

Winning the Mba Talent War: The Role of Employer Branding and Organizational Reputation in Shaping Intention to Apply

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: To investigate how organizational reputation affects final-year MBA students' intention to apply by using employer branding as a mediating factor.

Method: A structured electronic questionnaire was used to gather data from 462 final-year MBA students from various Mumbai colleges. Convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used to choose respondents for the study's cross-sectional survey design. SPSS software was used to analyze the data. The reliability was tested using Cronbach alpha.

Finding: Without the need for mediation, an organization's reputation serves as a powerful, independent signal that directly affects applicants' intention to apply.

Practical implication: Organizations can improve their employer branding by communicating a compelling employee value proposition and upholding a positive organizational reputation through ethical behavior, transparent communication, and employee advocacy. When combined, these strategies increase an organization's attractiveness, promote trust, and increase the possibility that top-notch MBA graduates will submit job applications.

Keywords: Employer branding, Organizational reputation, Intention to Apply, MBA students

INTRODUCTION

In the fiercely competitive business world of today, companies are fighting a never-ending "war for talent," trying to draw in and keep highly qualified workers who can spur innovation and organizational success (Michaels E. et al. (2001), Turban et al. (2017), Hollstein et al. (2017)) Because of their advanced managerial expertise, capacity for leadership, and capacity for strategic thought, MBA graduates constitute a valuable talent pool. In order to obtain a competitive edge in luring this talent, companies are consequently concentrating more on enhancing their employer brand and organizational reputation.

An organization's reputation reflects the opinions of its stakeholders, including its workers, clients, investors, and the general public. The image and value proposition that a company presents to both present and prospective employees is known as employer branding. When considered collectively, these factors significantly influence potential employees' decisions to apply for jobs and their perceptions of a company as a desirable place to work (Silva & Dias, 2022, Ambler and Barrow 1996, Gatewood et al. 1993).

Previous research indicates that organizations with a positive reputation and a strong employer brand are more likely to attract qualified candidates, particularly from Generation Z and recent MBA graduates who are actively seeking long-term growth, career development opportunities, meaningful work, and supportive organizational cultures. Organizational reputation and employer branding have developed into strategic tools that help businesses stand out in the fiercely competitive hiring market and increase their ability to draw in top talent. Elving et al. (2013) and Slaughter et al. (2017) claim that employer branding and organizational reputation have evolved into strategic tools that enhance organizational attractiveness and favorably impact the intention of potential employees to apply.

This study examines how MBA graduates' intentions to apply for jobs are influenced by employer branding and organizational reputation. It specifically seeks to understand how these factors affect job seekers' perceptions and willingness to pursue career opportunities with potential employers. Through a review of the literature and an empirical investigation of these relationships, the study determines the critical factors that make companies desirable employers for recent MBA graduates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Babikova, K., & Bucek, J. (2019) “*A Model Replication with an Extension of Students’ Perception of Prospective Employer Attractiveness*”. This study replicated the employer branding model proposed by Sivertzen et al. (2013) to examine the relationship between employer attractiveness, corporate reputation, social media, and intention to apply among 627 university students in the Czech Republic. The findings demonstrated that while employer attractiveness had a positive impact on corporate reputation, social media had a positive impact on both intention to apply and corporate reputation. Additionally, corporate reputation greatly increased applicants' intention to apply, even though the strength of these relationships varied by industry.

Elbendary et al. (2024), “A mixed-methods approach for the relationship between organizational attributes, reputation, employer brand and intention to apply for a job vacancy”. The impact of organizational reputation, employer brand, and organizational attributes on the intention to apply among 356 job seekers in Egypt was examined in this study using PLS-SEM. The findings revealed that, after organizational characteristics, employer brand and reputation had the next biggest influence on intention to apply. Additionally, employer brand mediated the relationship between organizational attributes and intention to apply, while organizational reputation significantly moderated these relationships, highlighting its role in boosting applicants' intention to apply.

Hein et al. (2023) in their study “*Employer Branding and its influence on job seekers: A systematic literature review*”, conducted a comprehensive review of the literature on employer branding and how it influences the attitudes and behaviors of job seekers. To compile the body of knowledge regarding the literature was thoroughly examined to determine how employer branding affected the attitudes and actions of job seekers. The study identifies key components of business branding, such as symbolic (like reputation and status) and instrumental (like pay and career opportunities). According to the statement, hiring decisions, organizational attractiveness, and the desire to apply are all significantly impacted by employer branding. The review also calls for additional empirical and integrative research in this area, highlighting the increasing significance of social media and digital platforms in influencing employer brand perceptions.

Jordan, M. H., & Desiana, P. M. (2024).” *The influence of employer branding on intention to apply, mediated by organization reputation and person–organization fit in Generation Z talent candidates.*

“using organizational reputation and person-organization fit as mediators, this study investigated the impact of employer branding on Generation Z candidates' intention to apply. Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to analyze data from 251 final-year students and recent graduates from ten of Indonesia's top universities. The results showed that organizational reputation partially mediated the relationship between employer branding and intention to apply, which was positively and significantly impacted. The study emphasizes how crucial it is to spend money on employer branding in order to improve an organization's reputation and draw in top talent.

Soeling et al. (2022).” *Organizational reputation: does it mediate the effect of employer brand attractiveness on intention to apply in Indonesia?* “The intention to apply and employer brand attractiveness of 425 Indonesian final-year university students were investigated in this study in relation to the mediating function of organizational reputation. The path analysis's findings demonstrated that employer brand attractiveness had a significant impact on both organizational reputation and intention to apply. Organizational reputation, which had no appreciable effect on intention to apply, did not act as a mediator in the relationship between employer brand attractiveness and intention to apply. The study's conclusions suggest that in order to draw in top talent, businesses should enhance their employer brands.

Verma (2024)” *Does Employer Branding Shake Application Intentions of Potential Employees?* “This study examined the effect of employer branding on MBA students' intention to apply for jobs using data from 210 graduates of a prestigious Indian business school. The data was analyzed using PLS-SEM. The findings demonstrated that employer branding considerably boosts intention to apply, with job role, pay and benefits, organizational culture, job security, and overseas assignments being the most significant factors. The study emphasizes how important it is to enhance employer branding in order to attract top talent.

RESEARCH GAP

This study is limited to final-year MBA students from colleges in Mumbai, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings to other regions and populations. While employer branding has been thoroughly studied in the past, the combined impact of employer branding and organizational reputation on MBA students' intention to apply during campus placements has received relatively little attention. To increase the findings' generalizability, future research should use more varied samples from various geographical areas and academic institutions.

OBJECTIVE

- To investigate the perception of employer branding among final-year MBA students preparing for campus placements.
- To examine the effect of organizational reputation on MBA students' intention to apply to prospective employers.
- To examine the relationship between organizational reputation, employer branding, and intention to apply among final-year MBA students.

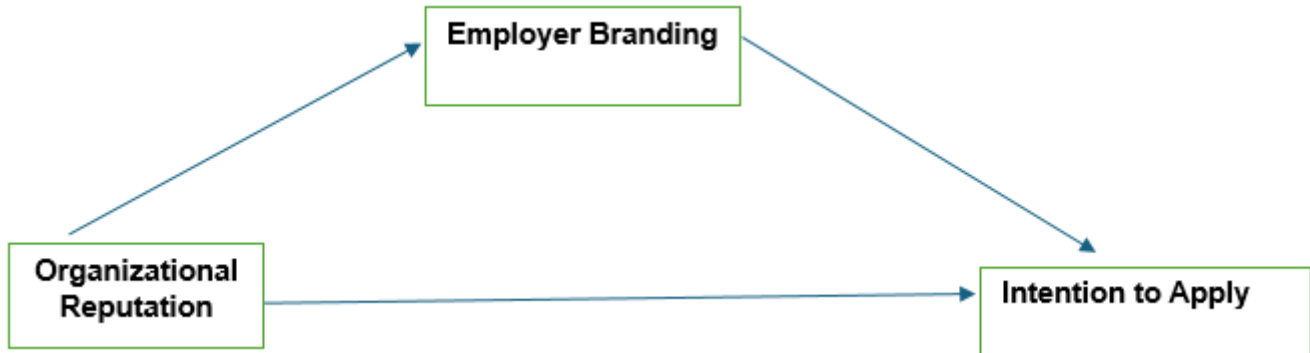
HYPOTHESIS

H1: Organizational reputation has a significant positive effect on employer branding.

H2: Organizational reputation has a significant positive effect on intention to apply for jobs.

H3: Employer branding mediates the relationship between organizational reputation and intention to apply for jobs.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK



RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In order to investigate the function of employer branding in mediating the association between organizational reputation and application intention among final-year MBA students, this study used an exploratory research design. Since an exploratory approach adds to the expanding body of literature on employer branding and recruitment and offers a deeper understanding of the relationships among the study variables, it was deemed appropriate. 462 final-year MBA students enrolled in management schools throughout Mumbai provided data for the study at a single point in time using a cross-sectional survey design. Because they represent potential job applicants actively preparing for campus placements and making employment-related decisions, these students were chosen as respondents. Respondents were chosen using a convenience sampling technique, a non-probability sampling method, according to their availability and willingness to take part in the study. A structured electronic questionnaire created from previously approved measurement scales was used to gather primary data. The two sections of the questionnaire measured the constructs of employer branding, organizational reputation, and intention to apply, while the first section gathered demographic data from respondents. The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale, while secondary data were obtained from relevant academic sources. Data analysis was performed using Smart PLS 4. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, and Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) was employed to test the hypothesized relationships. The significance of the structural paths was evaluated using bootstrapped t-statistics and p-values.

Of the 462 responders, 42% were women and 58% were men. Millennials made up 14% of the population, with Generation Z (those under 27) making up the majority (86%). The majority of respondents (52%) had a specialization in finance, which was followed by marketing (23%), human resource management (11%), and information technology, operations, and other management disciplines. According to this demographic profile, the sample was mainly made up of young MBA students preparing for campus placements from a variety of specializations.

To generate useful data for research analysis, a scale that appropriately represents the construct being studied must be designed. As described in the table below lists the 32 items used in the conceptual framework to measure the dimensions of different constructions. Four items explained the intention to apply (Int_Jobs), nine items explained the employer branding (EB), and five items explained the organizational reputation (OR). As shown in the conceptual framework, Employer Branding served as a

mediator in this study between the independent variables (IV), Organizational Reputation (OR), and the dependent variable, Intention to apply (Int_Jobs).

Measurement model

Table 1: Construct reliability

	Item: - Statements	Items	Loadings	Alpha	CR
	The organization has presence in international locations	OR1	0.792		
	The organization is a known brand in the industry	OR2	0.866		
OR	The firm should be within the state of my permanent residence	OR3	0.792	0.867	0.903
	The organization allows me to work from any location	OR4	0.768		
	The organization is regularly involved in promoting social causes	OR5	0.816		
	Opportunities for professional growth	EB1	0.863		
	Positive work environment	EB2	0.910		
	Strong leadership and management	EB3	0.920		
EB	Work-life balance	EB4	0.896	0.957	0.963
	Job security and stability	EB5	0.768		
	Competitive salary and benefits	EB6	0.879		
	Company reputation	EB7	0.782		
	Corporate social responsibility	EB8	0.876		
	Commitment to diversity and inclusion	EB9	0.858		
	I would prefer to work for a company that is an established name in itself.	Int1	0.829		
Int_Jobs	Given that I require a decent start, I shall apply to reputed firms.	Int2	0.838	0.854	0.902
	I would prefer applying to companies which are a known brand	Int3	0.863		
	My first priority shall be to focus on big brands during the placements.	Int4	0.806		

Referring to Table 1 above, the measurement model demonstrated strong reliability and convergent validity for three latent constructs: Organizational Reputation (OR), Employer Branding (EB), and Intention to Apply (Int_Jobs). Organizational reputation was operationalized using five items. Students' perceptions of an employer's global reach, industry brand recognition, proximity to their permanent residence, flexibility in work location, and involvement in social causes were all captured by these items. With Cronbach's alpha of 0.867 and composite reliability (CR) of 0.903, the construct showed strong internal consistency. Additionally, all items loaded significantly on the OR factor (loadings ranging from 0.768 to 0.866). This implies that a coherent underlying reputation construct is consistently measured by the items.

Opportunities for professional development, a positive work environment, strong leadership and management, work-life balance, job security and stability, competitive salary and benefits, company reputation, corporate social responsibility, and dedication to diversity and inclusion are just a few of the nine items that were used to measure employer branding (EB). Opportunities for professional development, a positive work environment, strong leadership and management, work-life balance, job security and stability, competitive salary and benefits, company reputation, corporate social responsibility, and dedication to diversity and inclusion are just a few of the nine items that were used to measure employer branding (EB).

Students' intention to apply was assessed using four items that measured their propensity to work for respectable, well-known, and "big brand" companies during campus placements (Int_Jobs). The loadings for these items ranged from 0.806 to 0.863, once again showing strong convergence on a single latent factor. The satisfactory reliability estimates for Int_Jobs ($\alpha = 0.854$, CR = 0.902) show that the items form a consistent measure of brand-oriented application intentions. When taken as a whole, the three constructs' strong reliability coefficients and high factor loadings validate the measurement model's appropriateness and call for their inclusion in additional structural analyses.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

Construct	Mean	SD	AVE	$\sqrt{\text{AVE}}$	OR	EB	Int_Jobs
OR	3.995	0.796	0.653	0.808	–	0.37	0.446
EB	4.072	0.911	0.745	0.863	0.37	–	0.298
Int_Jobs	3.18	0.812	0.696	0.834	0.446	0.298	–

Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics (Mean, SD), convergent validity (AVE and square root of AVE), and discriminant validity (inter-construct correlations) for the three latent constructs: intention to apply, employer branding, and organizational reputation. Each AVE value demonstrated sufficient convergent validity since it was greater than the recommended cutoff of 0.50. Furthermore, the square root of AVE (shown on the diagonal) for each construct was greater than the corresponding inter-construct correlations, satisfying the Fornell–Larcker criterion and supporting discriminant validity among the constructs.

Table 3:- Rotated Factor Matrix

Rotated Factor Matrix ^a	
Items	Factor
The organization has presence in international locations	0.722
The organization is a known brand in the industry	0.679
The firm should be within the state of my permanent residence	0.595

The organization allows me to work from any location	0.567
The organization is regularly involved in promoting social causes	0.521
Extraction Method: Principal Axis Factoring.	
Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.	
a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.	

Table 3 presents the results of an exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with Varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization for the five items that represented organizational reputation. A single factor solution was obtained when the rotation converged after five iterations. All items loaded satisfactorily on this factor, with loadings ranging from 0.521 to 0.722. Significant loadings above 0.50 were also shown by items related to geographic proximity, work-location flexibility, and involvement in social causes; the strongest loadings were found for items reflecting international presence and industry brand recognition. These results suggest that the five indicators tap into a common underlying dimension of perceived organizational reputation and support the unidimensional structure of the scale.

HYPOTHESE TESTING

Structural Model Results

Table 4: Results of Hypotheses Tests

Hypotheses	B (Beta)	B.Mean	B.SD	T Stat.	2.5% CI	97.5% CI	Results
OR → EB	0.052	0.052	0.068	0.758	-0.079	0.188	Not Supported
OR → Int_Jobs	0.158	0.159	0.064	2.484	0.03	0.281	Supported
OR → EB → Int_Jobs	0.005	0.006	0.008	0.617	-0.008	0.025	Not supported

Source: Researcher

Notes: OR: Organizational Reputation; EB: Employer Branding; Int_Jobs: Intention to apply for jobs, B. Mean: Bootstrapped Mean; B.SD: Bootstrapped standard deviation

The structural model was tested using bootstrapping to examine the suggested relationships between organizational reputation (OR), employer branding (EB), and intention to apply for jobs (Int_Jobs). The path from OR to EB was not significant ($\beta = 0.052$, $T = 0.758$, 95% CI [-0.079, 0.188]), indicating that organizational reputation had no significant effect on employer branding perceptions. The statistically significant path from OR to Int_Jobs ($\beta = 0.158$, $T = 2.484$, 95% CI [0.030, 0.281]) supports the hypothesis that higher organizational reputation directly increases MBA students' intention to apply to that employer. The indirect effect of OR on Int_Jobs via EB (OR → EB → Int_Jobs) was non-significant ($\beta = 0.005$, $T = 0.617$, 95% CI [-0.008, 0.025]), suggesting that employer branding does not mediate the relationship between organizational reputation and intention to apply in this sample. Overall, the findings indicate that application intentions are directly impacted by organizational reputation as opposed to being mediated by employer branding.

FINDINGS

After completing their undergraduate degrees, 48.9% of students in the 21–23 age range enrolled directly in an MBA program, according to the study. Due to a strong academic continuity mindset, the majority of recent graduates are choosing to pursue postgraduate management education without any prior work experience.

Since Organizational Reputation and Employer did not significantly positively correlate ($\beta = 0.052$, $t = 0.758$, 95% CI [-0.079, 0.188]), hypothesis 1 was rejected. An organization's reputation (global reach, flexible policies, CSR, and brand presence) does not significantly boost perceived employer branding, despite providing basic credibility. These elements are important to MBA students, but they think they will be enhanced by first-hand knowledge of employee culture and experience.

The second hypothesis, which claims that students' intentions to apply for jobs are positively and strongly correlated with an organization's reputation, was confirmed. positively impacted (95% CI [0.030, 0.281], $\beta = 0.158$, $t = 2.484$), in contrast to the results of Soeling et al.'s 2022 study, which disregarded the impact of an organization's reputation on job application intention. An organization's reputation, which includes flexibility and a strong brand, has a significant influence on job applications. This is particularly true for students who, when starting their careers, place a high value on social impact, security, and prestige. The position of the brand in the placement environment has a significant impact on the intention to apply.

The **hypothesis 3** claims that employer branding would serve as a mediator, which means that students' motivation to apply for jobs would only increase if an organization's reputation—that is, its level of respect or recognition—was filtered through successful employer branding. The data revealed no significant mediation effect, indicating that employer branding is not the primary way that organizational reputation influences job application intentions. As a result, this theory was refuted. Employer branding signals are not necessary for students to choose where to apply because they can recognize and react to a company's general reputation on their own. It implies that businesses still need to have a solid reputation in the marketplace and with job seekers in order to draw applications, even though a well-managed employer brand can aid with hiring.

LIMITATIONS

This research has a number of significant limitations. Because the sample is restricted to B-school/MBA students from a specific Mumbai institution, the findings might not be applicable to other student groups or seasoned professionals. The cross-sectional, self-report design may be influenced by common method bias or social desirability in addition to restricting causal interpretation. Additionally, the model only considers a few factors (organizational reputation and employer branding) and ignores other influences, such as broader labor market conditions, peer and faculty guidance, or individual traits.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATION

In order to boost young talent and MBA students' intentions to apply, managers should actively work to enhance the organization's reputation. Because reputation has a direct positive impact on intention to apply, employers must invest in consistent industry visibility, credible performance, and socially responsible initiatives, and make sure these are communicated clearly in campus interactions. Employer branding initiatives should concurrently highlight the specific attributes that students value, such as growth opportunities, a positive work environment, and strong leadership, in order to make reputable companies not only well-known but also seen as desirable places to start a career. Educational institutions can assist students in evaluating the reputation of their employers by providing organizations with opportunities to engage with alumni and share local success stories and social initiatives.

CONCLUSION

The study highlights the significance of organizational reputation and employer branding in influencing

B-school students' intentions to apply for jobs in the context of campus placement. According to research demonstrating that organizational reputation is a significant direct driver of application intentions, students are more likely to apply to organizations they perceive to be respectable, well-established, and socially conscious. This highlights how important it is for companies to maintain a strong and positive reputation in the talent market.

Employer branding, which is conceptualized through students' perceptions of elements like opportunities for professional development, a positive work environment, strong leadership, work-life balance, job security, competitive rewards, CSR, and inclusivity, offers a complementary perspective on how young talent evaluates potential employers. The findings demonstrate that having a strong reputation and a distinct employer brand enhances an organization's overall appeal during campus placements. By concentrating on these two elements, the study concludes that companies seeking to attract MBA students should simultaneously invest in upholding a strong organizational reputation and developing and promoting an appealing employer brand, as both factors affect students' intentions to apply.

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