

The Dark Side of Employer Branding: A Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

Employer branding has emerged as a strategic approach for attracting, engaging, and retaining talented employees in increasingly competitive labour markets. While existing literature predominantly emphasises the positive outcomes of employer branding, limited attention has been devoted to its potential negative consequences. This study addresses this gap by examining the underexplored dark side of employer branding and developing a conceptual framework that explains how the negative employer branding practices may generate adverse outcomes for employees and organisations. Adopting a conceptual research design, the study synthesises existing literature on employer branding, psychological contracts, organisational behaviour, employee engagement, diversity and inclusion, and reputational management. The findings reveal three primary pathways through which the dark side of employer branding emerges: unrealistic promises leading to psychological contract breaches, employer branding façades that prioritise image over substance, and exclusivity biases that undermine diversity and inclusion. The study further identifies digital transparency, social media visibility, changing workforce expectations, and institutional pressures as contextual factors that amplify these effects. These mechanisms collectively contribute to employee cynicism, emotional exhaustion, disengagement, turnover intentions, reputational deterioration, and organisational sustainability challenges. The study contributes to employer branding literature by offering an integrated conceptual framework that extends existing knowledge beyond the traditionally positive perspective of employer branding. The findings highlight the importance of authenticity, transparency, and inclusivity in employer branding practices and provide valuable insights for organisations seeking to build sustainable and credible employer brands.

Keywords: Diversity and Inclusion, Employer Branding, Organisational Authenticity, Psychological Contract Breach, Sustainable Employment Relationships.

Introduction

Employer branding (EB) has emerged as a strategic HR management practice that enables organisations to attract, engage, and retain talented employees in increasingly competitive labour markets. While corporate branding primarily focuses on an organisation's external image, EB encompasses both internal and external dimensions of organisational identity and reputation (1). In a knowledge-driven economy, organisations increasingly rely on EB to differentiate themselves as employers of choice (2). The concept of EB was originally introduced as the application of branding principles to employment relationships. Since then, employer branding has been widely recognised as an effective mechanism for enhancing organisational attractiveness and strengthening relationships with both current and prospective employees. However, the accuracy of an employer brand's portrayal is also critical to an organisation's success (3). Existing research has

consistently reported positive outcomes associated with strong employer brands, including increased organisational attractiveness, improved recruitment effectiveness, enhanced employee engagement, and reduced turnover intentions (4–6). These findings have contributed to the widespread acceptance of employer branding as a valuable organisational strategy. Organisations increasingly compete to project attractive employer images through recruitment campaigns, social media platforms, employer review websites, and digital communication channels. While such initiatives can enhance organisational visibility, they may also encourage organisations to exaggerate strengths, minimise workplace shortcomings, or present idealised images that do not accurately reflect employees' actual experiences (7, 8). Therefore, a well-designed employer brand boosts workplace attractiveness, thereby creating a competitive advantage (9)

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(Received 02nd April 2026; Accepted 17th June 2026; Published 18th July 2026)

thereby creating a competitive advantage (9). Advances in digital technologies have transformed EB by increasing transparency and public scrutiny. Discrepancies between EB messages and workplace realities are more visible and can quickly damage organisational credibility. Furthermore, changing workforce expectations, particularly among younger generations, have increased the importance of authenticity, transparency, inclusion, psychological safety, and social responsibility in employment relationships. Organisations that fail to align their brand messaging with employees' experiences may risk undermining trust and long-term organisational commitment. Early research predominantly focused on the benefits of EB, whereas it not only enhances external recruitment effectiveness but also strengthens organisational identity internally (10, 11).

These developments have stimulated interest in exploring the less-explored dimensions of EB. While EB is commonly associated with positive organisational outcomes, a growing body of literature suggests that it may also generate unintended psychological, behavioural, ethical, and reputational consequences (12). In the context of this study, the "dark side of employer branding" refers to the negative outcomes that emerge when EB practices diverge from organisational realities. Similarly, an employer "branding façade" refers to projecting an attractive organisational image that masks inconsistencies, deficiencies, or problematic workplace practices. Such situations may result in breaches of the psychological contract, unmet expectations, employee cynicism, emotional exhaustion, disengagement and dissatisfaction, exclusion, and reputational deterioration (13–16). Previous studies suggest that exaggerated employer-branding promises can create unrealistic expectations among employees, leading to dissatisfaction, distrust, and turnover when those promises go unfulfilled (17–19). Some scholars have further argued that exaggerated EB may function as a form of manipulation that prioritises attraction over authenticity.

Another concern is the use of EB as a symbolic exercise primarily focused on image management. Organisations may promote narratives of flexibility, employee care, inclusion, and professional growth while simultaneously maintaining excessive workloads, limited developmental

opportunities, or unsupportive managerial practices. When employees perceive substantial discrepancies between organisational rhetoric and workplace reality, EB may be viewed as a façade rather than a genuine reflection of organisational values (20, 21). Such inconsistencies can contribute to employee cynicism, emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and declining organisational trust.

Employer branding may also have unintended implications for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many branding strategies seek to attract individuals who fit a particular organisational identity or cultural profile. While such approaches may strengthen perceptions of organisational distinctiveness, they may simultaneously discourage applicants from diverse backgrounds and reinforce narrow definitions of the "ideal employee" (22–24). Exclusionary branding practices can weaken employees' sense of belonging, reduce organisational inclusivity, and ultimately limit innovation and organisational effectiveness. These risks are further amplified in the digital era, where online review platforms and employee-generated content have increased transparency and reduced organisational control over employer reputation (25, 26). Negative workplace experiences shared through social media and employer review websites can rapidly expose inconsistencies between branding promises and organisational realities, making authenticity, transparency, and inclusivity essential prerequisites for sustainable employer branding (27, 28). Several theoretical perspectives help explain these challenges. Psychological Contract Theory suggests that employees develop expectations based on organisational promises and may react negatively when those expectations are violated (14). Signalling Theory explains how employer branding messages influence perceptions among prospective employees (29). Institutional Theory suggests that organisations may adopt employer branding practices in response to competitive or industry pressures, even when these practices are not fully aligned with internal organisational realities (30). Social Exchange Theory highlights the reciprocal nature of employment relationships, suggesting that unmet organisational obligations may reduce employee commitment and engagement (31).

Although individual studies have acknowledged issues such as unmet expectations, organisational hypocrisy, employee burnout, and exclusionary branding practices, these concerns remain fragmented within the literature. Limited attention has been devoted to integrating these perspectives into a comprehensive framework that explains how the negative consequences of EB emerge and interact. By emphasising co-creation, organisations transform employees from passive endorsers into active brand participants (32).

Accordingly, this study seeks to address this gap by developing a conceptual framework explaining the dark side of employer branding. Specifically, the study aims to:

- (a) critically examine the negative consequences associated with EB practices;
- (b) identify the mechanisms through which EB contributes to employee and organisational challenges;
- (c) develop a conceptual framework explaining the dark side of employer branding; and
- (d) propose implications for ethical, inclusive, and sustainable EB practices.

The originality of this study lies in its integration of multiple theoretical perspectives to explain EB as a multidimensional process involving branding inputs, mediating mechanisms, contextual amplifiers, and organisational outcomes. By highlighting the ethical, psychological, and reputational risks associated with EB misalignment, the study contributes to a more balanced understanding of EB and provides a foundation for developing more authentic, transparent, and sustainable EB strategies.

Methodology

This study adopts a conceptual research design to examine the underexplored negative dimensions of employer branding. Conceptual research is particularly appropriate when the objective is to synthesise existing knowledge, identify theoretical gaps, and develop new frameworks that advance scholarly understanding of a phenomenon.

The study was conducted through a systematic review and critical synthesis of the literature on employer branding, organisational behaviour, psychological contracts, organisational identity, employee engagement, diversity and inclusion, and reputational management. Relevant peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters,

and scholarly reports were examined to identify recurring themes associated with the unintended consequences of employer branding practices.

The literature analysis was guided by four theoretical perspectives: Psychological Contract Theory, Signalling Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Institutional Theory. These theories were selected because they provide complementary explanations regarding how employer branding messages influence employee expectations, organisational relationships, behavioural responses, and institutional practices.

The conceptual development process consisted of three stages. First, the literature was reviewed to identify commonly reported benefits and emerging criticisms of employer branding. Second, recurring negative mechanisms associated with employer branding were categorised and synthesised into broader conceptual themes. Third, these themes were integrated into a conceptual framework illustrating the pathways through which employer branding practices may generate adverse employee and organisational outcomes.

The resulting framework identifies key employer branding inputs, mediating mechanisms, amplifying contextual factors, and organisational consequences. By integrating insights from multiple theoretical perspectives, the framework provides a holistic understanding of the dark side of employer branding and offers a foundation for future empirical investigation.

Results

The analysis of the literature revealed that employer branding, while widely recognised as a strategic mechanism for attracting and retaining talent, may also generate unintended negative consequences when organisational promises fail to align with employee experiences. The findings indicate that the dark side of employer branding emerges through three primary mechanisms:

- a) unrealistic promises and psychological contract breach,
- b) employer branding as a façade for exploitative practices, and
- c) exclusivity bias and diversity concerns.

Furthermore, the impact of these mechanisms is intensified by contemporary contextual factors, including digital transparency, social media

visibility, evolving workforce expectations, and institutional pressures.

Unrealistic Promises and Psychological Contract Breach

One of the most frequently identified risks associated with employer branding is the creation of unrealistic employee expectations. Employer branding campaigns often emphasise attractive workplace characteristics such as career advancement opportunities, supportive leadership, work-life balance, organisational flexibility, and employee well-being. These messages serve as signals that shape applicants' perceptions before they join the organisation. However, when actual workplace experiences fall short of these promises, employees may perceive a violation of the psychological contract.

A psychological contract breach occurs when employees believe that the organisation has failed to fulfil its implicit or explicit obligations. Such perceptions frequently result in reduced trust, lower organisational commitment, diminished engagement, and increased turnover intentions. The literature further suggests that repeated discrepancies between organisational promises and workplace realities contribute to employee cynicism and dissatisfaction. In extreme cases, employees may develop negative attitudes toward the organisation, reducing both individual performance and organisational effectiveness.

Beyond behavioural outcomes, psychological contract breach may also generate psychological consequences, including emotional exhaustion, frustration, identity strain, and reduced psychological safety. Employees who feel misled by employer branding messages may lose confidence in organisational leadership, thereby weakening long-term employment relationships. Consequently, unrealistic employer-branding promises may yield short-term recruitment benefits while creating significant long-term organisational risks (33).

Employer Branding Facade and Exploitative Practices

The literature further indicates that employer branding may function as a façade when organisations prioritise image management over genuine employee well-being. In such situations, branding initiatives project an attractive organisational image externally, while internal workplace practices fail to support the values

being communicated. The façade effect becomes particularly evident when organisations promote narratives of employee care, flexibility, inclusion, or development while simultaneously maintaining excessive workloads, limited growth opportunities, or unsupportive managerial practices.

This disconnect creates a form of organisational dissonance in which employees perceive a substantial gap between organisational rhetoric and reality. As a result, employer branding may be viewed as a symbolic exercise designed to enhance organisational reputation rather than improve employee experiences. Such perceptions can foster distrust, disengagement, and resistance toward organisational initiatives.

The literature also highlights the relationship between branding façades and employee burnout. When employees are expected to embody organisational values that are not genuinely supported by internal practices, they may experience emotional strain and increased work pressure. Consequently, employer branding may unintentionally contribute to employee exploitation by encouraging individuals to internalise organisational expectations without receiving corresponding organisational support. Over time, this dynamic undermines organisational credibility and weakens the sustainability of employer branding efforts.

Exclusivity Bias and Diversity Concerns

Another significant finding concerns the unintended exclusionary effects of employer branding. Many employer branding strategies seek to attract individuals who fit a particular organisational image or cultural profile. Although such approaches may strengthen perceptions of organisational identity, they may simultaneously discourage diversity by reinforcing narrow definitions of the ideal employee.

The literature suggests that branding messages emphasising exclusivity, prestige, or cultural homogeneity can reduce the attractiveness of organisations among individuals from diverse backgrounds. Employees who do not conform to the projected organisational image may experience feelings of exclusion, limited belongingness, and reduced organisational identification. Consequently, employer branding may unintentionally create barriers to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

The long-term implications of exclusivity bias extend beyond recruitment outcomes. Organisations that fail to foster inclusive environments may experience reduced innovation, weaker collaboration, and reputational challenges. In an increasingly diverse and socially conscious workforce, exclusionary branding practices may damage organisational legitimacy and reduce competitiveness in talent markets.

Amplifying Factors in the Contemporary Employment Environment

The analysis revealed several contextual factors that intensify the negative consequences of employer branding misalignment. Digital transparency has emerged as one of the most influential factors. Online platforms such as Glassdoor, LinkedIn, and Indeed provide employees with opportunities to publicly share workplace experiences, making inconsistencies between employer branding messages and organisational realities more visible. Changing workforce expectations also contribute to the amplification of employer branding risks. Contemporary employees increasingly value authenticity, transparency, inclusivity, psychological

safety, and organisational purpose. Consequently, organisations that rely on superficial branding messages without substantive organisational support are more likely to face employee dissatisfaction and reputational criticism.

Institutional pressures further contribute to the problem. Many organisations adopt employer branding practices because they have become accepted industry norms rather than because they genuinely reflect organisational culture and values. This tendency may encourage symbolic adoption of employer branding initiatives that prioritise appearance over substance.

Proposed Conceptual Framework

To integrate the findings of the literature synthesis, a conceptual framework was developed illustrating the relationships among employer branding practices, mediating mechanisms, contextual amplifiers, and organisational outcomes. The framework synthesises the major themes identified from the reviewed literature and demonstrates how the dark side of employer branding emerges through interconnected pathways. Figure 1 presents the proposed conceptual model.

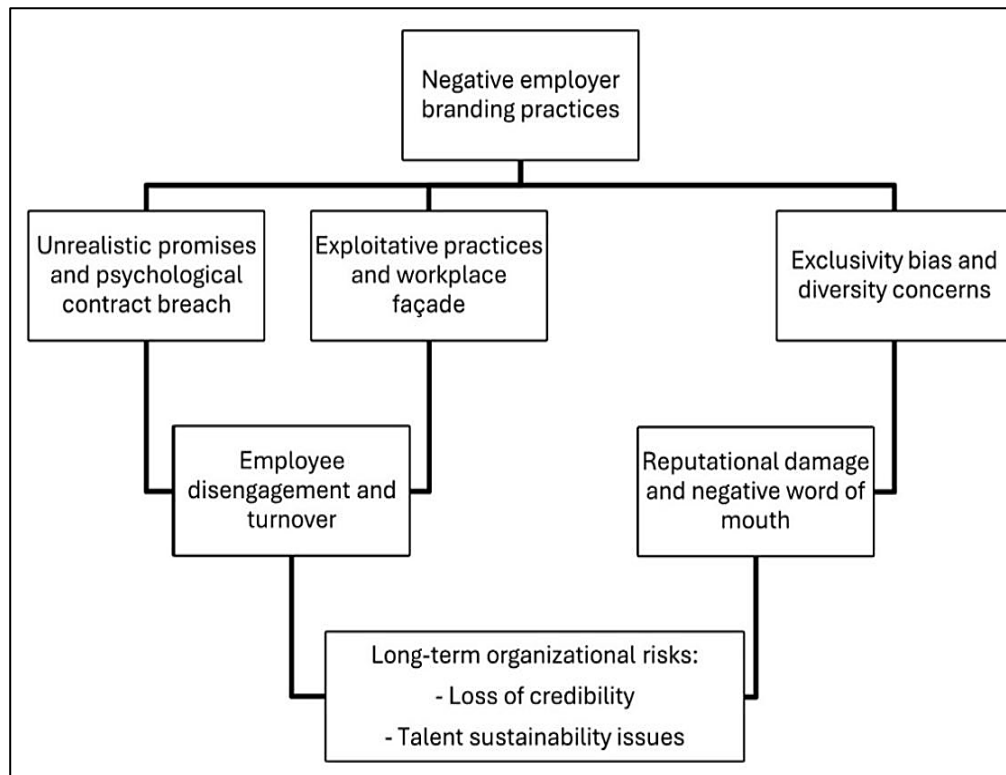


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of the Dark Side of Employer Branding

The framework, as shown in Figure 1, suggests that employer branding practices constitute the primary inputs influencing employee expectations and organisational perceptions. When these practices involve unrealistic promises, branding façades, or exclusionary narratives, they trigger mediating mechanisms such as psychological contract breach, employee cynicism, emotional exhaustion, perceptions of exploitation, and feelings of exclusion. These effects are further intensified by contextual factors, including digital transparency, social media visibility, evolving workforce expectations, and institutional pressures. Collectively, these processes contribute to adverse organisational outcomes such as disengagement, turnover intentions, reputational deterioration, weakened trust, and sustainability challenges.

The findings therefore demonstrate that employer branding should not be viewed solely as a recruitment and retention strategy. Rather, its effectiveness depends on the extent to which branding messages accurately reflect organisational realities. Authenticity, transparency, and inclusivity are essential to ensuring that employer branding contributes to sustainable organisational success rather than becoming a source of organisational risk.

Discussion

The present study sought to develop a conceptual framework explaining the dark side of employer branding and the mechanisms through which employer-branding practices may generate unintended negative consequences for employees and organisations. While employer-branding literature has traditionally focused on favourable outcomes such as organisational attractiveness, employee engagement, recruitment effectiveness, and talent retention, the findings of this study suggest that employer branding may also create psychological, behavioural, ethical, and reputational challenges when organisational promises fail to align with workplace realities. By synthesising insights from employer branding, organisational behaviour, and psychological contract literature, the study contributes to a more balanced understanding of employer branding as both an opportunity and a potential organisational risk.

The findings support previous research indicating that employer branding significantly influences employee expectations before organisational entry. Strategic branding processes influence individuals' professional identity formation and work readiness. While that study examined branding at the individual level, the current conceptual framework extends this perspective to the organisational level by illustrating how employer-branding messages shape employees' expectations, perceptions, and workplace experiences. Employer-branding messages communicate signals regarding organisational culture, career opportunities, leadership quality, employee well-being, and workplace values, thereby shaping applicants' perceptions and expectations. Existing studies have consistently demonstrated that positive employer brands enhance organisational attractiveness and facilitate talent acquisition. Consistent with recent empirical evidence showing a positive relationship between employer-branding factors and employee retention in the financial services sector, the present study suggests that these benefits are likely to be sustainable only when employer-brand promises align with actual workplace experiences (34). The present study extends this understanding by demonstrating that expectation–reality gaps may be a critical mechanism by which employer branding produces adverse outcomes. When organisational promises remain unfulfilled, employees may perceive a breach of the psychological contract, resulting in reduced trust, lower organisational commitment, diminished engagement, and increased turnover intentions. These findings are consistent with previous research linking psychological contract violations to negative employee attitudes and behavioural responses, and reinforce recent calls for greater authenticity in employer branding practices. These findings are consistent with recent research highlighting the strategic role of internal employer branding in fostering employee commitment, organisational attachment, and talent retention, while emphasising that the long-term effectiveness of employer-branding initiatives depends on the alignment between organisational promises and employee experiences (35).

The study further highlights the importance of authenticity as a foundational element of sustainable employer branding. Much of the traditional

employer-branding literature implicitly assumes that branding messages accurately represent organisational realities. However, contemporary research increasingly questions this assumption, arguing that organisations may prioritise image management over substantive improvements in employee experiences. The concept of the employer-branding façade developed in this study reflects this concern by illustrating how attractive external narratives may conceal internal challenges, such as excessive workloads, limited career development opportunities, inadequate managerial support, and inequitable workplace practices. Recent studies have similarly argued that employer branding becomes ineffective when it functions primarily as a symbolic communication strategy rather than a genuine reflection of organisational culture. Under such circumstances, employees may perceive branding initiatives as manipulative or misleading, resulting in cynicism, distrust, and resistance toward organisational initiatives. The present findings are also consistent with recent research suggesting that employer branding is a multidimensional organisational construct encompassing developmental, ethical, managerial, economic, and work-life balance dimensions. Rather than functioning solely as a recruitment communication tool, effective employer branding requires a comprehensive organisational commitment to employee experiences and workplace practices. Consequently, organisations that prioritise external image creation while neglecting these underlying dimensions may increase the risk of employer-branding misalignment and associated negative outcomes (36).

Another important contribution of the study concerns the psychological consequences of employer-branding misalignment. Earlier employer-branding research has predominantly focused on recruitment outcomes and employee-retention indicators. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how branding inconsistencies influence employee well-being. The proposed framework suggests that employees exposed to discrepancies between branding promises and workplace realities may experience emotional exhaustion, frustration, identity strain, reduced psychological safety, and organisational alienation. These outcomes are particularly relevant in contemporary work environments

characterised by heightened performance pressures, digital monitoring, and increasing expectations regarding organisational support and flexibility. Recent studies have similarly emphasised the growing importance of employee well-being as a central indicator of employer-brand effectiveness. Consequently, the present study broadens the employer-branding literature by positioning employee psychological well-being as a critical outcome rather than merely a secondary consequence of branding effectiveness. The findings also reveal that employer branding may unintentionally contribute to exclusionary organisational practices. Consistent with diversity and inclusion literature, the study suggests that branding strategies built around narrowly defined organisational identities may discourage applicants from diverse backgrounds and reduce employees' sense of belonging. Although organisations frequently use employer branding to communicate distinct organisational cultures and values, excessive emphasis on cultural fit may unintentionally reinforce homogeneity and limit workforce diversity. Recent research has similarly highlighted concerns about diversity-washing, in which organisations publicly promote diversity and inclusion while failing to implement meaningful, inclusive practices internally. The present study extends this discussion by identifying exclusivity bias as a significant component of the dark side of employer branding. This finding suggests that employer-branding strategies should be evaluated not only on their attractiveness but also on their inclusivity and ability to foster equitable employment relationships. The present findings are further supported by recent research demonstrating that employer-branding initiatives may commercialise and aestheticise diversity, using inclusive imagery and diversity narratives to enhance organisational attractiveness while failing to implement substantive diversity and inclusion practices internally. Such contradictions between external employer-brand messages and organisational realities may create perceptions of inauthenticity and undermine employee trust, reinforcing the risks associated with employer-branding façades identified in the present study (37).

The study also highlights the growing influence of digital transparency on employer-branding outcomes. Unlike earlier employment environments

in which organisations exercised substantial control over employer narratives, contemporary digital platforms have redistributed this power among employees and external stakeholders. Social media platforms, professional networking websites, online discussion forums, and employer-review platforms allow employees to share workplace experiences with broad audiences, thereby increasing organisational transparency. Recent employer-branding research suggests that employee-generated content is often perceived as more credible than organisational communication. Consequently, inconsistencies between branding messages and workplace realities can rapidly damage organisational reputation and employer credibility. The present framework advances this perspective by conceptualising digital transparency as an amplifying factor that intensifies the consequences of employer-branding misalignment. This finding highlights the growing importance of authenticity and transparency in the digital era, where organisational narratives are continuously scrutinised by employees, applicants, and other stakeholders. This finding is consistent with recent employer-branding scholarship, which argues that the proliferation of social media platforms and third-party employer-branding channels has reduced organisational control over employer reputation and increased the importance of authenticity, credibility, and employee-generated narratives in shaping employer attractiveness (38).

From a theoretical perspective, the study contributes to employer-branding scholarship by integrating Psychological Contract Theory, Signalling Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Institutional Theory within a single conceptual framework. Existing employer-branding studies frequently rely on individual theoretical perspectives to explain recruitment outcomes or organisational attractiveness. In contrast, the present study demonstrates that a multi-theoretical approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of how employer-branding practices influence employee expectations, organisational relationships, and behavioural outcomes. Psychological Contract Theory explains how unmet expectations generate dissatisfaction and disengagement; Signalling Theory explains the role of employer-branding messages in shaping perceptions and expectations;

Social Exchange Theory explains employee responses to perceived organisational obligations; and Institutional Theory explains why organisations may adopt employer-branding practices to maintain legitimacy even when such practices are not fully aligned with internal realities. The integration of these perspectives provides a richer explanation of the mechanisms underlying both positive and negative employer-branding outcomes. This finding is consistent with recent research on personal branding and work readiness, which highlighted the role of branding in shaping professional perceptions and expectations. Extending this perspective, the present study demonstrates that employer-branding effectiveness similarly depends on the alignment between communicated promises and actual workplace experiences (39). Recent empirical research has similarly highlighted the multidimensional nature of employer branding by identifying behavioural, structural, and environmental determinants of employer-brand effectiveness. The present study extends this perspective by demonstrating how weaknesses or inconsistencies within these dimensions may contribute not only to positive outcomes but also to negative employee and organisational consequences (40).

The findings therefore suggest that employer branding should not be viewed solely as a recruitment and retention strategy. Rather, employer branding should be understood as an ongoing relational process requiring continuous alignment between organisational messaging and employee experiences. Organisations that focus exclusively on creating attractive external images may achieve short-term recruitment advantages while exposing themselves to long-term risks, including employee disengagement, reputational deterioration, diversity challenges, and talent sustainability concerns. Conversely, organisations that prioritise authenticity, transparency, inclusivity, employee well-being, and ethical communication are more likely to develop sustainable employer brands that generate long-term organisational value.

Overall, the discussion demonstrates that the dark side of employer branding emerges not because employer branding itself is inherently problematic, but because organisational realities fail to support the promises communicated through branding

efforts. The long-term effectiveness of employer branding, therefore, depends on maintaining consistency between external representations and internal employee experiences. In an increasingly transparent and socially conscious employment environment, authenticity emerges as the defining characteristic of sustainable employer branding. By highlighting the risks of employer-branding misalignment, the study encourages organisations to move beyond symbolic branding practices and to develop employer brands grounded in genuine employee experiences and organisational integrity.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore the underexamined negative consequences of employer branding and to develop a conceptual framework that explains the mechanisms by which employer branding may generate adverse outcomes for employees and organisations. While employer branding has traditionally been viewed as a strategic tool for attracting, engaging, and retaining talent, the findings of this study demonstrate that its effectiveness depends largely on the alignment between organisational promises and workplace realities. When such alignment is absent, employer branding may contribute to psychological contract breaches, employee cynicism, emotional exhaustion, perceptions of exploitation, exclusionary practices, reputational deterioration, and increased turnover intentions.

The proposed framework identifies three primary pathways through which the dark side of employer branding emerges: unrealistic promises and expectation–reality gaps, employer branding façades that prioritise image over substance, and exclusivity biases that undermine diversity and inclusion objectives. The study further highlights the role of contextual amplifiers, such as digital transparency, social media visibility, shifting workforce expectations, and institutional pressures, in intensifying the consequences of employer branding misalignment. Collectively, these findings suggest that employer branding should be understood not merely as a recruitment strategy but as an ongoing organisational commitment requiring authenticity, transparency, and consistency.

Contributions

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the employer branding literature by shifting attention from the predominantly positive narrative surrounding employer branding toward a more balanced and critical understanding of its potential risks. The integration of Psychological Contract Theory, Signalling Theory, Social Exchange Theory, and Institutional Theory provides a comprehensive explanation of how employer branding influences employee expectations, organisational relationships, and behavioural outcomes. By consolidating fragmented discussions regarding organisational hypocrisy, unmet expectations, employee well-being, and exclusionary branding practices, the study offers a novel conceptual framework that advances existing knowledge on employer branding. Recent employer-branding research grounded in Signalling Theory similarly demonstrates that social media communication and employee-generated narratives influence perceptions of organisational attractiveness and career growth opportunities. The present study extends this perspective by illustrating that the same signalling mechanisms may also contribute to adverse outcomes when organisational realities fail to support communicated employer-brand promises.

Practical Implications

The study also provides important practical implications for organisational leaders, human resource professionals, and employer branding practitioners. Organisations should ensure that employer branding messages accurately reflect actual workplace conditions rather than idealised representations designed solely to enhance organisational attractiveness. Employer value propositions should be continuously evaluated to ensure consistency between external communication and employee experiences. Human resource managers should regularly assess employee perceptions regarding organisational promises and workplace realities to identify potential expectation gaps before they develop into psychological contract breaches. Additionally, organisations should prioritise inclusive employer branding practices that appeal to diverse talent pools while fostering a sense of belonging and psychological safety among employees. In an era of digital transparency, authenticity has become a

critical determinant of employer branding success, making employee experiences as important as external branding campaigns.

Limitations

Despite its contributions, the study is subject to certain limitations. As a conceptual investigation, the proposed framework has not been empirically tested. Consequently, the relationships identified within the framework remain theoretically derived and require empirical validation. Furthermore, the study primarily focuses on general organisational contexts and does not examine how industry-specific, cultural, or geographical factors may influence the emergence of employer branding risks. The conceptual nature of the study also limits the ability to assess the relative strength of individual mechanisms and outcomes.

Future Scope

These limitations provide several opportunities for future research. Empirical studies may be conducted to validate the proposed framework and examine the relationships among employer branding practices, psychological contract breaches, employee well-being, and organisational outcomes. Longitudinal research could investigate how employer branding misalignment develops over time and influences employee attitudes and behaviours across different career stages. Future studies may also explore sector-specific manifestations of employer branding risks, particularly in industries characterised by high employee expectations and intense competition for talent. Comparative studies across different cultural contexts would further enhance understanding of how social, institutional, and economic factors influence perceptions of employer branding authenticity. Additionally, future research could examine the role of emerging technologies, artificial intelligence, and digital employer branding platforms in shaping both positive and negative employer branding outcomes.

In conclusion, the study argues that the long-term success of employer branding depends not on the attractiveness of organisational promises but on their credibility and authenticity. Employer branding initiatives that prioritise substance over symbolism are more likely to foster employee trust, engagement, inclusion, and organisational sustainability. Conversely, organisations that rely on exaggerated or misaligned employer branding

practices risk undermining the very outcomes they seek to achieve. As employer branding continues to evolve within increasingly transparent and digitally connected workplaces, authenticity emerges as the defining characteristic of sustainable employer branding practice.

Abbreviations

AI: Artificial Intelligence, EB: Employer Branding, HR/HRM: Human Resource/ Human Resource Management.

Acknowledgement

There are no additional acknowledgements to be mentioned regarding the preparation of the manuscript. All the contributors have met the authorship criteria. However, the authors would like to mention their gratitude to the editor and the anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and comments.

Author Contributions

Rini John: Lead author of the manuscript as well as the corresponding author, Reena Patel: Supervised and provided overall guidance, Meghashree Dadhich: Uplifted the quality of the paper with her expertise

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the present study.

Data Availability

No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study because the research is based on a conceptual synthesis of existing literature.

Declaration of Artificial Intelligence

(AI) Assistance

During the preparation of the manuscript, the authors sought assistance from AI technology for sentence refinement, grammar correction, and improving the manuscript's overall quality and readability. All content was manually reviewed and edited by the authors, who take full responsibility for the manuscript's integrity and originality.

Ethics Approval

This study is a conceptual research investigation based exclusively on the review and synthesis of published academic literature. No human participants, personal data, interviews, surveys,

experiments, or identifiable records were involved in this study. Consequently, formal institutional ethical approval was not required. The study was conducted in accordance with accepted principles of research integrity, academic honesty, transparency, and responsible scholarship. All sources used in the development of the conceptual framework were appropriately acknowledged and cited to ensure intellectual property rights and academic standards were maintained throughout the research process.

Funding

The study received no funding from any parties.

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How to Cite: John R, Patel R, Dadhich M. The Dark Side of Employer Branding: A Conceptual Framework. *Int Res J Multidiscip Scope.* 2026;7(3):979-990. DOI: 10.47857/irjms.2026.v07i03.012131