toward employees is among the other imperative symbolic attributes of the employer brand according to the findings of this study. Based on the experience of the respondents, they are more interested to engage with an employer where their dignity is assured. These findings are in line with the previous studies of Terjesen, Vinnicomne, and Freeman ([2007](#)); Arachchige and Robertson ([2013](#)); Barrow and Mosley ([2007](#)); Kucherove and Zavyalova ([2012](#)); Leekha and Sharma ([2014](#)); Judge et al; Sarri and Judge ([2004](#)). Innovation as the theme of this study is another attribute that shows the symbolic feature of the organization. The findings of this study reveal that creativity in processes and actions, change orientation, potential environmental adaptability, working on new ideas for quality education, and taking new initiatives to bring more enlightenment in services are the needed attributes for an employer brand. This is congruent with the findings of previous studies such as the Terjesen, Vinnicomne, and Freeman ([2007](#)), Backhaus et al. ([2004](#)); Erlenkaemper, Hinzdorf, Priemuth, and Thaden (2003). Employee involvement in decision-making is also necessary according to participants' perceptions. Moreover, the fundamental issue of private universities is a

lack of employee input in decision-making, which leads to the imposition of policies that may have detrimental effects on the potential of lecturers. Furthermore, lecturers should be allowed to openly share their opinions with management, and their grievances and complaints should not be suppressed. Previous studies have found no evidence of employee involvement in decision-making. Moreover, according to the study's participants, they care about competence in an organization. Their logic was to share and learn as much as they could from senior and knowledgeable lecturers. Lievens and Highhouse ([2003](#)) identified competence as the primary symbolic attribute that people associate with an organization. The next imperative theme of the study is corporate social responsibility initiatives which are essential for becoming an employer of choice stated by Turban and Cable ([2003](#)). Similarly, the faculty members of sampled universities reported that one of the priorities that they prefer is the corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives of the university. CSR being a symbolic attribute has been reported by other researchers as well such as Turban and Cable ([2003](#)) and Aboul-Ela (2016) in their studies on employer brands. In addition, having financial strength, enough resources for innovation, and the ability to solve problems are the other concerns of this study that could be reflected in the umbrella term of robustness. Employee support potential, assistance, and Support of employees in crisis and solving their problems are the key sub-themes that have been derived from the data. Robustness has been noted by Lievens and Highhouse ([2003](#)) and Lievens ([2007](#)) as the trait that people may associate with a job or organization as the employer brand. Furthermore, global exposure and foreign links have been recognized as the imperative symbolic attributes by the participants of this study. According to different lecturers, universities should have linkages with foreign institutions for different programs such as student exchange, employee exchange, scholarship schemes, and cultural exchange that can ultimately influence the creativity and quality of education positively. In previous studies, Kucherove and Zavyalova

(2012) have reported the degree of corporate internationalization as the imperative attribute for an employer brand.

Following data analysis and verification of the findings from the available literature, the proposed conceptual framework has been amended to include certain instrumental and symbolic attributes. The study's conceptual framework has been expanded to include

instrumental attributes such as work-life balance, job security, autonomy, location and security, and total rewards. While symbolic attributes such as CSR, employee involvement, labour dignity, and global exposure have been added to the study's proposed conceptual model. To illustrate the change between the previously stated conceptual framework and the current framework, the table below depicts the modified conceptual framework.

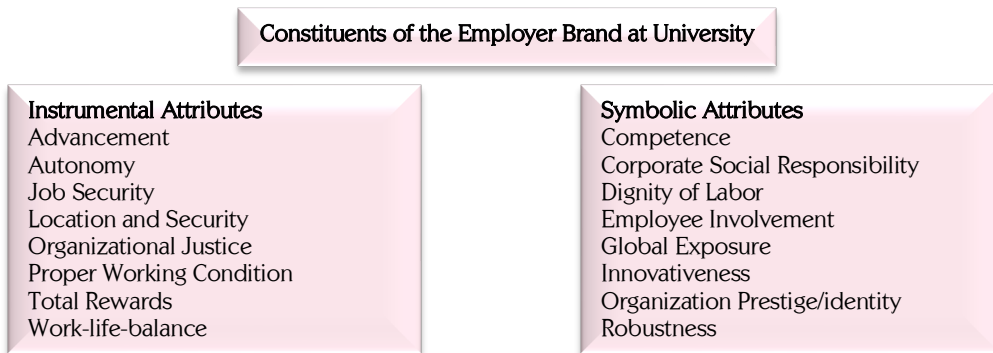


Figure 2: Modified Conceptual/Theoretical Framework of the Study

Conclusion

The study was conducted in the context of private universities in the eastern zone of Afghanistan. The respondents were faculty members of seven sampled universities. Semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion were conducted with the lecturers of different universities and different departments. The objective was to understand the perception of faculty regarding their lived experience as to what attributes they prefer the most while selecting their employer in the context of universities. As a result of eight semi-structured interviews and one focus group discussion, eight instrumental or job-related and eight symbolic or trait-related themes have been derived that constitute a university as an employer brand. Among these attributes, some instrumental attributes overlap with the conceptual framework used in this study while the rest are new, identified by the study at hands such as *work-life balance, job security, autonomy, location and security, and total rewards*. Similarly, symbolic

attributes such as *CSR, employee involvement, labour dignity, and global exposure* have been added to the study's proposed conceptual model being the contribution of this study.

The emergent theoretical framework of this study will assist private universities in making policy and other employment-related decisions. The study findings will encourage private universities to consider certain themes of the study as necessary components of becoming the desirable place to work with. This is a pioneer study of employer brands in Afghanistan. The findings of this study will stimulate private universities to adopt and implement the identified themes as the essential traits for becoming the desirable working place. Moreover, it will help private universities to attract more talented and qualified lecturers since it is all about the optimum level of benefits a university should offer to its lecturers.

Limitations of the Study

The study is restricted to a small number of

private universities in the eastern zone of Afghanistan therefore, it can only be transferable to the sampled and other similar private universities. The study is undertaken in

the fragile context of Afghanistan hence; the findings may be more transferable to fragile states. To make this theory more transferrable, empirical evidence is needed in similar states.

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