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Affective commitment to the employer brand: Development and validation of a scale

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Abstract   In recent years employer branding has become increasingly important as a source of sustainable competitive advantage. Companies are trying to engender affective commitment in the best employees in a global labour market. In this study, we develop and validate a multidimensional scale to measure the strength of an employee's affective commitment to the employer brand in five separate studies. In Studies 1 and 2 the Affective Commitment to the Employer Brand (ACEB) scale was developed and tested for its structure, reliability and convergent validity. Study 3 examines additional reliability and discriminant validity. Study 4 provides evidence of external validity. Study 5 examines the scale's nomological validity showing that a positive experience with the employer brand is important in making the employee develop affective commitment towards it. The limitations of the scale and the boundary conditions of its applicability are also discussed.

Introduction

Employer branding is a hot topic among companies of all sizes, in all countries, and in all business sectors. The Talent Brand Index survey (LinkedIn, 2013) found that 94% of companies plan to increase or maintain their employer branding budget in 2013. In the words of Steve Barham, Senior Director of LinkedIn Talent Solutions, ''The ability to better understand how your company is perceived among key professional audiences empowers you to take steps to better engage the professionals you most want to hire''.

Academics and practitioners alike agree that products and brands are among the most valuable assets of a company (Madden et al., 2006), and that the goal of branding strategies is to attract, retain and engage customers by creating brand value in the consumer's mind. Until fairly recently, only those external to the company were considered to be customers. However, the branding literature is increasingly promoting the notion that a firm's own employees are its primary customers (Edwards, 2010), the rationale being that employees are indeed (internal) customers of a valuable (internal) product: employment. Therefore, branding strategies should take into account not just external customers but also internal ones; businesses should seek to attract, retain and commit employees to the corporate

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mission by satisfying their needs and wants (Thomson et al., 2005; Punjaisri et al., 2008).

Satisfying needs and wants has increasingly come to mean providing emotional satisfaction. In consumer marketing, it is widely accepted that brand success relies on making promises that add value for the customer. In recent years these promises have taken on strong emotional content (Schmitt, 1999; Thomson et al., 2005; Gobé, 2010). Emotions strengthen attachment and may lead customers to buy a product, even when it carries a premium price.

Like consumer marketing, employer branding has also shifted towards the delivery of emotional benefits to achieve employee commitment (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2009). This affective commitment can then lead to desirable behaviours such as willingness to help or propensity for further development (Burmann et al., 2009). In this sense, consumer branding and employer branding are closely linked.

Whereas in consumer marketing, valid and reliable multidimensional scales already exist to measure consumer's affective bond to the brand, such as attachment to brands (Thomson et al., 2005), brand experience (Brakus et al., 2009) or brand love (Batra et al., 2012), in management the most commonly used measure is that of Allen and Meyer (1990). This conceptualization consists of three differentiated components: affective (desire to commit), normative (moral obligation to commit) and continuance (perceived cost of abandon) commitment and has proved efficient to measure the different types of commitment (bond) of an employee towards his/her organisation. In other words, the scale is focused on the discrimination between commitment profiles (Gellatly et al., 2006). Affective commitment in turn refers three dimensions as initially defined by its authors: ''identification with, involvement in, and emotional attachment to the organization'' (Allen and Meyer, 1996, p. 253). However the affective commitment mind set is measured with a single-dimension.

Since 1990, the first publication of Allen and Meyers' scale, the relevance of affective commitment has emerged as a major issue of interest. Several authors have requested that attention should be directed at the development of measures of the relevant affective commitment mind-sets by adopting a deeper, new, more comprehensive perspective (Morgan and Hunt, 1994; Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001; Evanschitzky et al., 2006; Verhoef et al., 2002; Fullerton, 2005; Aaker et al., 2004; Mattila, 2004; Fullerton, 2005; Gustafsson et al., 2005; King and Grace, 2010).

The aim of this study is to develop a new reliable, valid and parsimonious scale to measure affective commitment that differs from previous approaches offered by literature, focusing on affective commitment to the employer brand. In this study, affective commitment is described as the degree of the emotional bond between the subject and the employer brand that encompasses enthusiasm with, and attachment to the employer brand, and creates a desire in the employee to remain in the organisation in the long term. Such an instrument may serve as an easily applicable tool for helping companies attract, retain, and appraise affective commitment to the employer brand from outstanding employees in a globally competitive landscape.

Following procedures recommended by Churchill (1979) and further developed by others (e.g. Fornell and Larker, 1981; Anderson and Gerbing, 1988; Hair et al., 2005), we used qualitative and quantitative approaches to develop and validate a psychometrically reliable measure of the strength of affective commitment to the employer brand. Specifically we present here the results of 5 studies: In Study 1 we conducted a qualitative investigation of the domain of an employee's affective commitment to the employer brand, leading to the design of a pretest questionnaire to arrive at a more parsimonious set of survey items. In Study 2, we used a quantitative approach to develop and purify the scale, conducted exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis and initially assessed scale reliability, unidimensionality and convergent and discriminant validity. In Study 3, using a new sample of employees, we conducted a quantitative study to assess the scale's discriminant validity with respect to potentially related constructs (e.g. satisfaction and motivation). In Study 4 we examined the stability of the scale across independent samples for further evidence of external validity. Finally, in Study 5, we examined the scale's nomological validity.

Theoretical background

What is employer branding?

Ambler and Barrow (1996) coined the term employer branding to refer to all the benefits offered by a company that together create a unique employer enthusiasm in the minds of job applicants and employees, and that make them willing to join or stay with the company. These authors suggest that just like a consumer brand, an employer brand possesses a personality and an image in the mind of the labour market, which can create tight bonds between the brand and its workforce (Pitt et al., 2002). An employer brand represents a ''value proposition'' that individuals believe they will receive by working for a specific employer (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

Recently the term has evolved to include a wide set of company activities aimed at recruiting and retaining talented professionals (Mosley, 2007; Davies, 2008). In this expanded sense, the term ''employer branding'' encompasses the process of building the employer brand and differentiating it to make it competitive, as well as the specific actions undertaken to attract, recruit, select, retain, recycle and release employees (Sutherland et al., 2002). Throughout the varied processes and activities collectively referred to as ''employer branding'', employee commitment to the employer brand is a key indicator of the state of the relationship between the employee and the employer (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2009; Fernandez-Lores, 2012).

Although employer branding is still a relatively young field, several models can already be found in the literature (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Mosley, 2007; King and Grace, 2010). Some researchers consider employer branding strategies to be a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2009; Maxwell and Knox, 2009; Edwards, 2010), making the concept analogous to that of consumer branding (Keller and Lehmann, 2006). This group of researchers holds that employer branding is