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Significance of Trait Inferences on Applicant Attraction: A Study of the Indian Information Technology Sector

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Abstract

All the business units are in a tussle to build a competitive brand not only to increase the market share but also to capture the potential applicants. It is believed that customers assign certain qualities to each and every brand they know. Similarly, potential applicants attach specific traits to the organizations, which in turn influence their attitude towards the organization. The present study attempts to examine the perception of external audience towards symbolic traits and employer attractiveness in the Indian Information Technology (IT) Sector. Two samples of prospective applicants were drawn (Students = 351, IT Employees = 234) from the applicant population. Respondents were randomly assigned to respond about two leading IT companies, chosen for the study. Results of multiple regressions reveal that the symbolic attributes significantly predict the level of attractiveness of an organization, with dimensions like competence and sophistication playing an important role as major predictors for both the samples. Students, being a naïve job seeker, considered excitement as another key predictor for attractiveness. Based on the results implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords: Trait Inferences, Symbolic Attributes, Organizational Attractiveness, Information Technology Sector

1. Introduction

Organizations strive hard to be the market leader in their respective sectors. But their success depends on the level of high-quality applicants that they can attract (Rynes & Barber, 1990). Organizations use tangible and intangible attributes to sustain the competitive advantage (Siguaw, Mattlle, & Austin, 1999). It is felt that physical and functional attributes can be replicated, whereas symbolic qualities remain to be distinctive as they can be used to create differentiation across organizations (Plummer, 2000). In the consumer behavior context, such symbolic attributes or 'brand personalities' create preferences in the minds of the consumers thereby increasing the usability of the

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brands (Keller, 1993; Sirgy, 1982). It is believed that consumers accredit certain personality traits to brands, analogous to human personality (Aaker, 1997; Keller, 1993; Plummer, 2000). The same applies in case of applicant behavior where organizations try to attract and retain the vital human resources.

Aaker (1997) developed a valid scale for measuring the brand personality construct. However, studies pointed out that the measure is susceptible to cultural context (Aaker, Benet-Martinez, & Garolera, 2001; Austin, Siguaw, & Mattila, 2003). Aaker and Schmitt (2001) determined the possibility for existence of distinction and similarity in the psychological processes pertaining to self-expression among consumers across cultures. The same is expected to hold good for organizational personality (Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, & Mohr, 2004).

Recruitment research has understood the importance of such symbolic attributes in attracting talent pool towards the organization (Highhouse, Thornbury, & Little, 2007). The present study has been carried out to ascertain, to what extent does the symbolic trait inferences have an impact on the attractiveness of an IT organization as an employer, among students and employees.

2. Literature Review

The concept of applicant attraction persists to dominate the recruitment literature in the recent past, as there is a shortage of talented pool of aspirants. It continues to fascinate the researchers and managers

2.1 Symbolic Trait Inferences

Employer reputation is defined by Cable and Turban (2001) as “a job seeker's beliefs about the public's affective evaluation of the organization” (p.127). Reputation is generally measured objectively through published reputation lists (Cable & Graham, 2000; Fornbrun & Shanley, 1990). Turban and Cable (2003) found out that applicants use reputation as a signal about job attributes. In another study, Collins and Han (2004) revealed that organizations' reputation had a direct and positive impact on quality and quantity of applicants. But Lievens and Highhouse (2003) carried out an empirical study by undertaking the marketing concept of instrumental-symbolic framework for describing the organization from potential applicants' perspective. They stressed on reputation as symbolic attributes which is said to measure “the job/ organization in terms of subjective and intangible attributes” (p.81).

In the marketing context, it is seen that brands are allotted certain human personality traits by the consumers which is generally referred as ‘brand personality’ (Aaker, 1997; Plummer, 2000; Siguaw et al., 1999). Similarly applicants also assign personality traits to various organizations (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter et al., 2004). Slaughter et al. (2004) define organization personality as “the set of human personality characteristics perceived to be associated with an organization” (p.86).

It is believed that brand personality can be used to differentiate among brands (Siguaw et al., 1999). On the similar lines Lievens and Highhouse (2003) pointed out that people make an increased use of symbolic function if they think that it is difficult to differentiate the brands on the basis of instrumental attributes which is felt to be similar across organizations.

Aaker (1997) generated a valid framework for brand personality ‘across products categories’, culture and various class of age, applicable for a multi-product range. A list of 309 non-repetitive attributes was considered for initial screening from the previously used scales by academics, human

personality scales, and study-specific trait generated through pre-test. In the next stage, listed attributes were further brought down to 114 relevant and descriptive traits. A non-student sample of 631 respondents representing the US population, rated 37 varied multi-function brands on 114 traits, in return for assured gifts. This resulted in a five factor model: Sincerity (items like honest, down-to-earth, wholesome, etc.), Excitement (trendy, spirited, cool, unique, etc.), Competence (successful, leader, reliable, etc.), Sophistication (upper-class, smooth, charming, etc.), and Ruggedness (rugged, tough, outdoorsy, etc.) with a refined list of 42 meaningful traits. It was found that the brand personality scale echoes only some element of the human personality scale thereby making it a distinct construct.

Lievens and Highhouse (2003) applied the brand personality theory (Aaker 1997) to determine the personality of organizations as employers. They measured the symbolic image of organizations as attributed by prospective applicants' on a refined scale (sincerity, innovativeness, competence, prestige, and robustness).

Later on Slaughter et al. (2004) developed an organizational personality measure with five major dimensions as Boy Scout (e.g. friendly, honest, family-oriented), Innovativeness (e.g. original, creative, exciting), Dominance (successful, popular), Thrift (low budget, undersized, deprived), and Style (stylish, trendy, fashionable).

2.2 Organizational Attractiveness

Researchers have recognized the need to determine the organizational attractiveness from the applicants' perspective (Barber, 1998; Barber & Roehling, 1993; Chapman, Uggerslev, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005; Gatewood, Gowan, & Lautenschlager, 1993; Highhouse, Zickar, Thorsteinson, Stierwalt, & Slaughter, 1999; Rynes, 1991; Turban, Forret, & Hendrickson, 1998; Turban & Greening, 1996; Turban & Keon, 1993).

Organizational attractiveness is considered as making the prospective applicants' to perceive the organization as a desirable place to work (Rynes, 1991). Bauer and Aiman-Smith (1996) viewed organizational attractiveness as 'an attitude or expressed affect' towards the organization. Chapman et al. (2005) in their meta-analysis, refers to the organizational attractiveness as 'an overall evaluation of the attractiveness of the organization from the point of view of prospective applicants'. Berthon, Ewing, and Li Lian Hah (2005) define 'employer attractiveness' as "the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization" (p.156).

Studies reveal that symbolic traits inferences have a significant variance in attractiveness of an organization as an employer over and above the instrumental characteristics (Lievens, 2007; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens, Hoye, & Schreurs, 2005). Anderson, Haar, and, Gibb (2010) held that, the prospective applicants make use of signals sent across by organization through media, web-sites, advertisements etc, as an information cue to form the personality attributes (Signaling theory – Spence, 1973). Yet, more empirical studies are required to confirm the effect of perceived trait inferences in the recruitment domain with respect to the two set of samples pertaining to applicant population.

Consumers tend to prefer those brands which match with their own personalities (Sirgy, 1982). This is mainly based on the social identity function in which the resemblance of values, needs, personalities, etc. increases attraction towards the products/services/organizations (Highhouse et al., 2007). That's why it could be seen that applicants too generally get attracted to those organizations

that appear to them like their own personality (Schreurs, Druart, Proost, & De Witte, 2009; Slaughter et al., 2004; Tom, 1971). Recent researches show that applicants' personalities moderate the relationship between symbolic trait inferences and organizational attractiveness (Schreurs et al., 2009; Slaughter & Greguras, 2009).

Aaker (1997) justified the use of positive attributes by stating that, brands elicit affirmative relations. Brand users are expected to presume positive brand personality due to the brand knowledge (Winchester & Romaniuk, 2008). As the goal of this study is to examine the extent to which such symbolic attributes influences the attractiveness of an organization as an employer, Aaker (1997) brand personality theory is considered to be useful.

It is observed that being the actual users of a brand, customers tend to have better brand associations and awareness about the brands when compared to the non-users of the brand (Winchester & Romaniuk, 2008). Thus for the purpose of the study two different samples from applicant population in the Indian Information Technology Sector are considered.

Researchers have studied extensively about various job/organizational attributes (specific to industries) that boosts organizational attractiveness (Bretz & Judge, 1994; Cable & Graham, 2000; Cable & Judge, 1994; Highhouse et al., 1999; Turban et al., 1998; Turban & Keon, 1993), whereas the trait based perspective is comparatively a newer construct (Anderson et al., 2010; Davies et al., 2001; Kausel, & Slaughter, 2011; Lievens, 2007; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens et al., 2005; Schreurs et al., 2009; Slaughter et al., 2004). Thus it is to be verified among different groups of potential applicants across various industries as perception of traits is sensitive to culture and tradition.

3. Research Methods

The goal of the study is to examine the relationship between symbolic trait inferences and applicant attraction among two samples of applicant population in the Indian scenario.

3.1 Hypotheses

It is held that trait inferences of Belgian banks and Belgian army have an impact on organizational attractiveness (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Lievens, Hoye, & Schreurs, 2005). Thus, based on the literature review the following hypotheses are proposed:

H₁: Students' perceptions of sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness will positively affect their attractiveness towards the organization as an employer in Indian Information Technology Industry.

H₂: Employees' perceptions of sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness will positively affect their attractiveness towards the organization as an employer in Indian Information Technology Industry.

3.2 Study Design and Sample

The applicant population is the group that is ultimately targeted by the concerned industry for recruitment and selection process (Barber, 1998; Lievens et al., 2005). Thus two samples (student and employee sample) were drawn from the applicant population targeted by IT sector, as it is a dominant industry with respect to recruitment and growth level. Due to time and cost constraints, it was difficult to cover all the IT companies in India, therefore a pre-study with twenty students and twenty employees was carried out to select the top two companies in the sector for the study. The first sample

consisted of 351 final – year students from one university. Only those courses which were considered to be the primary interest to the IT industries were chosen. All the students who were pursuing Bachelor of Engineering (B.E) and Master of Computer Applications (MCA) courses were selected for this study. The survey was carried out before the commencement of campus interview in the university.

The second sample consisted of ‘industry insiders’ with hands on experience in the IT sector, comprising of 234 employees. Purposive sampling was used as employees from varied IT companies were targeted to complete the questionnaire except the two, which were selected for the study. Employees sample did not constitute those people who had already worked for the chosen companies, as employees are anticipated to exhibit their own experiences (Slaughter et al., 2004).

For the student sample questionnaire were distributed during the break time with the help of class representatives and faculty in charge. In the employee sample, questionnaire were distributed to employees who worked for IT companies other than the two selected for the study. Respondents were randomly assigned to one of the two Indian IT companies.

3.3 Tools

Established and validated questionnaire were used to collect the data for measuring the variables (Independent variable - perceived trait inferences dimensions namely: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication and ruggedness; Dependent variable - organizational attractiveness).

The perception of trait inferences was measured using the five dimension framework of Aaker (1997) brand personality scale. Studies have felt the sensitivity of the brand personality scale towards different cultural settings (Aaker et al., 2001). Based on the review of the panel of experts and statistical analysis of an initial pre-study, 14 symbolic traits like small-town, sentimental, contemporary, feminine, outdoorsy etc. were removed.

The final study measured resultant 28 items on the two selected samples with a five – point rating scale ranging from (1) “strongly disagree” to (5) “strongly agree”. In a previous study on attractiveness of banks, Lievens and Highhouse (2003) measured 16 trait adjectives among students and 15 among employees. To check the internal consistency the reliability analysis was carried out. The Cronbach Coefficient Alpha Values for the five dimensions were: Sincerity $\alpha = 0.86$, Excitement $\alpha = 0.85$, Competence $\alpha = 0.86$, Sophistication $\alpha = 0.80$, Ruggedness $\alpha = 0.79$ in the student sample. In the employee sample Alpha Values were as follows: Sincerity $\alpha = 0.85$, Excitement $\alpha = 0.81$, Competence $\alpha = 0.85$, Sophistication $\alpha = 0.73$, Ruggedness $\alpha = 0.81$.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed for trait inferences. The factor loadings of all observed variables were above the threshold of 0.50 (Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, & Tatham, 2007) indicating an initial validity of the construct. The χ^2 associated with the five-factor model was 947.03 (df = 337, $p < 0.00$), $\chi^2/df = 2.810$, CFI = 0.91, GFI = 0.90, and RMSEA = 0.056. The CFA showed that the five-factor model produced a good fit to the data.

Organizational attractiveness three item scale was adapted from the study of Highhouse, Lievens, and Sinar (2003). A sample item from the scale is “This Company is attractive to me as a place for employment” (1= strongly disagree; 5= strongly agree). Coefficient Alpha of this scale accounted to 0.85 for the student sample and 0.75 for employee sample

4. Results

In order to examine the effect of trait inferences on organizational attractiveness, a step-wise regression analysis was carried out. Step-wise regression analysis was used in this study to explore and maximize the prediction, while employing the smallest number of variables (Hair et al., 2007).

Before the analysis, for both the samples the assumptions of normality and linearity were evaluated through examination of scatter plots. Multicollinearity statistics like Condition Index, Variance Inflation Factors (VIF) and Tolerance Level were also examined. Results confirmed the absence of multicollinearity. Durbin Watson score revealed no auto-correlation between the residuals.

4.1. Student Sample

The results of the regression analysis show that (Table 1) competence, sophistication and excitement are significant positive predictors of organizational attractiveness. The Competence (Beta = 0.31, $p < 0.001$) has the highest impact than Sophistication (Beta = 0.20, $p < 0.001$) and Excitement (Beta = 0.16, $p < 0.05$). The set of perceived trait inferences account for a variance of 21% with a significant model fit ($F = 31.47$, $p < 0.001$). Whereas Lievens and Highhouse (2003) explained 8.9% of variance in their model, with the highest contribution by innovativeness/excitement (Beta = 0.20, $p < 0.001$), followed by competence (Beta = 0.14, $p < 0.05$). Based on the results H1 is partially supported.

Table 1: Multiple Regression Analysis of Trait Inferences on Organizational Attractiveness among Students

| Variables | Beta | t | R ² Change |
|----------------|------|---------|-----------------------|
| Competence | 0.31 | 6.40*** | 0.13 |
| Sophistication | 0.20 | 3.75*** | 0.07 |
| Excitement | 0.16 | 3.07** | 0.02 |

R = 0.46, Adj. R² = 0.21, F = 31.47, $p < 0.001$
 Durbin Watson = 1.789, N=351
 * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$
 Excluded variables: Sincerity and Ruggedness

4.2. Employee Sample

As given in Table 2, the model pertaining to the Trait Inferences explained 7% ($F = 9.89$, $p < 0.001$) of the variance in employees' sample with Competence (Beta = 0.25, $p < 0.001$) emerging as major predictor of organizational attractiveness. Sophistication (Beta = 0.15, $p < 0.001$) appeared as a second significant positive predictor of company's attractiveness as an employer. Lievens and Highhouse (2003) explained a variance of 17.5% among the employee sample with Innovativeness (B = 0.25, $p < 0.05$) and Competence (B = 0.23, $p < 0.05$) predicting the attractiveness of banks.

Table 2: Multiple Regression Analysis of Trait Inferences on Organizational Attractiveness among Employees

| Variables | Beta | t | R ² Change |
|----------------|------|---------|-----------------------|
| Competence | 0.25 | 3.97*** | 0.06 |
| Sophistication | 0.15 | 2.39* | 0.02 |

R = 0.29, Adj. R2 = 0.07, F = 9.89, p < 0.001
 Durbin Watson =1.784, N=234
 *p < .05, **p < .01, ***p < .001
 Excluded variables: Sincerity, Excitement and Ruggedness

The model reveals that the employees’ perceptions of trait inferences namely competence and sophistication positively affect their attractiveness towards an organization as an employer in Indian IT industry. Therefore H2 is supported partially.

5. Discussion

Organizations want their brand names to be the ones to come in the minds of the applicant population (Breugh, 1992). For this reason previous studies have felt the importance of symbolic attributes, as employees ascribe their personality like attributes to organizations (Slaughter et al., 2004).

The results of the present research paper lend support to all the hypotheses and are consistent with prior studies (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter et al., 2004). Traits like Competence, Sophistication, and Excitement must be strengthened to attract students into the organization, whereas employees are better attracted with the Competence and Sophistication traits. The amount of variance predicted shows that the organizations must differentiate itself from its competitors not only based on the functional image, to become an ‘employer of choice’ but also on specific trait inferences.

One important thing that could be noted is the amount of variance explained by Lievens and Highhouse (2003) in the employee sample was higher when compared to the student sample. But in the present study the adjusted R2 value accounts for as high as 24% in the student sample, whereas 15% in the employee sample. This could be due to the fact that students are new to the industry and have little information about the job attributes (Barber, 1998). Based on the signals obtained from the media, advertisements and word-of-mouth, they try to personalize the organizations and get attracted to it. It is felt that organizations with attributes like Excitement (daring, spirited, exciting, trendy, unique) Competence (up-to-date, leader, successful, technical, secure, reliable, intelligent, confident) Sophistication (upper class, highly regarded, and well respected) are more attractive.

The results of this study suggest that in order to increase the symbolic image and reputation of the company, the employers should focus more on students and build some awareness. This is very vital because in the knowledge-intensive industry students serve as the major market for recruitment and they rely more on such trait related attributes. Organizations must consider the symbolic attributes along with other objective characteristics in forming the Employee Value Proposition (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). It is believed that, the prospective applicants’ gather information through indirect sources to ascribe trait inferences to the organizations (Slaughter et al., 2004). Organization must try to pass on some positive, strong and creative signals as it could influence the job pursuit intentions of the applicants’ (Anderson et al., 2010).

6. Limitations

The study is restricted only to IT industry as they are manpower intensive and recruit in huge numbers. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized across all sectors. The data collection was made within a limited geographical area due to cost and time constraints. Only IT professionals currently working in India have been considered for the purpose of this study.

7. Conclusion

The study measured the significance of organizational personality in enhancing the overall attractiveness of the organization. Applied to an Indian IT industry context, it appears that the companies should focus on the students' sample (industry outsiders) and employees' sample (industry insiders) separately. While there is a growing body of popular literature on the student population, there is little substantiated research on applicant population that too with respect to the Indian workforce. There is an urgent need in organizations across India, especially in IT sector, to understand the perception of their prospective employees. There are large numbers of competitive players in the market. Thus, every firm is forced to exhibit themselves as unique and attractive. This could be done through proper portrayal of organizational personality. They can shape the knowledge of potential applicants through apt usage of recruitment practices.

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