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Much Ado About Little: A Critical Review of the Employer Branding Concept**

Abstract

Within the past ten to fifteen years the concept of Employer Branding (EB) has established itself as a widely known and highly regarded concept especially among Human Resource Management practitioners. In many organizations the development, implementation and communication of a distinctive and unique employer brand is meanwhile considered an important building block for gaining a competitive advantage in the so called "war for talent". The paper at hand aims at critically exploring the conceptual foundations of employer branding by reviewing an extensive body of EB-literature consisting of standard references, scientific journal articles, textbooks as well as practitioner-oriented literature. This review reveals several general weaknesses, discrepancies and "blind spots" which cannot simply be attributed to some few single publications but rather call for a skeptical look upon the whole concept of employer branding itself. In conclusion the authors assert that the employer branding concept widely lacks innovative novelty as well as content-related persuasiveness. It should therefore be regarded as neither more nor less than a contemporary remake of what is and has for quite some time been well known as "Internal Marketing" or "HR Marketing".

Keywords: employer branding; personnel marketing; critical HRM; management fad
(JEL: M12, M31, M54)

Introduction

At least in modern western societies the ever-progressing globalization, demographic change and the development towards post-industrial, service- and knowledge-oriented economies are certain to have drastic effects on the working world in general.

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Consequently, these so called "megatrends" almost inevitably bring up new challenges for contemporary HR management. While a highly motivated and skilled workforce is increasingly regarded as a (if not *the*) determining factor of sustainable organizational success the ability to recruit and retain qualified personnel is considered to be a crucial HR-competence for businesses in the modern world (Colbert, 2004; Lado & Wilson, 1994; Wright, Dunford, & Snell, 2001). In this context, during the past ten to fifteen years one could witness the emergence of the so-called *employer branding* approach, a concept explicitly targeting at these challenges. The core idea of employer branding is to create a *distinctive and distinguishable employer brand* and hereby positioning a company as an *employer of choice* in particular for relevant high potentials (e.g. Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2009). Through this, organizations are said to be able to achieve a competitive advantage which allows them to gain a decisive lead in the much cited *war for talent* (Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Chambers, Foulon, Handfield-Jones, Hankin, & Michaels, 1998; Elving, Westhoff, Meeusen, & Schoonderbeek, 2013).

Indeed, if one is inclined to believe the assessments of experienced HR experts, the employer branding concept is attested an impressively encompassing potential to solve all kinds of problems regarding not only the narrow realm of HRM but also various other challenges of successful business. For example, in the 2013 edition of a biannual survey carried out by the German Society for Human Resource Management (DGFP) concerning current "megatrends and HR trends" the majority of HR managers considered employer branding to be an adequate strategy to handle the threats of demographic change as well as mastering those challenges stemming from globalization (DGFP / Deutsche Gesellschaft für Personalführung e.V., 2013). Accordingly, in an international survey amongst almost 2.000 HR experts from eight different countries employer branding was voted the most important HR trend for the upcoming years (for similar results see also CareerArc, 2015; index Internet und Mediaforschung GmbH, 2014; LinkedIn, 2018; Randstad Deutschland GmbH, 2016).

Last but not least, the employer branding discourse has also left its marks within the academic sphere. Just recently, the persistent scholarly interest in employer branding was convincingly demonstrated by Theurer, Tumasjan, Welpe, and Lievens (2018): Through an exhaustive literature review the authors were able to identify more than 180 scientific publications with a conceptual and/or theoretical view on employer branding as well as empirical studies assessing various effects of employer branding activities and strategies. What is somewhat striking however, is the affirmative tone of the considered body of literature. In fact, only very few papers seem to approach the topic of employer branding from a distant, critical (or at least skeptical) perspective.

So what is this employer branding-hype all about? Is employer branding really an indisputably effective, innovative HR concept? Does it truly boast the potential of

being a promising solution to the crucial challenges contemporary HR management is facing? Or is it after all another vivid example for a short-lived "management fashion" (e.g. Abrahamson, 1996; Giroux, 2006; Kieser, 1997) which – after a short period of exaggerated euphoria – will vanish into thin air filed away amongst other standard HR practices as so many others before? Considering the critical investigation of prevailing management concepts and strategies as one of the main responsibilities of practice-oriented management research, the article at hand aims to explore these questions and to examine the concept of employer branding from a perspective of an application-oriented but at the same time critical standpoint.

Approach and Review Method

A first and classical option to scientifically explore the usefulness of management concepts would be to empirically test for their effects on various indicators of organizational effectiveness. In fact, in recent years a number of empirical studies have been conducted to examine the impact of employer branding (Biswas & Suar, 2016; Dineen & Allen, 2016; Güntürkün, Haumann, & Lukasczyk, 2015; Sokro, 2012). However, it has to be noted that empirical designs for evaluating the impact of more complex HR concepts (such as employer branding) find themselves confronted with certain limitations complicating the matter (on the fundamental problems concerning empirical analyses of HR-effectiveness see e. g. Keenoy, 2009, pp. 461–464): First of all, as there is usually no "one best way" of doing things, management instruments and measures generally require a case-specific design of their basic components to adequately match the situational demands of the respective organization (A. Martin, 2001). Consequently, in order to actually be successful, an employer branding strategy has to be specifically molded to fit the company it is applied in. Hence, the implementation of employer branding should typically take very different forms in different organizations. Secondly, the literature claims a magnitude of different goals and aims that could possibly be pursued through employer branding. So not only the actual strategies but also the targeted objectives may vary from business to business. And finally, as HR managers are by no means infallible, it seems highly probable that real-world employer branding strategies may differ substantially in sophistication and quality. All these aspects taken together result in severe methodological problems: Strictly speaking, neither the *independent* variable ("*[quality of] employer branding*") nor the *dependent* variables (*employer branding's effects*) can be operationalized in a satisfying way which would allow for reliably evaluating and comparing the impact of employer branding across different enterprises. Therefore, empirical studies that either measure the mere degree of employer branding's formal institutionalization across different companies and/or rely solely on HR practitioners' subjective assessments are inevitably of questionable informative value. They as such and taken in isolation, do not allow for reliable, objective conclusions concerning the effectiveness of employer branding.

Hence, for our examination of employer branding's actual substance and persuasive power we decided to choose a different approach. By refocusing on fundamental criteria of scientific evaluation (primarily *theoretical soundness, logical consistency* and *explanatory power*), the paper at hand tries to unravel the common (yet often implicit) logic of argumentation underlying the employer branding approach. For this purpose, we will proceed in four consecutive steps: After a brief discussion of the theoretical foundations behind the core idea of employer branding, the ambitious assumption that if only done right, the implementation of an effective employer branding strategy is open to more or less every organization, is challenged. Subsequently and with particular regard to presumed *effect mechanisms* (Bunge, 1997; Elster, 2015), we will critically scrutinize the commonly postulated effects as well as the central measures and instruments of employer branding. Finally, based on our (to anticipate it: *dissatisfying*) findings, the paper finishes by raising the question whether employer branding should actually be considered a management fashion.

In order to do so, we conducted a broad review of the existing employer branding literature and focused on conceptual journal articles, books and book chapters that do not only provide empirical insights but also discuss the fundamental reasoning underlying the concept of employer branding. As a starting point, we referred to the above-mentioned body of scientific literature identified by Theurer et al. (2018). Their emphasis was on English double-blind peer-reviewed academic journal publications. In addition, they also included books and book chapters with resilient theoretical references or empirical research results *(formal inclusion criteria)*, but explicitly excluded *"… purely practitioner-oriented articles (e.g. magazine articles) discussing company-specific cases"* (Theurer et al., 2018, p. 157). By use of their proposed review method, we then conducted a structural and content-based literature analysis to further extract those publications elaborating their understanding of the concept and hence discussing employer branding from a conceptual perspective. In line with our focus on the underlying logic of argumentation, we also excluded literature with rather vague and only implicit employer branding contributions *(content-related criteria)*. After monitoring all 187 articles identified by Theurer et al., we arrived at a total of 39 publications that matched our content-related selection criteria. Since Theurer et al.'s literature review only considered publications until and including July 2015, we then extended our search for publications that matched their formal selection criteria as well as our content-related criteria until the year 2018. In doing so, we were able to expand the body of literature by an additional nine publications. Finally, by taking advantage of our German background, we supplemented the literature basis with another 15 German articles, books and textbook chapters addressing the conceptual argumentation of the employer branding approach. Here, we also included rather practitioner-oriented literature – though only written by authors with an academic background – to take into account how academic researchers explain the operation and effects of employer branding when addressing an audience of practitioners and students. Eventually, the process of select-

ing relevant literature for the specific purpose of our review resulted in a total of 64 publications serving as the basis for our discussion of the conceptual foundations of employer branding.

Table 1: Synoptic table of the relevant literature applied

Total number of publications: 64			
Language			
English	**48**	**16**	German
Type			
Scientific Journal Article	**39**	**25**	Textbook (chapter)
Main Target Audience			
Academics	**49**	**15**	Practitioners

Employer Branding

The increasing popularity of employer branding is meanwhile reflected in a growing body of relevant publications – mainly aiming at HR practitioners and application-oriented academics. Unsurprisingly, these works reveal a broad variety of (at least slightly) different notions and focal points (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2009; Figurska & Matuska, 2013; Theurer et al., 2018). In order to provide a general insight into the basic argumentation underlying the employer branding concept, our analysis will mainly focus on those aspects that could be regarded as broad commonalities among different authors/ publications and which therefore may be considered widely accepted within the respective literature.

Concept, Origin and Core Idea

Employer branding has its origin in the field of marketing, or rather brand research (e.g. Ambler & Barrow, 1996). According to the American Marketing Association [AMA], a brand is defined as *"… a name, term, design, symbol, or any other feature that identifies one seller's good or service as distinct from those of other sellers."* (AMA, 2018; for an informative overview of different perspectives and definitions of the term 'brand' see Jones & Bonevac, 2013). In 1996 this basic line of thought had been taken up and transferred to the sphere of labor markets in the Journal of Brand Management. In their meanwhile classic article *"The employer brand"* marketing experts Ambler and Barrow discuss the possibility of transferring approved concepts and methods from the field of product branding to the area of human resource management (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). Based on an explorative study in which they surveyed and interviewed 27 top-managers of British companies, the authors draw the conclusion that business ventures could gain a considerable competitive advantage if they manage to carry the positive implications of successful

product brands over to the job market:[1] As some of the most important factors determining an employer's attractiveness bear typical features of so called 'experience goods' (like *work environment*, *corporate culture*, *management style* etc., see e.g. Cable & Judge, 1996; Judge & Bretz, 1992; Turban, Forret, & Hendrickson, 1998) external job candidates often do lack sufficient information about crucial aspects concerning the actual working realities of potential employers (Trost, 2009). Instead, *"… early in the job choice process, initial application decisions are heavily based on general impressions of organizational attractiveness"* (Gatewood, Gowan, & Lautenschlager, 1993, p. 415) – so called *organizational images* (Rynes, 1991). Thus, while only a small proportion of young professionals and university graduates might actually have primary experiences with most of these *employers of choice* (like through an internship etc.), their distinctive reputations seems to be able to generate rather differentiated imaginations about what kind of working realities they are offering (Lievens & Highouse, 2003). Depending on individual preferences, needs and dislikes of potential employees these images can both work as an attractor or as a repellant having significant impact on application numbers and employee motivation (Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995). Therefore, organizations with a prominent *employer brand* in the sense of an excellent reputation *"for providing a high-quality employment experience, and a distinctive organisational identity which employees value, engage with and feel confident and happy to promote to others"* (Graeme Martin, Gollan, & Grigg, 2011, pp. 3618–3619), should have a sustainable competitive advantage at their disposal when trying to recruit new key employees in increasingly competitive labor markets.

This is where employer branding comes into play: While it is generally possible for brands to emerge rather accidentally and naturally, the term brand*ing* emphasizes the *conscious strategic action* of positioning a specific company or product as distinctive and desirable in the minds of potential customers (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).[2] Accordingly, employer branding is usually regarded as *"… the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity"* (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004, p. 502) in order to increase the perceived attractiveness of a given enterprise as an employer for high potentials and future employees (for an overview of different definitions see Aggerholm, Andersen, & Thomsen, 2011; Figurska & Matuska, 2013; Mrozek,

1 Ambler and Barrow themselves define the employer brand rather vaguely as "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 185; Ewing, Pitt, Bussy, & Berthon, 2002; Schumacher & Geschwill, 2009). It is however worth noting, that while Ambler/Barrow discuss the potential positive effects of an (existing) employer brand, the term "employer branding" is merely mentioned once in a single quote stemming from an interview with a manager (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 199).

2 Branding thus can be understood as encompassing all measures fit to distinguish a product from others. Etymologically the term originates from cattle-breeding and means the actual branding of cattle to show its ownership or race. This method has been used already in the middle ages in different kinds of handicraft (Esch & Langer, 2005).

2009; Stotz & Wedel-Klein, 2009; or Stritzke, 2010).[3] It comprises all decisions regarding the configuration of the employer brand and the respective marketing activities (Petkovic, 2007) aiming *"… directly at the ongoing optimization of personnel recruitment and retention, commitment and corporate culture as well as the improvement of the corporate image"* (Deutsche Employer Branding Akademie, 2007, own translation). With regard to the practical implementation of employer branding, basically three main fields of managerial action can be distinguished (Barrow & Mosley, 2011; Mandhanya & Shah, 2010; Stritzke, 2010). First of all, those company-specific characteristics that contain the potential to set a certain business venture apart from its competitors in terms of employer attractiveness, have to be condensed into what is called a unique *„employer value proposition*" (Barrow & Mosley, 2011; Lundkvist, 2015; Graeme Martin, Beaumont, Doig, & Pate, 2005; Mokina, 2014). Secondly, all major aspects of the company's human resource management require careful monitoring to secure that they are consistent with the alleged *employer branding promise* (Mosley, 2007). Any significant deficits or discrepancies turning up during this investigation have to be dissolved and brought into line with the aspired employer brand. The third and final step then consists in developing an appropriate *communication strategy* that is suitable for promoting the employer brand to the relevant target groups (Barrow & Mosley, 2011; Botha, Bussin, & Swardt, 2011; Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

It must be noted though, that most of these insights and conclusions are by no means new or innovative. In fact, they show remarkable similarities to the decades old concept of *internal marketing* in the English research literature (B. Collins & Payne, 1991; Foreman & Money, 1995; Grönroos, 1990; Graeme Martin et al., 2005) or the closely related concept of *personnel marketing* in the German scientific discourse (e.g. Fröhlich, 2004a; Strutz, 1992b). Following Kotler's notion of *"employee directed marketing"* (Kotler, 1972, p. 51), the idea of applying marketing concepts to the management of internal relationships within the organization entered the HR literature in the 1980s (e.g. Berry, 1984; Grönroos, 1981; Winter, 1985). Especially during the 1990s, the term "internal marketing" had acquired an increased prominence among practitioners as well as researchers (B. Collins & Payne, 1991; Ewing et al., 2002; Foreman & Money, 1995; Greene, Schrest, & Walls, 1994; Grönroos, 1990; Piercy & Morgan, 1991; Rafiq & Ahmed, 1993). In order to achieve the overall objectives of organizations, internal marketing was intended to *"… attract, develop and motivate employees, thereby satisfying the needs and wants of these internal customers"* (Ewing et al., 2002, p. 10; Grönroos, 1990). And

3 Regarding this potentially enormous expenditure, it may not surprise that the development of an employer brand seemed appealing to practitioners mainly in situations "… where high skills and development were crucial, e.g. consulting companies and investment banks" (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 201). By contrast, managers from "… large-scale industrial and manufacturing companies where employee individuality is less conspicuous" are more reluctant due to the efforts and costs associated with such an approach (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 201).

even back then, the war for talent, changing societal value and demographic developments were set out as the main reasons for striving to systematically position a business as an employer of choice (Strutz, 1993). Nowadays within the employer branding literature, internal marketing (respectively personnel marketing) is usually debased to a solely *operative* HR tool, while employer branding is advertised as a profound strategic approach (Barrow & Mosley, 2011; Figurska & Matuska, 2013; Graeme Martin et al., 2005; Graeme Martin et al., 2011).[4] This interpretation however neglects the high claims and expectations that were initially associated with the concept of personnel marketing (Fröhlich, 2004b; Strutz, 1992a, 1993). So in summary, the idea which lies at the core of the employer branding approach – to strategically position an enterprise as a favorable employer in the minds of potential and existing employees – was already uttered in a very similar fashion in publications on personnel marketing some thirty to forty years ago. This is even more remarkable, if one considers that even advocates of personnel marketing have already been accused of simply restating already known truths decades ago (Strutz, 1992a).

From a scientific standpoint, probably the most fundamental quality criterion for evaluating management tools and concepts is *theoretical soundness*. In this respect, the basic deliberations underlying the employer branding approach, namely a) the postulated relations between *perceived employer attractiveness* and *recruitment success/ organizational commitment* (Cable & Turban, 2003; Gatewood et al., 1993) as well as b) the idea that certain characteristics of companies may result in *specific employer reputations and images* (Cable & Graham, 2000; Lange, Lee, & Dai, 2011) appear plausible, theoretically explainable in different ways and sufficiently confirmed through numerous empirical studies. For instance, *signaling theory* (Spence, 1973), may well be used in order to elucidate that in light of insufficient information, an employer brand may serve as a signal of unobservable organizational characteristics (App, Merk, & Büttgen, 2012). S*ocial identity theory* (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) raises awareness for the fact that perceived employer attractiveness is significantly influenced by certain symbolic meanings attached to organizations (Highhouse, Thornbury, & Little, 2007) and the *elaboration likelihood model* (Petty & Cacioppo, 1986) may inform our understanding of how carefully job seekers process information about potential employers (Cable & Turban, 2001). Likewise, *brand equity theory* ((Cable & Turban, 2003; Keller, 1993) or even more fundamentally the *resource-based view* (Barney, 1991) offer rather convincing foundations for plausibly explaining how a popular employer brand may even serve as the source of a sustainable competitive advantage in the labor market.

However, a closer inspection of the various theoretical foundations referred to in the employer branding literature (App et al., 2012; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens

4 It should be noted however, that contradictory opinions which define employer branding as an instrument under the roof of personnel or internal marketing can be found as well (e.g. Ewing et al., 2002).

& Slaughter, 2016; Theurer et al., 2018) reveals that these theories first and foremost provide explanations for a) the modes of functioning and b) the potential economic benefits of already established employer brands. So while the pivotal "employer brand"-concept itself may be based on more or less reliable (albeit not new) theoretical considerations, these theories are not really suitable for justifying its transformation into the practical, application-oriented management approach of "employer branding". In fact, pertinent research results indicate that organizational attractiveness perceptions of job seekers evolve on the basis of various different information sources (social influences, word of mouth communication) – many of which are in large parts beyond managerial control (Uen, Peng, Chen, & Chien, 2011; van Hoye & Lievens, 2005, 2007). More generally speaking: Establishing a desired image is by no means an easy task. In other words, the pronounced interest of practitioners and marketing researchers in the phenomenon of "brands" not only results from their potential to serve as a powerful competitive advantage, it is also based on the fact that the emergence of successful brands constitutes an enormously complex and still widely unexplored multifactorial process. Against this backdrop, it may not come as a surprise that Lievens and Slaughter (2016, p. 432) explicitly indicate investigating what *"organizations [can] do to influence the images that job seekers hold"* as a fundamental question in their summary of directions for future research on employer image and employer image management.

With that in mind, we will now turn our attention to the proclaimed strategies, measures and tools usually recommended in the employer branding literature. For maybe it is not so much the ends but the means that actually contain new and innovative approaches.

Identification of the Employer Brand

The so-called *Employer (*or *Employee) Value Proposition (EVP)*[5] marks the starting point of every employer branding strategy. Comparable to the *Unique Selling Proposition* (USP), a concept originally stemming from the realm of product marketing, the EVP basically contains a performance promise based on a company's specific strengths and assets to be communicated to existing and potential employees. Its uniqueness is supposed to improve the company's competitive standing on the labor market (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Barrow & Mosley, 2011; Figurska & Matuska, 2013; Merk, 2016). The process of developing such an EVP is no simple undertaking, though. The employer branding literature lists a number of significant features and criteria that inevitably have to be considered during the process of constructing an employer brand (App et al., 2012; Barrow & Mosley, 2011; Botha et al., 2011; Lievens, van Hoye, & Anseel, 2007; Wilska, 2014).

5 The term Employee Value Proposition can also be found and is used synonymously (e.g. Barrow & Mosley, 2011; Moroko & Uncles, 2009).

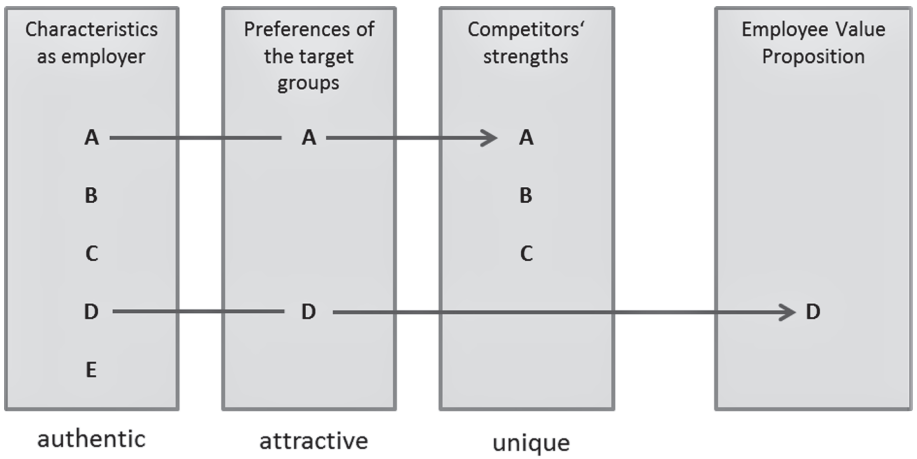


Figure 1: The development of an Employer Value Proposition (Trost, 2009, p. 40)

First and foremost, the EVP must be *authentic.* Authenticity in this case means that a communicated employer image must reflect the company's factual work reality. So with regard to the EVP's credibility, the literature generally claims that any promise expressed through an employer branding strategy has to be deeply rooted in the identity and culture of the respective organization (Graeme Martin et al., 2011; G. Martin & Hetrick, 2009; Stritzke, 2010; Stumpf, 2016). In order to ensure this, every employer branding campaign (ideally) has to be preceded by a self-critical internal analysis (e.g. through a staff survey) which serves to identify the specific strengths and weaknesses that characterize the organization as an employer (Botha et al., 2011; Lane, 2016; Seng & Armutat, 2012; Stritzke, 2010; Stumpf, 2016; Trost, 2009). On that basis, the next important characteristic of an EVP is its *attractiveness*. Therefore, in a second step it has to be reviewed in how far the initially identified strengths are capable to actually influence the respective target group's decision making (Andratschke, Regier, & Huber, 2009; Ewing et al., 2002; Moroko & Uncles, 2008, 2011; Sokro, 2012; Stumpf, 2016). In order to be able to exert such an influence, it is vital that these assets match with the (potential) employees' demands and expectations. Thus, it is necessary to conduct yet another analysis in order to determine and select those strengths that, due to their actual relevance for the target group, should be incorporated in the EVP (Botha et al., 2011; Lehmann, 2012; Moroko & Uncles, 2008; Stotz & Wedel-Klein, 2009; Stritzke, 2010). Finally, a third and last criterion that must be taken care of, is the EVPs *uniqueness*. An EVP should focus on those strengths and assets that are *more or less* distinctive for the respective company. In order to stand out from the competition and to get potential candidates to apply for jobs, a successful employer brand has to rely on exclusive incentives that cannot easily be matched or imitated by others (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lane, 2016; Wilden, Gudergan, & Lings, 2010).

The basic logic underlying these three criteria (*authenticity*, *attractiveness* and *uniqueness*) are reminiscent of the so-called SWOT-analysis known from the area of strategic management (Jacobs, Shepherd, & Johnson, 1998; Kotler, Berger, & Bickhoff, 2016). As in the search for general strategic success potentials, a critical self-reflection with regard to *strengths and weaknesses* is followed by an analysis of *opportunities and risks*. Thus – at least at first glance – these criteria may seem very plausible and comprehensible. However, when transferred to the field of employer branding, some obvious problems and fundamental questions arise which are hardly ever touched in the literature. First, it must be clarified under what circumstances *authenticity* actually leads to an increase in a company's appeal as an employer. As propagated in the pertinent literature, this idea is apparently based on the daring assumption that indeed every enterprise possesses significantly positive cultural traits suitable to serve as the basis of an EVP. Taking into account the high variance and often sobering results of large-scale surveys regarding employee's affective commitment and job satisfaction (see e.g. Attridge, 2009; Mann & Harter, 2016) there is good reason to argue that a lot of companies struggle in their quest to provide attractive working conditions. In addition, there is a distinctive lack of discussion about how to deal with the (inevitably existing) weaknesses that may as well be revealed in the course of the above-mentioned cultural introspection. Throughout the bulk of employer branding literature there are near to no substantial comments on how to handle those aspects of a company's work reality that may in fact diminish its employer attractiveness. The only exemption from this are very vague pieces of advice to "work with these weaknesses" in order to further enhance the appeal as an employer (DGFP / Deutsche Gesellschaft für Personalführung e.V., 2013; Schulz, 2016). This is even more surprising as the identified weaknesses might as well be deeply embedded in an organization's culture and should therefore pose serious obstacles on the way to implementing a successful employer brand.

Another fundamental problem neglected in the relevant literature arises from the requirement to develop an EVP that suffices the criteria of *exclusivity* and *attractiveness* at the same time. Here, on the one hand it is apparently assumed that the respective group of target employees is basically characterized by relatively homogenous sets of preferences in regard to what the main features of an attractive employer are. Consequently, in order to successfully approach the job market it seems inevitable to suit any given EVP to the preferences of these desired high potentials. However, if all businesses strive to create an EVP that matches the same target groups' preferences, than more or less unavoidably their EVPs are going to be rather alike – which then in turn would be absolutely contradictory to the general claim that each EVP should as well be *unique*. On the other hand, if an enterprise chooses to ground its EVP primarily on very unique aspects, it runs the danger of failing to meet the expectations of potential applicants and employees. Thought through to the end, the idea of different companies competing against each other with very unique and hardly comparable employer brands bears little power of persuasion.

Much more realistic seems to be the notion that predominantly those businesses will come up successful, that are able to meet the demands of their target groups in a credible and superior way. Or to put this consideration differently: Employer attractiveness may not primarily be about offering something very unique and different, but rather about being able to offer the generally requested incentives in a favorable or extensive way (e.g. to pay *higher* wages than the average, to offer *better* training and development perspectives than the competition etc).

To make our point of critique clear: We do not mean to generally reject the usefulness of *authenticity*, *attractiveness* and *uniqueness* as appropriate criteria for developing an employer branding strategy. What we do criticize however, is the pertinent literature's widespread ignorance towards the fact that these criteria are at least partially characterized by somewhat contradictory relationships and requirements. So against the backdrop of a more realistic understanding of the so-called *war for talent* as virtually a zero-sum situation, where there cannot be only winners (Michaels, Handfield-Jones, & Axelrod, 2009), the concept of employer branding inevitably loses substantially in persuasive power as a rather simple and programmable approach for enhancing any (really *any*?) company's attractiveness.

Goals and Measures

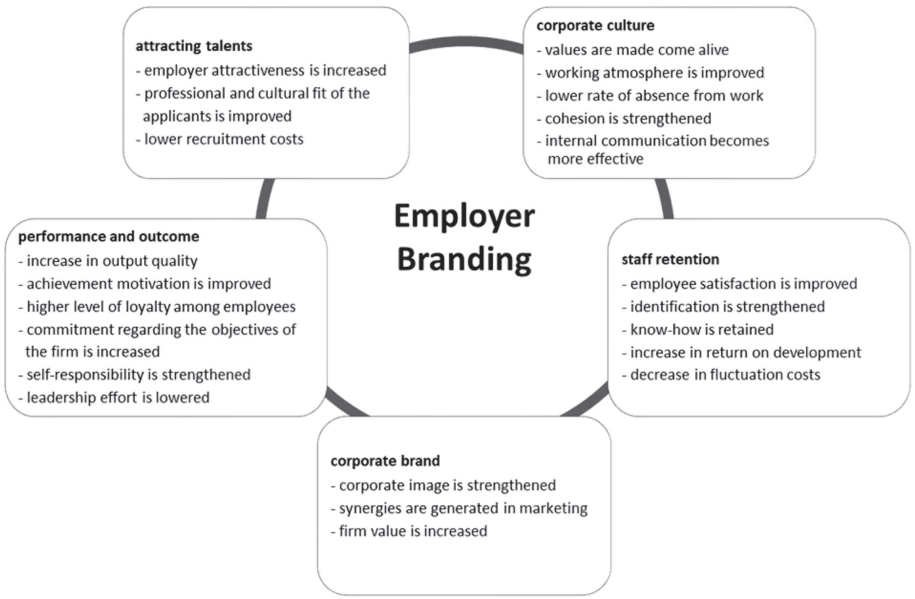
As stated at the outset, the overarching objective of employer branding is to position a company as an *employer of choice* on the job market through the establishment of a unique, distinguishable employer brand (e.g. Elving et al., 2013; Fischer & Kieler, 2015, p. 8). In this context (and roughly depending on which target group is primarily addressed), two basic, yet interrelated downstream goals can be distinguished: On the one hand, the *internal* dimension of employer branding is mainly concerned with enhancing the motivation and commitment of already employed staff by creating a preferable working experience (Fischer & Kieler, 2015, p. 7). On the other hand, the *external* dimension puts focus on attracting potential applicants and future employees through convincingly *communicating* a positive corporate image (Backhaus, 2004; Edwards, 2009; Foster, Punjaisri, & Cheng, 2010; King & Grace, 2008; Mast & Simtion, 2016; Schulz, 2016; Schumacher & Geschwill, 2009).

With respect to the employer branding literature, it should be noted that emphasis is put mostly on the external/ *communicative* dimension, claiming that an adequately communicated EVP will result in an improved "fit" between a company's job demands and applicants' profiles (C. J. Collins & Kanar, 2013; Gardner, Erhardt, & Martin-Rios, 2011; Graeme Martin et al., 2005; G. Martin, 2009; Graeme Martin & Cerdin, 2014; G. Martin & Groen-In't-Woud, 2011; Oladipo, Iyamabo, & Otubanjo, 2013; Wilden et al., 2010). While a more distinct communication may occasionally reduce the number of incoming applications (because now only those candidates that actually fit into the organization feel attracted), these applications

should generally boast a higher degree of person-organization-fit. Accordingly, a successful employer brand is predicted to lead to a significant reduction of recruitment expenditures (Barrow & Mosley, 2011; Biswas & Suar, 2016; Sponheuer, 2010; Wilska, 2014). While predominantly directed at external applicants, an internal communication of the EVP is as well expected to help enhancing the identification and commitment among the existing workforce (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Figurska & Matuska, 2013; Graeme Martin et al., 2005; Mast & Simtion, 2016; Siebrecht, 2012; Stritzke, 2010; Stumpf, 2016). To sum up, an active communication of the employer brand is generally ascribed significant potential for cost reductions in human resource management (e.g. due to reduced fluctuation or costs of control).

Typical examples of *measures regarding an effective communication of the employer brand* towards potential high-quality employees include the selective choice of adequate recruiting channels, an attractive design of job advertisements and recruiting videos, a professional career website or the conceptual design of campaigns on social media (Cable & Turban, 2001; Elving et al., 2013; Kuhs, 2012; Mast & Simtion, 2016; Stumpf, 2016; Trost, 2009). These measures are usually supplemented by activities aiming internally at the already-existing workforce. Accordingly, in order to foster employee commitment and motivation, the respective employer brand is communicated with the help of internally directed corporate identity activities (intranet, internal magazines, guidelines, corporate design etc., see Andratschke et al., 2009; Barrow & Mosley, 2011; Mandhanya & Shah, 2010; Mast & Simtion, 2016; Siebrecht, 2012; Stumpf, 2016).

However, in order to substantiate employer branding's far-reaching strategic scope, the literature frequently mentions a variety of additional, rather far-reaching and ambitious outcomes allegedly achievable through employer branding (App et al., 2012; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Graeme Martin et al., 2005; Sponheuer, 2010; Stritzke, 2010). Here, the stated effects range from an *improved working atmosphere* or an *enhanced feeling of responsibility* among employees to an *increase in innovativeness*, *customer satisfaction* or even *general productivity, efficiency* and *enterprise value* (Armutat, 2012; Born & Kang, 2015; Bruch, Fischer, & Färber, 2015; Figurska & Matuska, 2013; Gardner et al., 2011; Seng & Armutat, 2012; Wisniewska, 2016). As a vivid illustration, Germany's leading employer branding consultancy Deutsche Employer Branding Akademie [DEBA] has tried to systematize potential consequences of employer branding into five clusters with no less than 22 positive effects (figure 2).



(own illustration based on Deutsche Employer Branding Akademie (2015), translated from German, cf. Figurska and Matuska (2013))

Figure 2: Effects of employer branding

Thus, it can be noted that the concept of employer branding is assigned a rather impressive range of positive outcomes. While the postulated reputational effects of an active employer brand communication may appear at least partially plausible in the realm of marketing and corporate identity/communications research (e.g. George, 1990; Lewis, 1989; Piercy & Morgan, 1991), those presumed outcomes that stray further from the core areas of recruitment and personnel marketing raise questions as to how these ambitious promises may actually be fulfilled. In this context, the respective literature concerned with the actual implementation and practicalities of employer branding offers quite an impressive number of codes of practice, guidelines, checklists and tools designed to empower any given company to successfully and professionally implement its own employer branding strategy (Barrow & Mosley, 2011; DGFP / Deutsche Gesellschaft für Personalführung e.V., 2012; Lane, 2016). Some of these publications explicitly emphasize the wider personnel management claim of employer branding. Assuming that a credible employer brand can only be established effectively if it actually serves as a behavioral guideline within the company, the necessity of anchoring the EVP within the factual organizational reality is highlighted (Biswas & Suar, 2016). If that requirement is not met, excessively embellished self-descriptions will over time result in serious disappointments on behalf of attracted employees and applicants (Botha et al., 2011; Stritzke, 2010; Stumpf, 2016). So, when taking this more substantial perspective on

employer branding seriously, strictly speaking all areas of Human Resource Management come into play (App et al., 2012; Graeme Martin et al., 2005; Schumacher & Geschwill, 2009; Sponheuer, 2010). Stritzke (2010) for instance includes all *recruiting measures*, *staff planning*, *salary arrangements* and *personnel development* activities into the frame of employer branding. Likewise, in their conception of an "employer brand mix", (Barrow & Mosley, 2011, p. 149) mention a wide array of HR areas that have to be considered when putting an employer branding strategy to practice (containing *team management*, *performance appraisals*, *learning and development*, *rewards and recognition* and the design of *working environments*).

However, if basically all aspects of HR management, be it management culture, working hours, benefits or anything else, are regarded as integral parts of the employer branding, it becomes rather difficult to precisely outline what the characteristic, novel features of the employer branding concept may be. When trying to comprehend the reasoning behind the linkages between employer branding's intended effects and the variety of suggested tools and measures, the respective literature reveals some substantial deficits: First of all, most empirical studies exploring the impact of employer branding on different indicators for (economic) success are of very limited value. As there is usually no systematic, coherent operationalization of employer branding (Botha et al., 2011; Güntürkün et al., 2015; Srivastava & Bhatnagar, 2010), most studies leave the interpretation of what is actually meant by (and which activities to subsume under) employer branding open to the subjective assessments of their respondents (in most cases HR-managers; for an overview see e.g. Park & Zhou, 2013; the same holds true for most practitioner-oriented studies, e.g. CareerArc, 2015; LinkedIn, 2018; Randstad Deutschland GmbH, 2016). Consequently, the empirical measurement will usually rely on rather blurred and divergent conceptualizations of employer branding as an independent variable. Furthermore, respondents may often lack the necessary objectivity to critically evaluate a strategy that they themselves may have promoted and implemented in the first place. All this taken together, the respective results can hardly provide sufficient satisfactory proof for the aforementioned interdependencies.

Nevertheless, what is even more important for the scientific evaluation of any given management tool or concept is its underlying explanatory logic. Here, while it seems hardly expedient to ask for some kind of a comprehensive "employer branding theory" (given the complexity of the concept), the concept of *mechanism* as known from the philosophy of science comes into play (Elster, 2015). Mechanisms are commonly defined as "causal patterns" (Elster, 2015, p. 27) responsible for producing a certain outcome (Anderson et al., 2006; Pajunen, 2008). Transferred onto the topic of employer branding, the quest for effect mechanisms raises the question about any deeper explanations on how precisely an employer branding strategy is supposed to produce the aforementioned outcomes. According to the basic consideration that social mechanisms usually exhibit a hierarchical structure where *"… the lower-level components are essential for understanding the higher-level activity of the*

mechanisms in its context" (Pajunen, 2008, p. 1453; similar Hedström & Swedberg, 1998), we went through the literature searching for more in-depth clarifications concerning the intended impact of the various employer branding tools and measures. Overall, our inquiry disclosed a serious shortcoming of the reviewed literature. Instead of further elucidating how to align a company's HR activities with its respective EVP, most publications (even when explicitly practice-oriented) contented themselves with rather superficial platitudes. On closer inspection, most pieces of advice sounding like managerial *actions* to be taken in order to implement a successful employer brand turn out to be nothing more than second-order *goals* (like "Adjust your reward system to the EVP!" etc.). Thus, while the literature is packed with fine statements concerning *what* to strive for, comments on *how* (and *why*) to do so, remain very exceptional.

"No mechanism, neither understanding nor efficient control." In the light of this quote by Bunge (1997, p. 414), a rather disillusioning conclusion about the connection between employer branding's means and measures has to be drawn: Firstly, there is no clear-cut consensus about what actually are *specific* employer branding tools. If one follows the rather "reduced" version of employer branding as solely that of a communication concept, the respective literature may provide some reasonable ideas for the creation of a positive corporate image. Aside from the well-known idea of communicating a corporate identity that is well suited for the respective job market, the relevant literature contains near to no new, innovative tools or techniques. Here, employer branding would in fact be nothing more than a rather shallow HR marketing concept, abandoning its original, all-encompassing *strategic aim* that was supposed to set employer branding apart. In contrast, publications promoting a more comprehensive, extensive version of the employer branding concept put particular emphasis on the fact that the EVP must be deep-rooted in a company's factual work reality. Consequently, every central field of HR management should be regarded as a crucial aspect of an employer branding strategy. However, without any instructive advice on how these tools are supposed to be applied somewhat differently in the context of an employer branding strategy, such an all-embracing perspective does not allow for any useful distinction between employer branding and human resource management in general. Therefore, insights derivable from such a vacuous conceptualization are obviously of rather limited novelty, let alone practical help.

Employer Branding as a Management Fad

In light of the serious lack of substantially new or innovative ideas offered by the respective literature one is bound to ask why exactly the concept of employer branding has gained such a popularity within the HR community. In this context, a first indication is given by a study conducted by Baum, Gsell, and Kabst (2012). Here, by means of a neo-institutionalist analysis (Scott, 1987) of the 2009 German

Cranet data, the authors were able to detect evidence that economic considerations may not be the only reason for enterprises to become engaged in employer branding. Instead, it may very well be based on their desire or need for legitimacy ascriptions by relevant stakeholders (i.e. in order to appear more modern, up to date etc.). From this perspective, some of the correlations between organizational performance and employer branding should actually be interpreted the other way around: As large or respectively successful companies are more directly in the public limelight, they generally perceive a stronger pressure to adopt innovative concepts in order to be seen as keeping up with external expectations. In addition, due to their economic success, they have sufficient resources at their disposal to do so. The same could be said about the assumed connection between employer attractiveness and organizational success or respectively innovativeness. The more successful and innovative a company is perceived, the higher its attractiveness as an employer, as applicants quite probably associate good development possibilities, a rather safe job perspective, attractive career options and interesting, diverse tasks with such companies. Compared to these simple and obvious explanations, the alternative claim – namely that companies gain in innovativeness and/or economic success through the mere execution of an employer branding strategy – appears rather blurred and nebulous.

These deliberations lead to yet another cause for employer branding's widespread acceptance among the HR community: In addition to certain *external* expectations, a lot of HR departments are exposed to certain internal pressures to legitimize their specific resource demands (Alvesson, 2013; Hammonds, 2005). Just as companies compete for resources, so do the different departments, operational divisions etc. within a single company. As it is rather difficult to precisely determine the different subsystems' profit contributions, decision making within these subsystems (e.g. HRM, marketing, sales department) is often led by the strive for legitimization through top management. If employer branding is accepted as a critical factor for the company's survival, then this provides HR managers with a valuable asset in the internal competition for resources, prestige, status and power (Behrends, 2015). Therefore, HR managers may feel tempted to enhance their recognition and perceived significance within the company by promoting and emphasizing the (alleged) strategic scope of their activities.

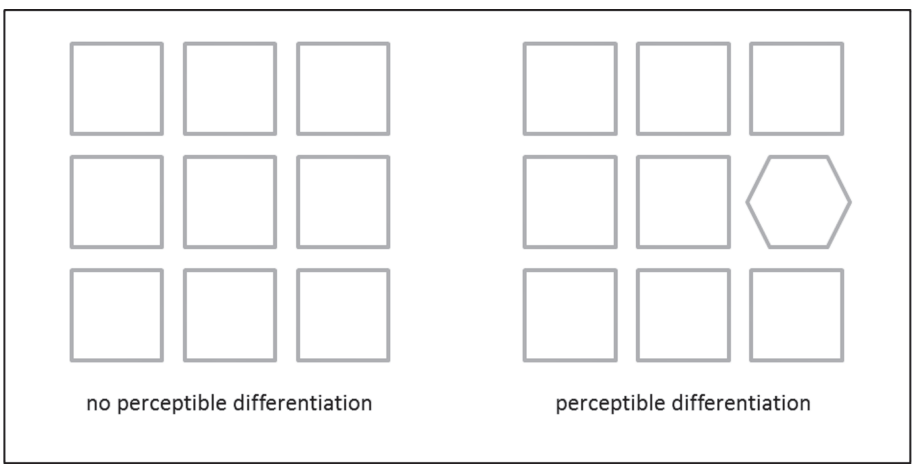
Against the backdrop of these considerations, research work regarding the characteristics and typical courses of so called "management fashions" (or "management fads") provides some enlightening hints (Abrahamson, 1996; Abrahamson & Fairchild, 1999; Benders & van Veen, 2001; Giroux, 2006; Perkmann & Spicer, 2008). Rooted in the theoretical premises of the aforementioned New/ Neo-Institutionalism (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1987; Walgenbach, 2001), this stream of research usually grounds its explanations of the spread of certain management concepts on the assumption that organizational decisions are often provoked by the pursuit of external legitimacy ascriptions rather than considerations of pure economic efficiency. To establish enduring relations with their most important stakehold-

ers and thus to secure their access to vital resources, organizations feel compelled to comply with the normative expectations of their environment. Hence, if a company wants to be perceived as an attractive employer it has to ensure that its HR management is credibly regarded as professional and modern. This overarching objective may result in the regular implementation and promotion of (apparently) new and innovative management concepts – even if these concepts will not necessarily foster economic performance. In some cases, this then leads to a kind of a mimetic snowball effect in which more and more organizations may feel the pressure to jump the bandwagon and do alike. So, with reference to our introductory question: Employer branding might not necessarily be implemented for its effective problem-solving capacity but mainly because it serves as a symbol of up-to-date HR management.

Using terminology taken from game theory, Kieser (1997) compares the discourses from which new management trends emerge to arenas *"… in which different groups of participants bustle about – consultants, professors, managers, editors of management magazines, publishers, commercial seminar organizers, organizers of internet forums, etc. (…). The participants can achieve their individual goals of highest possible profit, public image, power or career by widening the arena through luring further participants into it. For this purpose, they play principally co-operative games. Rhetoric is the main input currency in this game*" (Kieser, 1997, p. 57). For a new management fashion to become widely accepted as an acknowledged component of what is regarded as "modern management", certain rhetorical devices are crucial (Kieser, 1997; Nicolai, 2003), and it quickly becomes obvious that these rhetorics can be found numerously in the literature on employer branding. First of all, the strategic relevance of a new concept has to be convincingly accentuated. In the case of employer branding, this is done by referring to the growing significance of services, innovation and creativity as competitive advantages, thus emphasizing the importance of a qualified and highly motivated workforce (App et al., 2012; Barrow & Mosley, 2011; Graeme Martin et al., 2005; Moroko & Uncles, 2008). With that in mind, the substantial threats emerging from the ongoing "war for talent" are outlined, demonstrating the increasing relevance of successfully recruiting and retaining organizational "top performers" (Botha et al., 2011; Elving et al., 2013; Ewing et al., 2002). Then, through citing best practice examples of the impressive recruitment performances of some well-known companies (Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; G. Martin & Groen-In't-Woud, 2011), the "up till now gravely neglected" idea of a consciously designed employer brand is introduced as a key solution to these problems (Barrow, 2007; Mosley, 2007; Wilska, 2014). Against this background, the concept of employer branding immediately gains an aura of topicality and urgency.

Following up on this, advocates of management fads often use a simple rhetorical trick, drawing an improper voluntaristic conclusion from a phenomenon's mere existence to its active manageability (examples can be found in the literature on corporate culture, diversity management, knowledge management etc.). In our case,

the described positive examples of successful employer brands are uncritically interpreted as the result of an intentionally managed strategy, without reflecting their actual process of emergence. Thus, the sheer existence of successful employer brands is subtly transformed into the outcome of conscious managerial action (employer brand*ing*). Consequently, the implementation of an employer branding strategy is portrayed as something which in principle every company is (more or less easily) able to realize. More detailed descriptions regarding the development and implementation of such fashionable management concepts are characterized by *"a clever mixture of simplicity and ambiguity"* (Kieser, 1997, pp. 58–59). In the case of employer branding compare for instance the – admittedly extreme – example of simplicity in figure 3 that is supposed to show how perceptible differentiation increases the recognition value of an employer brand.



(Schumacher & Geschwill, 2009, p. 34)

Figure 3: An extreme example of employer branding's simplicity – "Recognition value through differentiation"

While the basic principles are simple and evidently plausible (e. g. nobody would argue that it is better to be an *attractive* employer than an *average* one etc.), the high degree of complexity and the potential inconsistencies that arise when one actually tries to follow the pieces of advice are widely disregarded or hushed up. Instead of more or less precise instructions, most texts rely on rather vague and ambiguous expressions. Implications like *"… you need to ensure your employer brand attracts the right kind of people and your employer brand management reinforces the right kind of culture"* (Mosley, 2007, p. 132) or *"Practitioners from different disciplines therefore should work together in order to create a stunning employer branding strategy"* (Elving et al., 2013, p. 489) are obviously not very informing or instructive. However, they contribute to the initial acceptance and distribution of novel management concepts

by offering a lot of interpretational freedom to practitioners – freedom that gives them the possibility to construe the fuzzy objectives and instructions to their very own gusto (cf. the concept of *"interpretative viability"* in Benders & van Veen, 2001; or Giroux, 2006).

Conclusion: Much Ado About Little

To sum up: In recent years, the concept of employer branding has established itself as a renowned aspect of modern HR management. Practitioners (as well as a growing number of researchers) regard the development of a distinctive employer brand as a central challenge for organizations in order to be able to hold one's ground in the so called "war for talent". As shown above, the promises attributed to employer branding in this context transcend the original marketing idea of an enhanced employer reputation, encompassing almost all aspects of organizational performance. However, in the course of our review and analysis of the relevant literature, we identified a number of fundamental weaknesses, inconsistencies and "blind spots", which cannot simply be attributed to the insufficiencies of single publications but rather challenge the concept's potential validity in general.

Therefore, organizations that are actually trying to put an employer branding strategy in practice, will find themselves confronted with a number of contradictory requirements when trying to determine their (unique) employer value proposition. Furthermore, explanations and pieces of advice regarding the actual operational implementation of an employer branding strategy for the most part remain quite vague. They usually consist of extensive lists of sufficiently well-known instruments and tools originally stemming from approaches such as corporate identity, corporate communication or HR management in general. Neither are the assumed cause-effect mechanisms linking EB's measures and goals elucidated in a satisfactory manner, nor did we find any further explanations on how these conventional tools should be adjusted in order to support a certain employer branding strategy. So apart from obligatory references to the importance of new/social media, they provide basically no significant enhancements to the internal marketing literature from the 1980s and 1990s. From these findings, we reach the conclusion that employer branding is actually not much more than a management fashion, a slightly "updated remake" of the sufficiently known and tested concept of *internal marketing*. This in itself would not necessarily have to be considered a problem as the current developments on certain employment markets seem to call for a renaissance of marketing ideas in the field of HRM. However, employer branding does not live up to its widespread claim that it is a veritably new and innovative concept.

To be clear, our criticism of the employer branding concept and discourse is not confined solely to the area of HR practice and consulting. On the contrary, HR managers might at times have good reasons for inflating even rather unspectacular concepts and activities in order to gain sufficient resources and recognition within

their organizations. Considering the notable body of scientific publications on the subject of employer branding, its largely uncritical adoption by most researchers must at least be termed surprising. Being relieved from the practical constraints of daily work routines and competitive pressures, scientific explorations of organizational practices should not fall for (or even encourage) the rhetoric of short-lived management fashions. In our opinion, the flowery descriptions of employer branding and its far-reaching effects ought to be cut back to one timeless, trivial and potentially uncomfortable truth: Organizations that really want to successfully and sustainably present themselves as employers of choice, first of all have to ensure that they actually *are* attractive employers. Consequently, the fundamental substance of any organization's HR policy gets under review: the actual design of jobs and compensation schemes, development perspectives and career advancements or the provision of a respectful and appreciative climate within the organization. Notwithstanding the immense diversity of (in part contradictory) theoretical approaches, empirical insights and yet unanswered questions, research on organizations has amassed ample convincing evidence that there simply is no cheap shortcut towards being an attractive employer: Therefore, employer branding must not be promoted as a new foundation of integrated HRM, it should at best be regarded as its supportive promoter.

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