

Employer branding: Examining the relationship between  
employers' attractiveness attributes and application intentions of online jobseekers

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**Declaration**

This thesis is entirely my own work, and has not been previously submitted to this or any other third level institution.

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### **Abstract**

Employer branding has become an increasingly important factor shaping organisations' recruitment strategies in the digital age. This research study explores the relationship between perceived attractiveness attributes of employers and the intentions of online jobseekers. Drawing upon the insights accrued from two focus groups of participants currently employed in the IT/Tech sector, the research reveals three emerging themes incorporating: Self-Perception and Person-Environment Fit; Instrumental and Symbolic Organisational Attributes; and Navigational Use and Online Resources. The results indicate that, in the early stages of job seeking online, perceptions of employer attractiveness are greatly influenced by perceptions of self and corporate reputation. This has significant implications for employer branding, which are subsequently discussed.

## Introduction

The social, technological and economic forces unleashed as a result of globalisation have radically altered the sphere of recruitment (Beechler & Woodward, 2009; Elving, Westhoff, Meeusen & Schoonderbeek, 2013; Girard & Fallery, 2010). Most notably, the shift from the industrial to the information age has underlined the primacy of human capital in advanced capitalist societies. As the pace of technological innovation has increased and competition between corporations has risen, it has become increasingly important for firms to locate new and dynamic means of attracting and retaining the very best employees from across the job-seeking spectrum (Beechler & Woodward, 2009). Where, previously, large corporations could rely primarily upon the name and reputation of the firm in order to attract the best candidates, in the digital age the human resources departments of firms have increasingly focused upon the concept of brand management (Sokro, 2012). Drawing upon the principles and practices of marketing, the ideology of employer branding is constructed upon the premise that employees represent the internal consumers within an organisation and that jobs constitute the internal products. Amber and Barrow (1996, p.187), the conceptual architects of 'employer branding', define brand management in the employment sector as "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company." Understood in this way, employer branding reveals the extent to which corporations are willing to: (1) manage the awareness of employees (and potential employees); and (2) build an image of the company as an ideal place to work (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016).

There are a number of research studies which outline the importance of employer branding (Collins & Kanar, 2014; Pingle & Sharma 2013; Sivertzen, Nilsen & Olafsen, 2013). In particular, academic research overwhelmingly supports the assumption that there is a direct and causal association between the cultivation of an

employer brand, and the ability to recruit and retain the best quality employees (Cappelli, 2001; Cheese, Thomas & Craig, 2007; Della Corte, Mangia, Micera & Zamparelli, 2011; Minchington, 2010). Conversely, the literature supports the notion that firms which do not allocate time and resources to employer branding are failing to fulfil their human capital potential (Botha, Bussin & De Swardt, 2011; Cheese et al., 2007; Dell, Ainspan, Bodenber, Troy & Hickey, 2001; Minchington, 2006). However, while there has a wide range of academic literature which has been published on employer branding from the employer's perspective, there has been relatively little attention paid to the issue from the vantage point of the job seeker/prospective candidate. Furthermore, it is only very recently that researchers have sought to examine how employer branding is influenced by social media. The proposed research study will endeavour to address these gaps in the literature by examining the relationship between employers' attractiveness attributes and the application intentions of online jobseekers.

## 1. Literature Review

The literature which has been published on employer branding draws upon a range of academic and theoretical perspectives including psychology, sociology, advertising and marketing, business studies, economics and communication studies. This has yielded a diffuse and highly varied approach to the study of employer branding. For instance, in a meta-analysis of academic research conducted into employer image and employer branding since 2001, Lievens and Slaughter (2016) isolate two conceptualisations of employer image including: (1) the 'elementalistic' perspective (which focus upon prospective candidates' perceptions of the organisation); and (2) the holistic perspective (which assesses the overall ratings of organisational attributes). According to Lievens and Slaughter (2016), the elementalistic perspective distinguishes between symbolic and instrumental organisational attributes. Instrumental organisational attributes refer to the tasks and/or skills which are required of employees within the organisation. A candidate looking for work in the banking sector will, for instance, typically seek a certain instrumental activity which will underpin their day-to-day role (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016).

Symbolic organisational attributes, on the other hand, denote inferences about the organisation and the 'intangible attributes' which define the organisation (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016, p.6). Symbolic organisational attributes therefore refer to the values and principles which shape job-seekers' behaviour in the employment marketplace. Lievens and Slaughter (2016) therefore underline the pivotal role which is played by singular attributes based upon a very specific set of mental representations. However, it is essential to recognise that, regardless of whether the researcher is examining the influence of instrumental or symbolic motivations, assessing the way in which an organisation is perceived is an inherently subjective undertaking which depends entirely



upon the individual's interpretation of the employment marketplace (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). This significantly undermines the generalizability of research into employees' perceptions of organisational attractiveness (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016).

In contrast, the holistic perspective refers to the broader reputation of the organisation and the effect that this has upon job-seeking behaviour. The holistic perspective therefore alludes to the positive feelings that a prospective candidate may hold towards an organisation. This is a key component of employer branding identified by Khan (2017) Incorporating a quantitative research design based upon a survey of 100 students enrolled in Masters and Graduate programmes, Khan (2017) found that the reputation of an organisation creates 'brand equity' which, in turn, influences the perception of a firm's prestige in the job marketplace. Viewed from this vantage point, prospective employees are attracted to organisations because they are keen to be associated with the brand and the image which the firm has promulgated (Khan, 2017). This is a theme which will be explored in greater depth in the proposed research study. In particular, the study will assess the correlation between perceptions of employer attractiveness and corporate reputation and, secondly, the extent to which company reviews impact upon a potential candidate's perception of corporate reputation. However, it should be acknowledged that the findings yielded by Khan's study, like many others in this field, are undermined because they have been garnered from the perspective of young job seekers who have yet to enter the employment marketplace. The findings cannot, as a consequence, account for the perceptions of older, more experienced employees and the factors that motivate their behaviour in the employment marketplace. Additionally, while the study is useful for understanding the motivations for applying for jobs, it does little to facilitate a deeper understanding of the issues which determine job retention and longevity in the workplace. This is a consistent weakness of the academic literature which has been published on employer branding (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016).

The academic literature underlines the centrality not only of perception but also of communication to employer branding. For instance, in an exploratory analysis of organisational attractiveness, Muruganatham and Princess (2017) argue that the perceived attractiveness in employment advertising is the most importance factor influencing recruitment effectiveness. In particular, Muruganatham and Princess (2017) suggest that there are certain dimensions of attractiveness which influence the way in which prospective candidates respond to employer advertisements.

Muruganatham and Princess (2017) highlight six dimensions of attractiveness including: (1) job and work characteristics; (2) employee portrayal/testimonial in job advertisements; (3) corporate image building statements; (4) perception of the Person-Organisation (P-O) fit; (5) aesthetic appeal; and (6) human resources capacity and organisational attributes. Dimensions one and six are indicative of what Lievens and Slaughter (2016) term 'instrumental' job attractiveness while the second, third and fifth dimensions are best understood in terms of symbolic organisational attributes. The fourth dimension of employer attractiveness outlined by Muruganatham and Princess (2017) alludes to an interactionist perspective which underlines the importance of the psychosocial link between the individual and the organisation as the most important factor influencing employer image/branding. This, as Bakanauskienė, Bendaravičienė and Barkauskė (2017) attest in an empirical analysis of employee attitudes in the Lithuanian business sector, represents a traits-based approach to the problem in which organisations are assigned personality traits and characteristics in the same way was people.

Drawing upon the interactionist, symbolic and instrumental perspectives, Bakanauskienė et al. (2017) conceive of 30 dimensions of organisational attractiveness in a bid to isolate the specific factors that contribute most prominently to employee attitudes. Bakanauskienė et al. (2017) ultimately found that the working environment of the organisation, the salary and the job requirements are the most pivotal features

determining employees' attitudes of a company. In the same vein, Ruchika and Prasad (2017) examined the relationship between employer branding and the formation of the anticipatory psychological contract (APC): the expectations and assumptions of employers and employees based upon inputs and outcomes. Incorporating semi-structured interviews with a sample group of final year students, Ruchika and Prasad (2017) found that there is a direct relationship between employer branding, the formation of the APC and intention to join an organisation. Organisational attractiveness cannot, therefore, be understood without recourse to the way in which prospective employees perceive the organisation to fit (or not to fit) into their worldviews (Ruchika & Prasad, 2017). This, according to Ruchika and Prasad (2017), is especially important in the current generation which place a high degree of importance upon promotion within the corporation. The findings from this study therefore reinforce the assumption that communication is central to effective employer branding (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Ruchika & Prasad, 2017).

However, it is important to underline the limitations of empirical research which attempts to understand the organisation in terms of traits, characteristics and attributes. Three issues are salient. Firstly, it should be recognised that the organisation is not a static and/or monolithic entity whose characteristics remain constant regardless of time, circumstance or place (Collins & Kanar, 2014). Organisations are subject to change according to the decisions taken by management, stakeholder investment, government policy and, most importantly, the wider macroeconomic environment. As a result, that which renders an organisation attractive today may have little or no influence upon attractiveness in the future (Collins & Kanar, 2014). This is an insight which is noted by Bakanauskienė et al. (2017), who acknowledge the constraining effects that economic crisis and recession can have upon the employment market, particularly in transition economies in the former Soviet bloc. Secondly, it is essential to note that research suggests that P-O fit has a negligible impact upon employer branding.

For example, examining company-controlled and company-independent social media websites from the perspective of branding theory, Kissel and Büttgen (2015) found that self-congruity has no bearing upon perceptions of employer attractiveness. Similarly, Kissel and Büttgen (2015) found that information acquired through social media (i.e. testimonials from other employees) is not a determining factor shaping prospective applicants' image of a firm. Rather, Kissel and Büttgen (2015) observe that a powerful corporate image is the most important determinant of employees' perceptions of an organisation. This is corroborated by quantitative research undertaken Yu and Davis (2017) who uncover a causal link between job search behaviours and familiarity with an employer's brand identity. In particular, Yu and Davis (2017, p.6) argue that image is the most important feature affecting organisational attractiveness because "it illustrates the potential benefits of being an employee of a particular organisation." Yu and Davis (2017) isolate two types of employer imagery including employer creativity and people focus as factors shaping organisational attractiveness. Yu and Davis (2017) thus corroborate the idea that instrumental and symbolic perspectives are both integral components of employee perception of organisational attractiveness. It is consequently important to underline the methodological pitfalls of assuming that job-seekers behave in a homogenous manner according to age, gender or socioeconomic class (Kissel & Büttgen, 2015; Yu & Davis, 2017).

Thirdly, it is essential to note that employer branding is not only influenced by the way that organisations communicate but also by the vehicle *through which* organisations communicate to prospective employees. For instance, Priyadarshini, Kumar and Jha (2017) conducted four focus groups with a sample group of job seekers in order to examine how the organisations' use of social media applications affects perceptions of attractiveness by young job seekers. Analysing qualitative data through interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), Priyadarshini et al. (2017) found that the

use of social media is mediated by: (1) ease of information; (2) navigational usability and user friendliness of the site; (3) P-O fit; (4) reliability; (5) positive and cost effective marketing; (6) value creation for employers; and (7) privacy concern. Priyadarshini et al. (2017) note that perceptions of employer attractiveness and employer brand identity are greatly influenced by the social media applications which organisations use to attract and recruit the best candidates. Nevertheless, while Priyadarshini et al. (2017) uncover a rich and multilayered account of online job seeking behaviour, the researchers pay scant attention to the role of corporate image as a first-order level of cognitive processing. Internal issues such as navigational usability and privacy are surely mediated by external factors such as the power of the corporate image, employer reputation and brand awareness (Caligiuri, Colakoglu, Cerdin & Kim, 2010; Kissel & Büttgen, 2015). The proposed research study will expand upon the aims and objectives outlined by Priyadarshini et al. (2017) by considering the issue of employer branding from the perspective of online jobseekers. However, rather than focusing upon candidates' perceptions of social media applications, the research study will assess the impact of corporate reputation and company reviews in shaping attitudes and feelings towards organisational attractiveness.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1. Research Design*

Research into employer branding and perceptions of employer attractiveness has been dominated by the two major social science research methodologies of quantitative and qualitative research. Quantitative research is rooted in the positivistic approaches to social research, which emerged during the second half of the nineteenth century (Creswell, 2013). Positivists believed that the facts of the social sphere could be analysed and observed in the same way as the facts of the natural world (Creswell, 2013). As a consequence, quantitative research methods broadly mirror the methods that are used in the natural sciences. In particular, quantitative research designs typically commence with the articulation of a testable hypothesis, followed by the accumulation of data, which either supports or refutes the hypothesis (Bryman, 2015). Quantitative research studies incorporate large datasets that are indicative of the wider population, with results typically disseminated in statistical and/or numerical form (Creswell, 2013). This is advantageous because, firstly, results accrued from quantitative research are generalizable at a macro level and, secondly, publishing results in the form of numbers and statistics renders it simple to chart the association between cause and effect (Bryman, 2015).

In contrast, qualitative research methods are grounded in the emergence of interpretive philosophies (Ormston, Spencer, Barnard & Snape, 2013). Unlike positivism, interpretivism is based upon the assumption that there are no social facts that can be observed in a quasi-scientific or rational way (Leung, 2015). Rather, interpretivism posits that the realities of the social world can only be studied and understood via recourse to the people who experience them (Leung, 2015). This has a profound impact upon the types of designs used in qualitative research. Most notably, qualitative research studies focus upon smaller and more manageable datasets, which allow the researcher to

perform an integral role in the research process (Flick, 2009). Interviews, documentary research, focus groups and ethnographic research are, for instance, commonly used in qualitative research. While this may undermine the generalizability of the results garnered, it reveals the extent to which human reality is socially and culturally constructed (Silverman, 2010).

This research study has incorporated a qualitative research design. Qualitative research methods have been selected for two reasons. On the one hand, time and resource constraints make it extremely difficult to conduct statistical research based upon a large dataset of companies and/or prospective candidates. On the other hand, there can be little doubt that, in order to understand how employers are perceived by prospective candidates online, it is essential to establish a research design which permits access to the views, beliefs and experiences of participants who have an intimate knowledge of job seeking (Priyadarshini et al., 2017). It was therefore deemed prudent to construct a research design that examined the views of a small sample of jobseekers. For this reason, the research study has included focus groups. There are three key advantages to focus groups in qualitative research.

Firstly, focus groups allow the researcher to acquire a vast and rich dataset in a concentrated time and space (Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech & Zoran, 2009). Incorporating multiple participants also ensures that the focus group yields diverse views and perspectives about the research topic (Onwuegbuzie et al., 2009). Secondly, the researcher performs an integral mediatory role in focus groups (Flick, 2009). Not only does the researcher set the agenda for the discussions that emerge in focus groups, they can also intervene in order to direct the flow of the conversation (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2010). This, in turn, can help to ensure that conversations remain relevant and that no participant(s) is able to dominate the focus group session (Hennink et al., 2010). Thirdly, there is a unique group dynamic in focus group research, which can provide

fertile grounds for the development of new and previously overlooked knowledge (Leung, 2009). As Leung (2009) notes, focus groups allow participants to 'piggyback' ideas off one another, thereby adding multiple dimensions to the dataset acquired through qualitative research.

## 2.2. Participants

This research study includes two focus groups in order to compare and contrast datasets. Both of the focus groups were comprised of eight participants (sixteen in total). Participants from were recruited directly from the Tech/IT company- Indeed. The average age of employees in Indeed is 28 years old. As is common in the IT/Tech sector, there are more male employees than female. Details about the research study were sent via email to the employees. A total of 68 employees expressed an interest in taking part in the research study. Random sampling was used to select the sixteen participants from the initial population. This, as Bryman (2015) details, reduces the risk of researcher bias in the selection of the participants.

**Table 1.**

### *Focus Group 1.*

<b>Participant Number</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Department</b>
1	23	Female	I.T Dept.
2	22	Male	Sales Dept.
3	27	Male	Sales Dept.



4	30	Male	Finance Dept.
5	29	Female	Client Services Dept.
6	26	Male	Client Services Dept.
7	29	Female	HR Dept
8	33	Male	Finance Dept.

**Table 2.***Focus Group 2.*

<b>Participant Number</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Department</b>
1	29	Male	Sales Dept.
2	22	Male	Marketing Dept.
3	23	Female	HR Dept
4	25	Female	Client Services Dept.
5	25	Female	Client Services Dept.
6	26	Male	Sales Dept.
7	22	Male	I.T Dept.
8	32	Female	Marketing Dept.

### *2.3. Ethical Considerations*

Both of the focus groups were held in onsite at the Indeed EMEA Headquarters in Dublin, Ireland. Each focus group ran for between forty and fifty minutes, during which participants were asked a series of research questions (Appendix A). Prior to commencing the focus groups, participants were emailed a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix B) and Informed Consent Form (Appendix C). The Participant Information Sheet clearly stated the aims and objectives of the research study, and outlined what participant in the focus group would entail (Webster, Lewis & Brown, 2013). The Informed Consent document formally acknowledged that participants had a right to withdraw from the focus groups at any point and without having to give an explanation (Webster et al, 2013). The Informed Consent document informed participants that the research study would also abide by ethical principles relating to confidentiality and anonymity.

### *2.4. Data Analysis*

The focus groups were audio taped so that all of the conversations that emerged during both sessions were recorded. In addition, the researcher took notes during the focus groups to highlight important points raised and to note the reactions of participants to particular issues raised (Onwuegbuzie et al, 2009). Data - both audio recorded and observational - was analysed in four stages. Firstly, all of the notes and the audio material from both sessions was transcribed ad verbatim (Bryman, 2015). Secondly, the data was organised into descriptive categories (Lewis, Ritchie, Ormston & Morrell, 2013). This involved segregating the text into units and assigning meanings to the events, experiences and phenomena discussed during each category. Thirdly, once all descriptive categories had been identified, the text was coded to define and conceptualise emerging trends in the data (Saldana, 2015). Finally, the text was

organised into themes and issues (Lewis et al, 2013). These themes and issues are outlined in the results section.

### 3. Results

There were three themes which emerged through analysis of the focus group data. These themes are: Self-Perception and Person-Environment Fit; Instrumental and Symbolic Organisational Attributes; and Navigational Use and Online Resources.

#### *3.1. Self-Perception and Person-Environment Fit*

The themes of self-perception and 'person-environment fit' appeared repeatedly during both focus groups. Self-perception refers to the way that prospective candidates see themselves. This is influenced not only by subjective views of selfhood but also by assumptions about the way that others see them. For instance, in discussing the second of the research questions, Participant 4 in Focus Group 1 revealed that:

"I don't really have a preconceived idea about the role I'm looking for, I'm more concerned with whether the job's right for me ... I'm a caring person and I could only work in a caring company."

In this case, the participant is stating that their conception of attractiveness is rooted in the way that they perceive themselves. This places limits upon the type of organisational environment that the participant finds attractive. The label, in this case 'caring', that the participant has applied to themselves is automatically applied to the organisation. If the two do not match, the company is deemed to be unattractive. Participant 2 in Focus Group 2 also alluded to the importance of self-perception as a prerequisite of job seeking behaviour. In responding to the fourth question, Participant 2 stated that:

"I don't think about what other people say [about a company] because their values and standards are bound to be different from mine. It doesn't matter to me if someone says

a company is a great place to work, only I'll know whether I like it or not and whether the place and the people are like me."

At this juncture, the focus group moderator asked the participant to elaborate upon what they meant by 'like me' but the participant could offer little more other than "it's hard to say." In this case, then, perceptions of self and perceptions of the organisation, inexorably intertwined, were based upon intangible attributes that the participant struggled to articulate. The way that the participant perceived themselves and, in turn, the organisation was therefore based largely upon intuition, emotion and feelings. Thus, there is no specific type of organisational environment that the participant is looking for when they are searching for work online; rather, the person-environment fit occurs spontaneously when the match 'feels right.' Participant 5 in Focus Group 1 further illuminated the extent to which self-perception shapes the job seeking behaviour of candidates online. In discussing the fifth question, Participant 5 found that:

"Definitely ... my personality and characteristics would be suited to a creative environment where you get a lot of support from other staff but would probably not be suited to an environment where, you know, there's a high level of control and you're criticised a lot of the time ... that would make me feel bad about myself and I'd struggle to get any work done."

In this case, the participant links perceptions of the organisation to their perceived self-efficacy and self-esteem. The participant feels that it's essential that an employer behaves in a particular way to boost their self-esteem and, in turn, to enable them to complete their tasks. Conversely, an environment of coercion and control will stifle their creativity and undermine their capacity to complete tasks. This was a theme which was also expressed by Participants 2 and 4 in Focus Group 1, and Participants 3 and 8 in Focus Group 2. In each of these cases, the participant expressed the belief that

organisations which juxtapose personal characteristics would undermine their emotional and psychological self-worth, thus contributing to a personal and professional environment of failure. This clearly indicates that the person-environment fit is an essential determinant of organisational attractiveness.

However, it should be noted that other participants stated that perceptions of self and the environment were not major issues which would exert a determining influence upon their application intentions online. Participant 6 in Focus Group 2, for instance, revealed that "I don't care about that [the environment] ... I can fit in anywhere if the pay's good." Participant 1 in Focus Group 1 also revealed that "the environment doesn't matter so much ... it's up to you to make the effort to fit in." These responses suggest that personality traits and innate characteristics are important determinants of employer attractiveness in the online job marketplace. Candidates who are inherently resilient may be less likely to concern themselves about whether or not they will fit in to an environment whereas candidates who perceive themselves to be vulnerable assign a significant degree of social and psychological capital to the person-environment fit.

### *3.2. Instrumental and Symbolic Organisational Attributes*

Instrumental attributes describe what a job will entail. This is most commonly manifest in terms of pay, responsibilities, training and development. Instrumental attributes featured prominently across both focus groups, particularly in response to the opening question. In the first group, five of the eight participants expressly alluded to the importance of pay in shaping their perceptions of organisational attractiveness while, in the second group, four of the participants referred to pay as the most significant instrumental factor influencing application intentions. Participant 1 in Focus Group 1, for example, stated that "pay is the most important thing I'm looking for.

I want a good starting salary and I want to know that my pay will increase the longer I'm there." Likewise, Participant 4 in Focus Group 2 commented that "salary: that's what I'm looking for ... everything else can be negotiated, but the salary has to be right."

A large number of participants also discussed the importance of the roles and the duties incumbent upon prospective employees. Participant 8 in Focus Group 1, for instance, acknowledged that it was essential to locate a balance between pay and responsibilities. 'You spend so long in work, you've got to enjoy what you're doing and get some kind of fulfilment out of the role,' Participant 8 concluded. This was a feeling which was also expressed by Participant 3 in Focus Group 2 who said that it was important that job descriptions did not involve "demeaning" duties and tasks, and that responsibilities were relevant to their "knowledge and skills." Few of the participants discussed the prospect of training and development in their prospective roles, and there was no discussion of the influence of workplace benefits such as pensions or maternity pay. The lack of significance placed upon these attributes, may in part pertain to the young age of the focus group participants, who were at the early stages of their career. Similarly, none of the participants discussed the importance of work-life balance when assessing organisational attractiveness at the outset of job seeking. Only one participant (Participant 7 from Focus Group 1) discussed the issue of job security as a factor determining their perception of organisational attractiveness and their application intentions. The focus groups therefore revealed a tendency to adopt a short-term approach to instrumental attractiveness without considering the long-term advantages and disadvantages of applying for a role in a particular company. This was acknowledged by almost all of the participants who, in response to the sixth question, felt that the age of the candidate was a powerful determinant of both perceived organisational attractiveness and job seeking behaviour online.

In addition to citing the relevance of instrumental aspects of the role, participants discussed the role that symbolic organisational attributes performed in influencing their perceptions of organisational attractiveness. Symbolic organisational attributes are based upon people's inferences about a company and its values. Clusters of symbolic attributes emerged after analysing the data from both focus groups. The most prominent attribute was prestige. For example, in responding to the eighth question, Participant 6 from Focus Group 2 argued that while corporate branding was not a major factor determining their decision to apply for a role, the wider reputation of the firm was an essential component influencing their job seeking behaviour online. This was a sentiment which was also expressed by Participant 8 from Focus Group 1 who stated that:

"Some companies you just want to work before because of what they stand for ... like if you're in our industry and Apple offer you a job, you're not going to say No are you?"

Participant 3 from Focus Group 1 went further and suggested that certain companies with worldwide reputations should not have to market themselves to candidates because candidates should be want to be linked to prestigious organisations.

"It's something to be proud of isn't it? If you can tell your family and friends that you work for a really great company that everyone knows, it's going to make you feel better about what you do."

In this case, the reputation of the company is intricately linked to the participant's sense of social identity and self-esteem. Working for a company that is well known and well respected is considered to be a benefit not only on a professional level but also on an emotional, social and psychological level. High status at work is equivalent to high status at home and in one's social milieu. For other participants, prestige and reputation were less important than the values and principles which underpinned the company's ethos. Sincerity and corporate ethics were cited in both focus group sessions. For example, in



responding to the eighth question, Participant 5 in Focus Group 2 suggested that image-building and brand awareness campaigns conducted by companies were futile attempts to construct attractiveness because "that proves they're fake ... a good company, an ethical company doesn't need some big marketing scam." This was echoed by Participant 1 from Focus Group 1 who also found employer branding to be testimony to insincerity. In particular, Participant 1 stated that they would only consider applying for a company that could prove that they would uphold ethical principles such as "respect for the environment and human rights."

### *3.3. Navigational Use and Online Resources*

Participants across both of the focus group sessions were influenced by the design of prospective employer's websites. For many participants, the ease with which they would be able to access information about prospective employers and, if appropriate, apply for a position was a crucial determinant of organisational attractiveness. In responding to the seventh question, for instance, Participant 4 from Focus Group 2 stated that:

"If you're struggling to get from A to B on the company's website, what chance have you got when you get to meet them in real life?"

Similarly, Participant 3 from Focus Group 2 also noted that:

"If they can't be bothered to create a decent website, then that tells you a lot about them as a company and what kind of place it is to work."

In both of these cases, participants made an implicit connection between the company's website and their perceptions of organisational effectiveness. Poor websites are

perceived to be indications of poor working conditions and poor standards of practice; likewise, well-maintained and interactive websites are deemed to be characteristics of well-run organisations that are attractive places to work. For instance, Participant 1 from Focus Group 1 believed that:

"It [the Internet] is a window into the company ... if it's full of information and help and easy to use ... it tells you a lot about what it must be like on the inside."

For some participants, it was important that prospective employers have a wide range of media resources available online so that candidates can acquire an array of knowledge about the company. Testimonies from former or current employees were cited as favourable attributes which could have a tangible effect upon job seeking behaviour. For instance, Participant 6 from Focus Group 2 believed that "it would be very helpful if you could open a page and have some real first-hand feedback from people who know what it's like to work there." Participant 6 felt that it would be beneficial if online resources included videos which showed people at work in the organisation as this would "give you a real feel for what it's like to work in [the organisation] day in, day out". However, most participants expressed considerable doubt about the testimonies which are posted online. Participant 2 in Focus Group 2, for instance, thought that only favourable testimonies would be posted online. Participant 2 therefore argued that:

"You're better off looking elsewhere if you want to find out what a company's really like. If a company uploads testimonies from people who work there it tells you they're desperate and not worth trusting."

This is an important point to note and one that was raised by other participants in both of the focus groups. For instance, in responding to the fourth question, Participant 8 in Focus Group 1 argued that it was "impossible to trust" any first-hand perspectives which were published online. This included (and was especially relevant for) interviews with

management and executive staff. Participant 7 in Focus Group 1 went even further by suggesting that videos showing inside a company's headquarters were little more than "corporate propaganda." For this reason, Participant 7 stated that "I'd prefer a really basic website with no gimmicks ... that [would] tell me they're genuine and sincere." Another participant, Participant 7 from Focus Group 2, stated that online applications did not have a major influence upon their determination of organisational attractiveness because they were largely formulaic. "You upload your CV and express your interest in the job. If you're not sure it went through alright you can always ring up the next morning and check they got your application ... I don't see how the website makes that much of a difference." Participant 3 from Focus Group 2 summed it up succinctly when they said that, "if there's a hierarchy of things that matter when you're considering whether a company is right for you, the website is right at the bottom". Therefore, opinions were split between those who believed that websites were crucial features of organisational attractiveness and those who believed that online resources had little impact upon wider employment issues and, as a result, their application intentions.

#### 4. Discussion

The themes that emerged during the focus groups present a number of issues that are integral to understanding the relationship between employers' attractiveness attributes and application intentions of online jobseekers. Three points are discussed. Firstly, the findings from the focus group corroborated previous research studies which outlined the centrality of self-perception and person-environment fit as factors shaping the way in which job seekers view organisational attractiveness (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Khan, 2017; Ruchika & Prasad, 2017). The focus group discussions clearly indicated that the way in which participants perceived themselves and, in turn, the organisation is based upon a complex intersection of intuition, emotion and feelings. Employer brands that build upon these intuitions, emotions and feelings were seen as positive because they represented an extension of the self. Conversely, employer brands that undermined the individual's emotions and feelings were perceived to be a threat and thus interpreted negatively. The finding from this research study, therefore reject the findings of Kissel and Büttgen (2015) who argue that self-congruity has no significant bearing upon perceptions of employer attractiveness.

Rather, as Ruchika and Prasad (2017) found, this study demonstrates that there is an intrinsic association between the corporate brand image, which is projected by the employer and the job seeker's self-concept. A preconceived idea of the self, impacts upon the preconceived idea of the organisation (and its attributes) and vice versa. However, the findings from this research study imply that the relationship between the person and the environment exists *independently* of any employer branding exercises undertaken by the organisation. Whether a person is intuitively attracted to an employer or not depends less upon the brand image, which is broadcast and more upon the values and principles that underpin the individual's unique worldview. This suggests

that employer branding exercises are limited because they are unlikely to have any tangible impact upon the jobseeker's principles and values. This has significant practical implications for recruitment strategies, which aim to attract a particular type of candidate. This research study suggests that corporations would benefit from branding their company and its attributes rather than attempting to render the environment suitable to all candidates at all times. Additionally, the findings from the focus groups revealed that perceptions of the person-environment fit are greatly influenced by self-esteem and perceived self-efficacy. This is an underdeveloped area of recruitment that has been largely ignored by the literature on brand equity (Collins & Kanar, 2014). This also has practical implications for recruitment strategies, particularly in sectors where candidates' perceptions of organisational attractiveness are more likely to be shaped by symbolic rather than instrumental attributes.

Secondly, the findings revealed the importance of instrumental and symbolic attributes as determinants of employer attractiveness. Salary was the most important instrumental attribute that was cited by participants in both of the focus groups. Some candidates expressly commented that organisational attractiveness was fundamentally shaped by remuneration and, as a result, all other determinants of attractiveness were secondary. As a result, application intentions are based primarily upon a rational cost-benefit analysis. This corroborates the findings of research undertaken by Muruganantham and Princess (2017) who cite job and work characteristics as one of the six dimensions of organisational attractiveness. However, it should be noted that, in this study, there was no allusion to other instrumental advantages of joining an organisation such as workplace benefits and pensions, and only one participant expressively acknowledged the importance of job security. This can be attributed to the age of the participants. In most cases, participants were young and were at the beginning of their career development.

The findings from the focus groups also demonstrated the importance of symbolic organisational attributes (i.e. the intangible attributes which determine how job seekers perceive organisations). Evidence of the importance of symbolic organisational attributes has been uncovered in previous research studies including Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), Sokro (2012), Lievens and Slaughter (2016) and Bakanauskienė et al., (2017). In this study, symbolic attributes were most closely associated with prestige and the reputation of the corporation. This confirms the findings of studies undertaken by Khan (2017), Yu and Davies (2017) and Della Corte et al. (2011) who find that a positive reputation is able to facilitate the generation of an ongoing value creation process. Issues of prestige and reputation highlight the importance of social identity as a predictor of candidates' perceptions of organisational attractiveness. The findings from this study clearly indicate that people's identity and self-esteem are intricately linked to employment status, and the wider reputation of the company. The study therefore supports previous empirical literature, which underlines the importance of employer branding as a means of making the organisation more attractive to consumers in the job marketplace (Botha et al., 2011; Pingle & Sharma 2013; Sivertzen et al., 2013). As Ruchika and Prasad (2017) found, employers that build a successful brand can facilitate a psychological contract between themselves and would-be candidates during the application process.

Thirdly, the findings revealed that the websites of employers are important sources of organisational attractiveness. In particular, participants discussed the extent to which company websites constitute a window into the corporation. If this window is managed well, it can have a profound impact upon the way that jobseekers perceive an organisation. Like Muruganatham and Princess (2017), this study found that personal testimonies on company websites can help to construct a more effective online brand by humanising the application process. However, some participants found that online

resources and personal testimonies had little impact upon perceptions of organisational attractiveness. In particular, participants suggested that testimonials would only be selected if they depicted the organisation in a positive light. Furthermore, there were suggestions that online gimmicks were primarily included as a way of distracting candidates from more important issues such as the values and principles of the organisation. The findings from the research study thus affirm research undertaken by Kissel and Büttgen (2015) who argued that testimonials are influential neither in shaping prospective applicants' perceptions of a firm nor in determining application intentions. However, this research study also found that trust was a crucial factor that determines the behaviour of some online jobseekers. Trust is determined not by employer branding but the values, beliefs and principles, which form the individual's worldview. Consequently, the findings further reinforce the centrality of perception to any understanding of the relationship between employers' attractiveness attributes and the application intentions of online jobseekers. This has significant practical implications for recruitment strategies. Most notably, the findings from this and other theoretical studies suggests that companies should market their company according to its functions and its status rather than engaging in marketing exercises which attempt to brand the company symbolically.

#### *4.1. Strength and Limitations of the Study*

The detailed findings from this study present a wide range of issues that are of substantial theoretical and practical use. The major strength of this study is that it reaffirms some of the central tenets of previous empirical and theoretical literature via recourse to the views and perceptions of people presenting employed in the IT/Tech sector. In particular, this study further substantiates the insights of existing literature by revealing that perceptions of organisational attractiveness are motivated by an

intersection of symbolic and instrumental attributes (such as salary, job role and corporate reputation), and subjective interpretations of organisational values and person-environment fit. Moreover, this study demonstrates that the subjective values and principles of candidates exert a profound influence upon the way in which they perceive organisations and, as a result, their application intentions. The qualitative research design is, however, inherently limited because the responses are subjective and based upon the unique experiences of the sample group. Additionally, the small size of the sample undermines the generalizability of the results accrued.

#### *4.2. Recommendations for Future Research*

There are four key recommendations for future research. Firstly, future research studies could examine the effect of employer branding strategies upon older job seekers' perceptions of attractiveness and their online application intentions in order to understand how attractiveness changes according to age. Secondly, it would be beneficial for future research to explore the person-environment fit from the perspective of social identity theory in order to understand how motivations for job applications are shaped by the candidate's perceptions of themselves. Thirdly, future research could assess the interaction between symbolic and instrumental attributes as a means of understanding how socio-cultural and structural determinants of organisational attractiveness intersect. Finally, future research could further examine how attributes of specific job roles influence the perceived level of organisational attractiveness for jobseekers.



## Conclusion

As the social and technological means of communication have changed in the Digital Age, so the methods of applying for work have also been transformed. In the early twenty first century, the vast majority of job searches and applications are completed online. It can be argued that this has transferred a considerable degree of power from the employer to the potential employee. In particular, candidates are able to access a wide range of knowledge and information about organisations in order to deduce whether to apply for a position. This, in turn, has significantly enhanced the importance of employer branding as an instrument for attracting the best candidates in an increasingly competitive and global job marketplace. There has been a relatively small but influential body of academic literature, which has been published on the issue of employer branding online. This has revealed the influence of a wide range of social, psychological and technological factors shaping perceptions of organisational attractiveness including symbolic attributes, instrumental activities, employee testimonials and job advertisements, corporate image building, navigational usability and user friendliness of websites, and the person-environment fit. Therefore, it can be argued that the application intention of the online jobseeker is determined both by the way in which organisations market themselves and by the way in which jobseekers perceive the organisation.

This study has reaffirmed the insights of existing literature by demonstrating that candidate perceptions of organisational attractiveness are motivated by an intersection of symbolic and instrumental attributes (such as salary, job role and corporate reputation), and subjective interpretations of organisational values and person-environment fit. In particular, the study has revealed that the subjective values and principles of jobseekers exercise a considerable influence upon the way in which they perceive organisations and, as a result, their application intentions. The study has also shown that values and principles are often based upon feelings, intuition and emotions.

Moreover, the study has shown that values and principles are intricately associated with perceived self-efficacy and self-esteem. This implies that employer branding is limited because online marketing exercises cannot account for variations in self-perception. From this perspective, it is prudent to argue that, in order to attract the best candidates, employers should target prospective candidates who: (1) have relatively high levels of self-efficacy and self-esteem; and (2) are motivated by universal attributes such as salary. However, it is imperative to recognise that intuition, emotion and feelings are subject to considerable change according to time, place and context. While young jobseekers may initially view prospective employers through an idealistic lens, this is unlikely to remain a constant feature of their online job seeking behaviour. Employer branding should therefore conceive of work as part of a broader life tapestry incorporating instrumental and symbolic, elemental and holistic, perspectives.

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**Tables****Table 1.***Focus Group 1.*

<b>Participant Number</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Department</b>
1	23	Female	I.T Dept.
2	22	Male	Sales Dept.
3	27	Male	Sales Dept.
4	30	Male	Finance Dept.
5	29	Female	Client Services Dept.
6	26	Male	Client Services Dept.
7	29	Female	HR Dept
8	33	Male	Finance Dept.

**Table 2.***Focus Group 2.*

<b>Participant Number</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Department</b>
1	29	Male	Sales Dept.
2	22	Male	Marketing Dept.
3	23	Female	HR Dept
4	25	Female	Client Services Dept.
5	25	Female	Client Services Dept.
6	26	Male	Sales Dept.
7	22	Male	I.T Dept.
8	32	Female	Marketing Dept.



**Appendices:****Appendix A. Focus Group Research Questions**

1. What attributes of prospective employers do you look for when searching for work online?
2. When you are searching for jobs online do you have a preconceived idea of the kind of role you are looking for?
3. To what extent does the reputation of the company affect your interpretation of roles and responsibilities?
4. When searching for work online, do you consider the views and testimonies of other jobseekers or employees who have worked at a company you are considering applying to? If so, how do these affect your perceptions of employer attractiveness?
5. Do you believe that your personality and characteristics are suited to certain organisations more than others?
6. To what extent , if any, are the application behaviours of online jobseekers influenced by issues such as age, gender and racial/ethnic identity?
7. How do issues such as user friendliness and navigability of an employer's website impact upon your interpretation of employer attractiveness when applying for work online?
8. Does your awareness of corporate branding and image-building marketing have any influence upon your perceptions of employer attractiveness?

**Appendix B. Information Sheet****INFORMATION SHEET**

**Study Title:** Employer Branding: Examining the relationship between employer's attractiveness attributes and application intentions of online jobseekers

**Purpose of the Research**

This research will be used as part of an assignment, which will be submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Msc in Cyberpsychology at the IADT. The aim of the research is to examine the psychology of online consumer behaviour.

**Invitation**

You are being invited to consider taking part in the research study 'This project is being undertaken by Michelle Slevin- student at IADT.

Before you decide whether or not you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read this information carefully and discuss it with friends and relatives if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is unclear or if you would like more information.

**Do I have to take part?**

You are free to decide whether you wish to take part or not. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign two consent forms, one is for you to keep and the other is for our records. You are free to withdraw from this study at any time and without giving reasons.

**If I take part, what do I have to do?**

If you decide to take part in the study you will participate in focus group discussion on the topic of Employer Branding:

**What are the benefits (if any) of taking part?**

By participating in this research you are contributing to the body of knowledge in this area.

**What are the disadvantages and risks (if any) of taking part?**

There are no disadvantages or risks in taking part.

**How will information about me be used?**

The data will be collected via hardcopy questionnaire and will be used as part of research for an assignment, which will be submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Msc in Cyberpsychology at the IADT. The data collected will not be retained for use in future research studies.

**Who will have access to information about me?**

The anonymous data will be stored securely on a password-protected computer. The data will be retained by the researcher for 1 year, after which it will be securely disposed of and deleted.

**What will happen to the results of the study?**

The results of the research will be used in a course assignment for the attainment of an MSC in CyberPsychology in the Dun Laoghaire Institute of Art, Design & Technology.

**What if there is a problem?**

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you may wish to speak to the researcher(s) who will do their best to answer your questions. You should contact Michelle Slevin (email: [N00163956@student.iadt.ie](mailto:N00163956@student.iadt.ie)) or Liam Challenor (email: [liam.challenor@dcu.ie](mailto:liam.challenor@dcu.ie))

**Contact for further information**

Michelle Slevin (email: [N00163956@student.iadt.ie](mailto:N00163956@student.iadt.ie))  
Liam Challenor (email: [liam.challenor@dcu.ie](mailto:liam.challenor@dcu.ie))

**Thank you for taking the time to read the information sheet.**

**Date:** January 15<sup>th</sup> 2018

**Appendix C. Consent Form****CONSENT FORM**

**Title of Project:** Employer Branding: Examining the relationship between employer's attractiveness attributes and application intentions of online jobseekers

**Name of Researcher/s:** Michelle Slevin

**Please tick box**

- 1 I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
  
- 2 I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.
  
- 3 I agree to take part in this study.