

Winning applicants and influencing job seekers: An introduction to the special issue on employer branding and talent acquisition

Kang Yang Trevor Yu¹  | Brian R. Dineen² | David G. Allen^{3,4}  | Anthony C. Klotz⁵ 

¹Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

²Krannert School of Management, Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA

³Neely School of Business, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas, USA

⁴Warwick Business School, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

⁵UCL School of Management, University College London, London, UK

Correspondence

Kang Yang Trevor Yu, Nanyang Business School, Nanyang Technological University, S3 - B1C - 94, Division of Leadership, Management and Organisation, College of Business (Nanyang Business School), Nanyang Technological University, 639798, Singapore.
Email: akyu@ntu.edu.sg

Abstract

This article introduces the special issue in Human Resource Management featuring employer branding and talent acquisition. We provide a brief history of talent acquisition and introduce an employer branding approach to this process, especially emphasizing the potential of this approach for building competitive advantage. The challenges of employer branding on social media in the digital age are also highlighted. We then introduce the five papers contained in this issue, each representing a variety of levels of analysis, theoretical perspectives, environmental contexts, and methodological and design approaches to scholarly investigations on this topic. Our introduction concludes with a list of research questions characterizing an agenda for future research based around the themes of (i) macro contextual effects; (ii) strategic employer branding; (iii) psychology and processing of employer brands; (iv) role the time; and (v) methods and approaches.

KEYWORDS

employer branding, job search, organizational attraction, recruitment, Talent acquisition

1 | INTRODUCTION

A recent worldwide survey conducted by the ManpowerGroup involving more than 40,000 employers in 40 countries indicates that the scarcity of skilled talent in the global economy has reached critical levels. With about three quarters of companies reporting talent shortages and hiring difficulties, especially in key sectors like education, health, government, IT and technology, addressing these talent acquisition challenges has perhaps never been more urgent (ManpowerGroup, 2022). The consequences of such talent shortages can be severe and long-lasting. KornFerry projections (Franzino et al., 2022) even suggest that the global human talent shortage will reach more than 85 million people by 2030, which could result in an estimated \$8.5 trillion in unrealized annual revenues. Exacerbating this situation, prevailing conditions from the lingering Covid-19 pandemic, aging populations, shifting societal preferences away from conventional employment arrangements, and the rise of the gig economy have further fueled this emerging talent shortage perfect storm. Some companies have chosen to address this situation by offering large pay packages and signing bonuses, which is hardly a sustainable strategy (Pelosse, 2022).

2 | A BRIEF HISTORY OF TALENT ACQUISITION

Our current body of knowledge on talent acquisition has primarily been built through employee recruitment research. Recruitment refers to the *broad set of activities that connect applicants to organizations and their jobs* (Ployhart et al., 2017, p. 3). More specifically though, recruitment is viewed as a process occurring over time, usually beginning with generating, sourcing, and identifying job candidates, followed by engaging with job applicants and managing their status, and finally influencing the job choice of these applicants (Barber, 1998). In their 100-year review of research on recruitment, Ployhart et al. (2017) reported that although the earliest article on the topic was published in 1917, recruitment research only started to flourish in the 1970s, an era in which economic changes led to increased employee mobility and the need for more specialized skill sets, causing organizations to invest more resources in identifying and attracting suitable candidates. The focus of this research included recruitment interviews (i.e., interviews designed to attract

applicants), the effectiveness of various recruiting strategies (e.g., using multiple recruitment sources), and how realistic job previews (RJPs) affected applicants' job perceptions. Collectively, this research highlighted that these organizational recruiting activities had meaningful impacts on applicant attitudes and behaviors (Rynes et al., 1980). Particularly important to applicant outcomes were characteristics of the individuals representing the organization and how applicants were treated during recruitment (e.g., time delays in communicating organizational decisions to applicants). Interestingly, Rynes et al. (1980) noted that recruitment practices and experiences could be the deciding factor for job applicants considering competing employment opportunities that featured similar job attributes.

The scholarly focus on recruitment sources, recruiters, and RJPs continued to dominate the field at the turn of the millennium (Breugh & Starke, 2000), which led to calls for increased attention to the processes that mediate relationships between different recruitment activities and their outcomes (e.g., applicant cognitive processing and recruitment message attributes). Moreover, advancements in digital technologies and intense labor market competition led to additional calls for a stronger integration of the recruitment context in talent acquisition research, emphasizing recruitment's potential for helping firms gain strategic competitive advantage (Rynes & Cable, 2003). Such calls for recruitment research that used firm-level outcomes grew louder as the decade progressed (Dineen & Soltis, 2011), urging researchers to evaluate recruitment activities in terms of their ability to provide a source of sustainable competitive advantage through offering firms and their candidates' experiences that are valuable, rare, and hard to replicate (Barney, 1986).

The result of the recruitment research evolution from the 1970s to the 2010s is a deep body of knowledge of how different recruitment strategies affect pre- and post-hire outcomes at the individual, group, and firm levels. This evolution continues today, as evidenced by the dominant themes of recruitment research in the field, which are reflective of the disruptive changes in business and society (Ployhart et al., 2017). First, in the area of recruitment and diversity, researchers are studying how recruitment messages can be used to increase applicant diversity and reduce adverse impacts that may be disadvantaging minority candidates (Campion et al., 2019; McFarland & Kim, 2021; Van Iddekinge et al., 2016). Second, in the area of recruitment practices and technology, significant effort is being put into investigating how digital communication tools like social media have revolutionized the practice of recruitment. Dineen and Allen (2014) identified two overarching themes that capture the fundamentals of this digital revolution—the richness and customization of relevant information available to potential candidates and the shifting levels of control and access to job and organizational information that these technologies provide to applicants. Third and finally, recruitment scholars have deepened their focus on organizational image, particularly how applicants and candidates view and experience the employer through its *employer brand* (Cable & Turban, 2001). An employer brand refers to the perception that outsiders have regarding the desirability of a firm as a place to work, mainly in terms of its familiarity,

image, and reputation (Cable & Turban, 2001). Scholars have shown that these cognitive constructs, which capture the knowledge and perceptions that potential applicants hold of employers and the jobs within them, not only influence applicant attraction and job choice (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016), but also how applicants differentiate firms from their competitors (Dineen et al., 2019; Yu, 2019).

3 | AN EMPLOYER BRANDING APPROACH

The focus of our special issue lies at the intersection of these three themes, but focuses on employer branding in particular as perhaps the contemporary approach to talent acquisition. Originating from consumer marketing where brands represent a combination of tangible and intangible attributes that create value for both product and company, an employer brand comprises the tangible (e.g., compensation, rewards, benefits, career advancement) and intangible (e.g., prestige, recognition, autonomy, social belonging) attributes or benefits that are associated with an organization (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Edwards, 2010). Employer brands can differentiate employers and their offerings from competitors, highlighting the unique qualities associated with working at a given company (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Therefore, in the context of talent acquisition, an employer's brand speaks to what it is expected to offer future employees in terms of tangible and intangible benefits and experiences.

Employer branding thus refers to the process of building and developing an employer brand that is identifiable and unique (Theurer et al., 2016). Based on the nature of employer brands, this process usually involves several crucial activities. As a start, this involves identifying not only the attributes of the employee experience, but also emphasizing the distinctiveness of this experience relative to other employers. In talent acquisition, this involves managing and cultivating the organization's employer image in the minds of job seekers—trying to create mental connections between the organization as an employer and instrumental and symbolic attributes that job seekers may value (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). An underlying assumption is that these various unique attributes combine to form a common or shared employment experience (Edwards, 2010). Once this experience and its characterizing attributes are identified, employer branding involves developing and communicating the uniqueness and attractiveness of this employment offering to potential high-quality applicants. Marketing principles and techniques are thus applied to the employer branding process through recruitment campaigns and ongoing communication channels to raise awareness (i.e., building familiarity) and strengthen associations between the employer brand and desirable qualities (Collins, 2007; Theurer et al., 2016; Tumasjan et al., 2020).

Although employer branding may appear to be a fairly novel recruitment strategy, almost three decades ago, Maurer et al. (1992) highlighted the advantages of such a marketing-based approach to talent acquisition that have proven remarkably prescient. First, conceptual parallels between consumer-based and job-based marketing have paved the way for more coordinated investigations highlighting information gathering and job choice behavior in consequential situations

that require high cognitive involvement from individual job seekers (Collins, 2007; Collins & Stevens, 2002). Next, in the spirit of adopting an interdisciplinary approach to investigating recruitment as a multifaceted phenomenon, a branding perspective has also introduced conceptual richness through the introduction of frameworks used to describe the instrumental and symbolic qualities of the employment experience, tying it to individual affect and attitudes that underlie desirability and attractiveness of the employer. Lastly, a marketing-based branding lens also emphasizes the importance of adopting a strategic approach to talent acquisition, which facilitates linking talent acquisition practices to the overall strategic human resource management and competitive advantage of the firm (Ployhart & Kim, 2014).

4 | EMPLOYER BRANDING CHALLENGES IN THE DIGITAL AGE

The employer branding approach to talent acquisition holds significant potential for employers to develop a sustained competitive advantage through people. However, the current context surrounding its practice offers several unique challenges for hiring organizations. The advancement of digital technologies and social media that facilitate relatively free creation, editing, sharing, and exchange of information in multiple media formats across the public sphere have fundamentally altered the way that employees encounter and process information about employer organizations (Leonardi & Vaast, 2017). As such, they represent a powerful contextual element that affects how organizations develop and manage their employer brand, in at least two key ways (Dineen et al., 2019).

First, managing employer brands on social media represents a considerable departure from traditional methods of employer branding, yielding questions regarding the very basis of traditional communication and image management (Etter et al., 2019). Organizations that once dictated the type of information presented about their jobs and work culture through their public relations and/or human resource personnel are now faced with the widespread public use of social media to produce, disseminate, and consume information. Now that social media enables individuals to publicly exchange experiences and opinions, online evaluations of both the employment experience and culture of organizations are readily accessible to virtually all potential job candidates. Stemming from a multitude of actors with diverse information sources and motivations, the complex and interconnected communities housed on these digital platforms also make it possible for multiple narratives about an employer's brand to simultaneously coexist in the public domain (Etter et al., 2019).

Accompanying societal dynamics surrounding social media use are significant as well, with members of the public (including potential job seekers) often expecting companies to take public stands on controversial issues (Wang et al., 2019). Furthermore, previous organizational tactics involving public relations and even intimidation have also become less effective as information from individual social media users is sometimes viewed as more credible owing to their independence from corporate interests, firsthand experience, and shared

affiliations with the wider social network. As a result of these changes, employer brands are now cocreated between both internal and relatively independent external third-party sources (Dineen et al., 2019), making controlling and managing the socially constructed value of employer brands significantly more challenging.

Second, the attributes and affordances of social media are also inherently more dynamic and complex to effectively leverage in employer branding efforts. Because independent content can be posted and disseminated almost instantly, and stays online permanently, controlling the narrative about how one's organization is seen by potential candidates is incredibly challenging (McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). Moreover, social media has become a platform for users to express themselves through emotional and humorous alteration of official images associated with organizations. Such subversion and distortion of organizational imagery effectively renders employer branding a moving target requiring consistent monitoring, communication, and interaction with external parties who may also be anonymous (Etter et al., 2019).

In sum, organizations face substantial obstacles as they engage in employer branding as a tool for talent acquisition in the current day. It is thus no surprise that the current state of knowledge in the area remains fragmented and offers limited insight to the dynamics of employer branding in the age of a digital world dominated by Web 2.0 technologies like social media. The purpose of this special issue is to add some clarity to several key areas needed to advance scholarship and practice in this field of inquiry.

Several key themes emerge across the five articles in this special issue, which we summarize in the form of broad research questions. First, *who* are the key parties involved in employer branding? The studies in this issue focus on employers and potential job seekers as the two primary stakeholders in the talent acquisition equation. Next, *where* does employer branding occur, and *when* it is most effective? Here, the articles describe the process and outcomes of employer branding within digital environments including online job ads, company webpages, and social media. Attention is also given to the content of communications in the form of job ads and postings emanating from employers, as well as from third-party sources on social media. Finally, *how* does employer branding exert its effects on job seekers? The articles in this issue explore the underlying cognitive processing and reactions to employer branding.

5 | PAPERS IN THE SPECIAL ISSUE

This special issue features five papers that, together, deepen current knowledge of the employer branding approach to talent acquisition by addressing research questions related to the *who*, *where*, *when*, and *how* of this phenomenon. First, Van Hove et al. (2022) introduce the concepts of points-of-relevance and points-of-difference to the study of employer images as a key component of employer brands. Specifically, they apply brand positioning concepts from marketing to uncover relevant organizational images that potential job applicants use to judge the attractiveness of potential employers. Utilizing Lievens and Highhouse's (2003) instrumental-symbolic framework to identify distinct

images ranging from objective and concrete (instrumental) to subjective and intangible (symbolic), these authors extend previous research to examine whether the same images that influence organizational attraction are relevant across different industries. Moreover, their analysis considers whether these images serve to differentiate between employers and industries. The authors worked with an HR consultancy to obtain a subsample of Belgian data from a best employer competition. Actual data were collected by a market research agency from 7171 Belgian workers representing 24 organizations from six industries.

Their findings reveal that, based on the instrumental-symbolic framework, both instrumental (e.g., interesting work, pleasant working environment, and competitive compensation) and symbolic (e.g., innovativeness, gentleness, and competence) attributes served as *points-of-relevance*, or images that influenced organizational attraction. Furthermore, potential applicants attached the same level of importance to both instrumental and symbolic images as points-of-relevance. Moreover, these same images were relevant at both the organization and industry levels of analysis despite the considerable range of industries studied. In terms of *points-of-difference*, or attributes that both drive attraction and differentiate between organizations, results uncovered significant differentiation in several images studied. For instance, *job content* and *innovativeness* not only influenced attraction but also played the crucial role of differentiating employers from each other both within and across industries. Other images like *working conditions* were relevant for attraction but did not serve to differentiate between industries.

Offering several concrete takeaways for employer branding, Van Hoye et al.'s research highlights the existence of several image attributes like job content, working conditions, compensation, innovativeness, competence, and gentleness, that serve to attract talent within and across industries. However, focusing on branding based on these influential images alone is not enough for employers to stand out. Instead, organizations need to also focus on which images serve as points-of-difference in order to develop a unique employer brand so as to achieve successful brand positioning. Organizations would also do well to approach employer branding from an industry perspective where talent can be attracted to particular industries based on the collective image shared among all firms belonging to an industry. Industry associations and communities of practice thus have a strong role to play in industry-level employment branding and talent acquisition.

In the next paper, Theurer et al. (2022) shift the focus from potential candidates to hiring organizations and how these firms represent themselves to potential job seekers on their webpages. The authors specifically investigate the previously unexplored content of company webpages and the signals they convey. Extending their research beyond the intended content featured on websites that are within the employer's control, Theurer et al. also compared these projected employer images to similar information featured on third-party social media-based employer review websites. In their analyses, the authors apply a novel method – computer-aided text analysis (CATA) – to first analyze the webpages of companies represented in the Fortune 500 list of US companies. This method specifically comprises three main steps. The first involves the

definition of relevant webpage sections and sub-categories with employer-relevant information (e.g., “Careers,” “Culture”) through the gathering of website text data in relevant webpage sections. Second, word lists are created based on the identification of instrumental and symbolic image dimensions. This involves following deductive and inductive approaches to compile an exhaustive discrete word list for each of the identified theoretical dimensions representing the images. Finally, the text analysis software LIWC is used to code and calculate the relative occurrence scores of words represented in the generated word lists, which are then aggregated at the company level and divided by the overall number of words featured across each company.

The running of these analyses on historical webpage data gathered across three data points over a period of 3 years (i.e., 2010, 2012, 2014), revealed that the projected images on webpages are relatively consistent across time. Slight adjustments were nonetheless still observed on instrumental attributes like *pay* and *benefits*. Theurer et al.'s findings also indicated that only slight differences existed between the projected images across companies both within and between industries. Finally, when compared against third-party employer ratings featured on the social media platform [Glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com), these authors found that projected images on company webpages differed somewhat from ratings on Glassdoor provided by current and former employees.

The practical implications of Theurer et al.'s research center around the introduction of CATA as a novel valid approach for assessing projected employer images. In the practice of employer branding, this approach can thus be effectively applied to identify gaps between intended employer images and perceptions of these images according to current and former employees. Such image audits can serve as the basis for strategic adjustments to intended images as well as the formulation of communication strategies that are often key to the employer branding process. Equally important is that this approach can also be used to compare a firm's employer image against those of its competitors. Generating such business intelligence is crucial for how organizations can strategically identify, differentiate, and communicate images that make up a unique employment offering as part of an overall employer brand.

The article by Wang et al. (2022) brings together key stakeholders of employers and potential candidates to expand upon the implications of different and conflicting components of employer brands. Their article examines the effects of different combinations of multi-source brand signals on employees and job seekers. Specifically, they investigate the implications of conflicting employer brand signals in the form of *corporate social responsibility* (CSR) or organizational actions that account for stakeholder expectations and the triple bottom line of economic, social, and environmental performance; *corporate social irresponsibility* (CSIR) or irresponsible or controversial actions observed as harmful to society; and finally *corporate ability* referring to a company's expertise in producing and delivering its outputs. Employing signaling theory as a theoretical lens, their study investigated the interactive effects of these three components of employer brands on organizational attraction.

Results across three studies, including a field study on current employees at an MNC, an experiment involving crowd-sourced participants, and a follow-up study on the job seeking experiences of these crowd-sourced participants together demonstrate that CSiR is a distinct and influential component of employers' brands that can coexist with CSR. Furthermore, they also provide evidence that CSR and corporate ability signals compensate for each other during talent attraction. In other words, when corporate ability is perceived to be weak, positive CSR signals can make up for this weakness when it comes to attracting talent. Interestingly, some types of conflicting employer brand signals also can be beneficial, where having a combination of CSiR and weak corporate ability signals was perceived as more attractive than a combination of CSiR and strong corporate ability.

The key talent acquisition takeaways from this study include appreciating the value of investing in CSR not only for its direct association with attraction, but also as a means of compensating for inherent weaknesses in other parts of corporate performance when it comes to attracting talent. Furthermore, findings also highlight the need for strategic coordination among organizational functions dealing with public relations, HR, and marketing in order to manage an employer brand with consistent signals in terms of CSR, CSiR, and corporate ability.

The fourth paper by Collins and Martinez-Moreno (2022) continues this special issue's focus on recruitment messages and their content. In particular, their research offers guidance for how unknown organizations can use recruitment messages to influence job seekers by focusing on the degree to which certain information provided in messages can be verified (i.e., message claim verifiability). Adopting an information economics approach to brand equity as well as applying insights from the search-experience framework, they document the influence of recruitment messages communicated by companies with no existing employer image on job pursuit intentions.

Collins and Martinez-Moreno conducted online surveys with active undergraduate and graduate student job seekers, simulating situations where job seekers have to evaluate multiple prospective employers during the early stages of talent acquisition. The authors adopted a within-subjects design and exposed participants to nine unique recruitment message vignettes from different employers purported to be recruiting on campus. Each message covered unique job and organizational attributes previously linked to recruitment outcomes (e.g., compensation, location, corporate social responsibility practices, career advancement opportunities, training opportunities, treatment from supervisor, inclusive work environment, work-life balance, and interesting work). Participants were assessed for their reactions to each message in terms of claim verifiability, credibility, and job pursuit intentions. Chosen job attributes were meant to vary in the extent to which they could be verified by job seekers. For instance, attributes like compensation and location are usually easily verified through an online search of the company website. On the other hand, attributes like supervisor treatment and interesting work are more difficult to verify until one starts actually working at the company. Lastly, fictitious company names were used in order to

ensure that participants had no prior knowledge of the company or its employer brand.

The findings confirmed that job seekers perceived varying levels of verifiability across different recruitment messages owing to their content. Search-oriented messages contain job attributes that are easy to verify through additional sources like other online sources (e.g., location, compensation, training opportunities), whereas experience-oriented messages covered attributes that are difficult to verify (e.g., supervisor treatment, inclusive environment, interesting work). Such differences are meaningful because more verifiable messages are seen as more credible, suggesting that the information signaled by verifiable messages can be trusted. In contrast, job seekers may view less verifiable messages as less credible because employers may be seen as more likely to make exaggerated or false claims knowing that the information cannot be verified without actual in-person experience. The finding that credibility mediated the effects of claim verifiability on pursuit intentions further highlights the importance of message credibility as a signal of other possible positive employer qualities, and thus also of the overall quality of the job opportunity.

This investigation provides the key practical insight that not all images and corresponding attributes equally influence job seekers during the early stage of recruitment, especially when prospective employers have little prior familiarity with the company. Employers with nascent or unfamiliar brands should thus focus on promoting attributes that are easily verifiable like location, compensation, and training, thereby engendering credibility and attracting more applications as a result. Extending previous understanding of the importance of using credible media to communicate job information, these findings also signify that the credibility of the message itself matters.

Finally, the article by Yu et al. (2022) continues this issue's focus on recruitment messages by engaging in a fine-grained analysis of the cognitive processing of employer reviews found on social media. In line with this special issue's goal of pioneering the development of both new theory and methods of inquiry, this research sought to deepen our understanding of the psychological processing that occurs when potential job seekers encounter job and organizational information on social media. Adopting [Glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com) as a research context that features both positive and negative word-of-mouth (WOM) about prospective employers, the authors utilize an eye-tracking approach to investigate the level of cognitive processing that occurs as one learns more about employers on such platforms. Specifically, they investigate what factors influence the level of cognitive processing devoted to making sense of the positive versus negative information upon which employer brands are based. In addition, their study explores drivers of the credibility perceptions of electronic WOM (eWOM), which is becoming a major source of information contributing to the development of employer brand perceptions among potential job candidates.

[Glassdoor.com](https://www.glassdoor.com) was chosen as a context to study eWOM because comments on this platform are not only presented in the form of employer reviews directed toward potential job seekers, but also because such eWOM is clearly displayed in two separate sections featuring positive versus negative information. Such separation facilitated

the eye-tracking methodology used to investigate the cognitive attentional resources devoted to making sense of eWOM. Specifically, fixation duration (i.e., the amount of time a participant's eyes focused on predetermined areas on experimental vignettes created based on Glassdoor webpages) was used to operationalize the amount of attention and processing devoted to each type and valence of eWOM.

Yu et al.'s findings across two studies were consistent with a negativity bias toward processing negative over positive eWOM information. In fact, job seeker participants spent almost twice as much time processing negative compared to positive eWOM. The processing of both negative and positive eWOM is also positively related to employer familiarity, suggesting that eWOM may be more influential for companies with well-established employment brands. Job search experience also proved to be an important boundary condition for eWOM processing; active job seekers spent more time scrutinizing negative eWOM for companies that had a negative reputation. Lastly, the valence of eWOM had no effect on its perceived credibility. Instead, credibility was only predicted by the reputation of the employer and the amount of effort the participant had spent on his/her job search prior to reading the eWOM.

For practical audiences like employers, this research highlights the importance of attending to negative WOM that can now be readily accessed by potential candidates on social media. As job seekers spend significant time processing negative eWOM, employers should consider not just tracking but also responding to such reviews. As such responses are starting to feature more prominently on social media, they could represent an important way for companies to engage with potential candidates and manage the narrative surrounding their brands. More research is thus needed to assess the effectiveness of different impression management tactics that organizations can use when engaging in such responses (Yu, 2019). The findings of this research also suggest that positive reputations can in fact compensate for negative aspects of employer brands by reducing the amount of attention paid to processing negative eWOM. Hence, in line with some of Wang et al. (2022) findings, corporate social activities and publicizing employment certifications and awards might be explored as a means of masking some of the negative elements of employer brands. Furthermore, incorporating information on firm activities, initiatives, and awards on company-controlled media like webpages and social media pages can be useful ways to boost both employer reputation and credibility. These could help lay the foundation for a coordinated approach toward communicating consistent messages to enhance the credibility and impact of recruitment communication on job opportunities and company culture which, if perceived to be believable, could have a powerful influence on the existing employer brand.

6 | THE FUTURE OF TALENT ACQUISITION AND EMPLOYER BRANDING

Combined, the five articles in this special issue feature employer and job seeker perspectives, as well as behavior within the digital contexts of online employer webpages, job advertisements, and third-party

social media. They also highlight the importance of the prevailing social contexts where employer brands operate both within and between industries, as well as existing employer knowledge structures like familiarity, reputation, and image (Cable & Turban, 2001; Collins, 2007). Finally, these articles give noteworthy attention to the content of recruitment messages and other communicated information, with valence (positive vs. negative), instrumentality, and symbolism particularly central to the research. These investigations meaningfully advance our current understanding of employer branding. At the same time, they highlight important gaps and limitations in this area of inquiry. As described below and summarized in Table 1, we have identified several themes to help organize an agenda for future research.

7 | MACRO CONTEXTUAL EFFECTS

Noting their findings that employer images tended to vary more significantly between industries than between organizations, Van Hove and colleagues argued for future emphasis on industry-level images in talent acquisition. Such an industry-level analysis would require more theorizing as to how industry-level images develop in the first place, as well as how they are affected by industry branding efforts and specific events or external shocks. On an even broader level, knowledge is also limited regarding how employer images vary across geographic locations for companies. Examining these differences could have significant implications for employers that hire across disparate geographies (e.g., multinational firms), which could use these insights to strategically manage employer brands globally and locally. Similarly, future research also should consider how employer branding practices differ across other physical, geographical, and social (e.g., culture, social class, vocation groups) boundaries. Moreover, scholars should consider the rise of alternative employment arrangements driven by the gig economy and whether employment branding needs to adjust to account for talent acquisition from these different populations (e.g., independent contractors, part-time/temporary employees; Ashford et al., 2018; Ashford et al., 2007; Cappelli & Keller, 2013). Incorporating these diverse macro contexts can help further elucidate the practical impact that employer branding can have on organizational diversity, equity, and inclusion goals.

7.1 | Strategic employer branding

In line with the need for research adopting more macro perspectives, we encourage future research that delves deeper into the strategic implications of employer branding for the firm. Generally, the field still lacks guidance concerning the role of employer branding in strategic human resource management and competitive advantage, prompting questions such as: How does employer branding fit into the overall human resource management system and strategy within the firm? Why should organizations invest in employer branding? What different forms can such investment take? What

TABLE 1 Employer branding future research agenda

Theme	Questions
1 Macro contextual effects	<p>(a) How do industry-level employer images develop? How are they affected by industry branding efforts, specific events, and/or external shocks?</p> <p>(b) How do images vary with geography for companies operating across different locations? How can multinationals manage global and local images effectively?</p> <p>(c) How do employer branding practices account for hiring across different types of employment relationships (e.g., standard full-time positions vs. independent contractors vs. part-time)?</p> <p>(d) What impact does employer branding have across job seeker populations from different social groups (e.g., social class/status, culture, vocation)?</p>
2 Strategic employer branding	<p>(a) How does employer branding contribute to competitive advantage?</p> <p>(b) How does employer branding fit into the overall human resource management system and strategy of the firm? Why should organizations invest in employer branding? What different forms can such investment take? What key resources do organizations require to develop their employer brands?</p> <p>(c) How can alignment be achieved among conflicting brand signals?</p> <p>(d) How can employer brands be managed to deal with negative organizational images?</p> <p>(e) How effective are different impression management tactics when it comes to responding to employer reviews on social media?</p>
3 Psychology and processing	<p>(a) What mediating mechanisms operate to translate the effects of incongruous brand signals onto prehire outcomes?</p> <p>(b) How does featuring multiple attributes that vary in verifiability in the same recruitment message impact job seeker reactions?</p> <p>(c) How does employer branding differ across sources of employer information? What are the combined and unique effects of such sources on job candidates?</p> <p>(d) How do information source and message content combine to influence job candidate outcomes?</p> <p>(e) What individual differences influence credibility judgments to do with recruitment source and messages among job candidates?</p> <p>(f) How is newly encountered information integrated into existing knowledge structures and beliefs on employer brands? How malleable are existing employer brand perceptions?</p>
4 Role of time	<p>(a) How do employer branding practices change at different stages of talent acquisition (e.g., identifying and attracting, maintaining candidate interest, influencing job choice)?</p> <p>(b) How do images related to points-of-relevance and points-of-differentiation evolve as one passes through different recruitment stages?</p> <p>(c) Do points-of-difference effects extend beyond job choice to eventual organizational commitment and turnover?</p> <p>(d) What factors influence the stability/change of projected employer images across different formal and informal/third-party employer branding sources?</p>
5 Methods and approaches	<p>(a) What types of employer attributes surface among communications within companies among current employees? How do these attributes compare to images that are communicated externally to potential job candidates?</p> <p>(b) How do factors related to online media like usability and aesthetics influence the communication and experience of employer images?</p> <p>(c) How can other eye tracking metrics be used to study psychological phenomena (e.g., level of processing, mental states, emotional arousal) related to the cognitive processing of employer brand information?</p> <p>(d) How can novel approaches to the practice of talent acquisition like virtual reality, gamification, and artificial intelligence affect the practice and experience of employer branding?</p>

key resources do organizations require to develop their employer brands?

Wang et al. (2022) research highlights the benefits of closer internal coordination among top management, public relations, marketing, and HR functions in order to ensure that CSR benefits are fully realized for employers. However, it remains unclear what organizations can do to achieve better alignment among conflicting signals, and whether the strategic management of recruitment message content can assuage some of the negative repercussions of conflicting brand signals. Noting that social media can now facilitate dialogue between employers and potential candidates, responding to eWOM must feature more prominently in employer branding efforts. Drawing on principles from organizational impression management research may therefore prove to be useful when formulating response strategies and ongoing dialogue with potential candidates and other

stakeholders on such publicly accessible forums. Thus, more research is needed to assess the effectiveness of different impression management tactics that organizations can use when engaging in such responses (Yu, 2019). Such research would provide valuable insights into how organizations can use employer branding to manage responses to threats to their reputation and image.

7.2 | Psychology and processing of employer brands

In addition to the aforementioned macro issues, there remain multiple areas for research to contribute to our understanding of employer branding at the micro level. For instance, although Wang et al. (2022) have demonstrated the deleterious effects of incongruent brand

signals based on CSR and CSIR, the underlying mechanisms linking these effects to organizational attraction and other prehire outcomes remain unexplored. Thus, it is also important to examine what type of expectations of jobs and employers' incongruous signals generate among job seekers (Yu, 2014).

Research is also needed to follow-up on Collins and Martinez-Moreno's findings that the verifiability of messages holds important implications for message credibility. First, it is important to ask about the impact of multiple attributes that range from verifiable search attributes to harder-to-verify experiential ones when they appear together in the same recruitment message. Similar research is needed to compare the effects of multiple sources of job and organizational information on potential candidates. Having seen evidence for the influence of branding information on company webpages, job ads, and social media among the studies in this issue, it is thus important to investigate the different employer branding practices used across different recruitment media sources and their unique and combined effects on candidates (Cable & Yu, 2006; Leonardi & Vaast, 2017; McFarland & Ployhart, 2015). Such research could extend Yu et al.'s findings to examine how eWOM functions relative to WOM that is encountered through in-person communications. Additionally, more research is needed to discern the specific attributes of eWOM (e.g., anonymity and permanence) that differentiate it as a unique source of job and organizational information compared to traditional WOM and other formal (e.g., employer websites, job advertisements) and informal information sources. Along the same lines, it is also important to study the interplay between source and message to unpack their combined influence on job candidates. Future research should thus examine both media source and message content to determine ideal combinations of each to elicit desired job candidate reactions.

The strong between-person effects for recruitment messages observed by Collins and Martinez-Moreno could also suggest that individual differences like personality, job search efficacy, and experience influence job seekers' propensity to view certain messages as more or less credible and verifiable. Hence, future investigations that identify and uncover the role of individual differences in the processing of recruitment messages represent fruitful opportunities to contribute to this body of knowledge. A possible explanation for between-person branding effects could also lie in differences in existing employer knowledge in terms of image, reputation, and familiarity among job seekers. Future research is thus needed to establish how newly encountered information is integrated into job seekers' existing knowledge structures and employer brand beliefs, and how malleable such beliefs are once established. Likewise, uncovering communication source and message factors that determine how susceptible they are to adjustment or change is another potentially fruitful line of inquiry.

7.3 | The role of time

Time can also serve as a central moderator that integrates both macro and micro approaches to employer branding. However, more research is needed to explicitly investigate the role of time and how the

practice and experience of employer branding evolve as one passes through the different stages of talent acquisition. These stages typically involve identifying and attracting, maintaining candidate interest, and influencing job choice. Since most of the studies in this special issue were conducted at the early recruitment stage, more research is needed to chart whether and how images related to points-of-relevance and points-of-differentiation evolve as one passes through different recruitment stages. Van Hove and colleagues' results were found during early recruitment and the authors suggest that points-of-difference could grow in importance as candidates eventually have to choose between organizations. Furthermore, it would also be important to establish if points-of-difference effects can extend beyond job choice to eventual turnover, since image differentiation in a marketing sense also relates to higher brand loyalty. Similarly, Theurer et al.'s findings suggest that the type of images communicated display remarkable stability across a four-year period. Aside from specifically investigating the factors that explain such inertia, it would also be worthwhile to investigate whether employer images and the branding practices used to develop and communicate them display similar stability across other recruitment sources. It is possible that images display more dynamism over informal and third-party sources of information where contributors and their motivations and sources of information are significantly more diverse compared to formal recruitment sources that are under the control of the hiring organization (Etter et al., 2019).

7.4 | Methods and approaches

Our final future research theme deals with methodological approaches to the study of employer branding. Theurer and colleagues' use of CATA opens opportunities for further identifying and comparing images derived from stakeholders. For instance, internal message boards or Twitter feeds can be analyzed for the prominence of certain images among an organization's current employees. CATA also facilitates the analysis of how internal actions and external events impact employer images, addressing the current lack of knowledge on why images evolve or remain consistent across time. Thus, their study should also be extended to explore factors beyond the actual text on websites, such as usability and aesthetics features that could influence the development of certain employer images (e.g., trust and credibility). Other big data approaches like text mining and natural language processing may offer valid alternatives to inductively analyze the copious amounts of textual data that are becoming more available in the study of employer brands (Kobayashi et al., 2018).

More opportunities are also available to use physiological techniques to study the effects of employer branding. Extending Yu et al.'s investigation, future research should continue to apply eye-tracking methodology to uncover other factors that drive the processing of eWOM, and the effects that such processing can have on outcomes beyond credibility perceptions, such as job choice and organizational attraction. Other eye-tracking metrics with potential use in this area include the position and number of fixations, saccadic amplitude and

velocity, and pupil diameter, which can provide further insight into the psychological reactions to branding information in the form of level of cognitive processing, mental states, and emotional arousal (Meißner & Oll, 2019). In addition to these new approaches, future research should consider how modern technology is continuing to change the practice of talent acquisition and employer branding in today's workplace. In particular, researchers should strive to keep up with the use of techniques like virtual reality, gamification, and artificial intelligence by carefully studying these novel approaches with scientific rigor (Bigné et al., 2016; Meißner et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2022).

8 | CONCLUSION

The rapidly changing economic, technological, and socio-political global landscape calls into question the relevance, generalizability, and precision of our current state of employer branding knowledge. The research featured in this special issue updates and challenges existing assumptions regarding the practice and effects of branding as a talent acquisition approach. We hope that we have not only provided an insightful academic treatment of the subject, but also demonstrated the immense potential for future efforts to contribute to this burgeoning area of practice and study.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study.

ORCID

Kang Yang Trevor Yu  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3364-8842>

David G. Allen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0067-2117>

Anthony C. Klotz  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7365-9744>

REFERENCES

- Ambler, T., & Barrow, S. (1996). The employer brand. *The Journal of Brand Management*, 4, 185–206.
- Ashford, S. J., Caza, B. B., & Reid, E. M. (2018). From surviving to thriving in the gig economy: A research agenda for individuals in the new world of work. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 38, 23–41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.riob.2018.11.001>
- Ashford, S. J., George, E., & Blatt, R. (2007). Old assumptions, new work: The opportunities and challenges of research on nonstandard employment. In *The academy of management annals* (Vol. 1, pp. 65–117). Taylor & Francis Group/Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Backhaus, K., & Tikoo, S. (2004). Conceptualizing and researching employer branding. *Career Development International*, 9(5), 501–517. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=buh&AN=23679004&site=ehost-live>
- Barber, A. E. (1998). *Recruiting employees*. Sage Publications.
- Barney, J. B. (1986). Organizational culture: Can it be a source of sustained competitive advantage? *Academy of Management Review*, 11(3), 656–665. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMR.1986.4306261>
- Bigné, E., Llinares, C., & Torrecilla, C. (2016). Elapsed time on first buying triggers brand choices within a category: A virtual reality-based study. *Journal of Business Research*, 69(4), 1423–1427. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2015.10.119>
- Breaugh, J. A., & Starke, M. (2000). Research on employee recruitment: So many studies, so many remaining questions. *Journal of Management*, 26(3), 405–434.
- Cable, D. M., & Turban, D. (2001). Recruitment image equity: Establishing the dimensions, sources and value of job seekers' employer knowledge during recruitment. In G. R. Ferris (Ed.), *Research in personnel and human resources management* (Vol. 20, pp. 115–163). JAI Press.
- Cable, D. M., & Yu, K. Y. T. (2006). Managing job seekers' organizational image beliefs: The role of media richness and media credibility. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 91(4), 828–840. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.91.4.828>
- Campion, M. C., Campion, E. D., & Campion, M. A. (2019). Using practice employment tests to improve recruitment and personnel selection outcomes for organizations and job seekers. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 104(9), 1089–1102. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000401>
- Cappelli, P., & Keller, J. R. (2013). Classifying work in the new economy. *Academy of Management Review*, 38(4), 575–596. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2011.0302>
- Collins, C. J. (2007). The interactive effects of recruitment practices and product awareness on job seekers' employer knowledge and application behaviors. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92(1), 180–190. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.92.1.180>
- Collins, C. J., & Martinez-Moreno, J. E. (2022). Recruitment brand equity for unknown employers: Examining the effects of recruitment message claim verifiability and credibility on job pursuit intentions. *Human Resource Management*.
- Collins, C. J., & Stevens, C. K. (2002). The relationship between early recruitment-related activities and the application decisions of new labor-market entrants: A brand equity approach to recruitment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 87, 1121–1133.
- Dineen, B. R., & Allen, D. G. (2014). Internet recruiting 2.0: Shifting paradigms. In K. Y. T. Yu & D. M. Cable (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of recruitment* (pp. 382–401). Oxford University Press.
- Dineen, B. R., & Soltis, S. M. (2011). Recruitment: A review of research and emerging directions. In S. Zedeck (Ed.), *APA handbook of industrial and organizational psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 43–66). American Psychological Association.
- Dineen, B. R., Van Hove, G., Lievens, F., & Rosokha, L. (2019). Third party employment branding: What are its signaling dimensions, mechanisms, and sources? (M. Rosokha Lindsay, trans.). In V. H. Greet, M. R. Buckley, R. W. Anthony, E. B. John, & R. B. H. Jonathon (Eds.), *Research in personnel and human resources management* (Vol. 37, pp. 173–226). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- Edwards, M. R. (2010). An integrative review of employer branding and OB theory. *Personnel Review*, 39(1), 5–23. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00483481011012809>
- Etter, M., Ravasi, D., & Colleoni, E. (2019). Social media and the formation of organizational reputation. *Academy of Management Review*, 44(1), 28–52. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2014.0280>
- Franzino, M., Guarino, A., Binvel, Y., & Laouchez, J. (2022). The \$8.5 trillion talent shortage. <https://www.kornferry.com/insights/this-week-in-leadership/talent-crunch-future-of-work>
- Kobayashi, V. B., Mol, S. T., Berkers, H. A., Kismihók, G., & Den Hartog, D. N. (2018). Text mining in organizational research. *Organizational Research Methods*, 21(3), 733–765. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428117722619>
- Leonardi, P. M., & Vaast, E. (2017). Social media and their affordances for organizing: A review and agenda for research. *Academy of Management Annals*, 11(1), 150–188. <https://doi.org/10.5465/annals.2015.0144>
- Lievens, F., & Highhouse, S. (2003). The relation of instrumental and symbolic attributes to a company's attractiveness as an employer. *Personnel Psychology*, 56(1), 75–102. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.2003.tb00144.x>
- Lievens, F., & Slaughter, J. E. (2016). Employer image and employer branding: What we know and what we need to know. *Annual Review of*

- Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 3, 407–440. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-041015-062501>
- ManpowerGroup. (2022). The talent shortage. <https://go.manpowergroup.com/talent-shortage>
- Maurer, S. D., Howe, V., & Lee, T. W. (1992). Organizational recruiting as marketing management: An interdisciplinary study of engineering graduates. *Personnel Psychology*, 45(4), 807–833.
- McFarland, L. A., & Kim, Y. (2021). An examination of the relationship between applicant race and accrued recruitment source information: Implications for applicant withdrawal and test performance. *Personnel Psychology*, 74(4), 831–861. <https://doi.org/10.1111/peps.12431>
- McFarland, L. A., & Ployhart, R. E. (2015). Social media: A contextual framework to guide research and practice. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 100(6), 1653–1677. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0039244>
- Meißner, M., & Oll, J. (2019). The promise of eye-tracking methodology in organizational research: A taxonomy, review, and future avenues. *Organizational Research Methods*, 22(2), 590–617. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428117744882>
- Meißner, M., Pfeiffer, J., Pfeiffer, T., & Oppewal, H. (2017). Combining virtual reality and mobile eye tracking to provide a naturalistic experimental environment for shopper research. *Journal of Business Research*, 100, 445–458. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jbusres.2017.09.028>
- Pelosse, G. (2022). Are employers heading for a talent shortage perfect storm? <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbeshumanresourcescouncil/2022/05/17/are-employers-heading-for-a-talent-shortage-perfect-storm/?sh=77f2bc8316c4>
- Ployhart, R. E., & Kim, Y. (2014). Strategic recruiting. In K. Y. T. Yu & D. M. Cable (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of recruitment* (pp. 5–20). Oxford University Press.
- Ployhart, R. E., Schmitt, N., & Tippins, N. T. (2017). Solving the supreme problem: 100 years of selection and recruitment at the journal of applied psychology. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 102(3), 291–304. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000081>
- Rynes, S. L., & Cable, D. M. (2003). Recruitment research in the twenty-first century. In W. C. Borman & D. R. Ilgen (Eds.), *Handbook of psychology: Industrial and organizational psychology* (Vol. 12, pp. 55–76). John Wiley & Sons.
- Rynes, S. L., Heneman, H. G., III, & Schwab, D. P. (1980). Individual reactions to organizational recruiting: A review. *Personnel Psychology*, 33(3), 529–542. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1980.tb00481.x>
- Smith, T. A., Butts, M. M., Courtright, S. H., Duerden, M. D., & Widmer, M. A. (2022). Work–leisure blending: An integrative conceptual review and framework to guide future research. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 107(4), 560–580. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000924>
- Theurer, C. P., Schäpers, P., Tumasjan, A., Welppe, I., & Lievens, F. (2022). What you see is what you get? Measuring companies' projected employer image attributes via companies' employment webpages. *Human Resource Management*.
- Theurer, C., Tumasjan, A., Welppe, I., & Lievens, F. (2016). Employer branding: A brand equity-based literature review and research agenda: Brand equity-based employer branding. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 20, 155–179. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12121>
- Tumasjan, A., Kunze, F., Bruch, H., & Welppe, I. M. (2020). Linking employer branding orientation and firm performance: Testing a dual mediation route of recruitment efficiency and positive affective climate. *Human Resource Management*, 59(1), 83–99. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.21980>
- Van Hoye, G., Lievens, F., Weijters, B., & Cromheecke, S. (2022). Employer image within and across industries: Moving beyond assessing points-of-relevance to identifying points-of-difference. *Human Resource Management*.
- Van Iddekinge, C. H., Lanivich, S. E., Roth, P. L., & Junco, E. (2016). Social Media for Selection? Validity and adverse impact potential of a Facebook-based assessment. *Journal of Management*, 42(7), 1811–1835. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206313515524>
- Wang, L., Han, J., Ramasamy, B., & Peng, S. (2022). Incongruous employer brand signals and organizational attractiveness: Evidence from multinational companies in China. *Human Resource Management*.
- Wang, X., Reger, R. K., & Pfarrer, M. (2019). Faster, hotter, and more linked in: Managing social disapproval in the social media era. *Academy of Management Review*, 46, 275–298. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.2017.0375>
- Yu, K. Y. T. (2014). Person–organization fit effects on organizational attraction: A test of an expectations-based model. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 124(1), 75–94. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2013.12.005>
- Yu, K. Y. T. (2019). Influencing how one is seen by potential talent: Organizational impression management among recruiting firms. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 104(7), 888–906. <https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000386>
- Yu, K. Y. T., Goh, K. H., & Kawasaki, S. (2022). Investigating electronic word-of-mouth on social media: An eye-tracking approach. *Human Resource Management*.

How to cite this article: Yu, K. Y. T., Dineen, B. R., Allen, D. G., & Klotz, A. C. (2022). Winning applicants and influencing job seekers: An introduction to the special issue on employer branding and talent acquisition. *Human Resource Management*, 61(5), 515–524. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22140>