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# Role of Employer Branding in Talent Attraction in Malawi

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# Acknowledgements

# Table of contents

## List of figures:

## List of tables:

# Abstract

The study aimed at investigating the role of employer branding in talent attraction in Malawi. Specifically, it examined the attributes prospective employees find attractive in their selection of a prospective employer. It also explored the channels used by prospective employees in search of an employer. A survey approach was adopted; an online questionnaire was distributed among 193 Malawians who were randomly selected. SPSS was used for data analysis. The study findings confirmed that both instrumental and symbolic attributes influences a candidates attraction to a job. The findings indicated weak gender differences in candidate's preference of job attributes as well as in the channel usage.

Key words: *talent attraction, employer branding, job seekers, prospective employee, prospective employer, instrumental attributes, symbolic attributes, and Malawi*

# 1 . Introduction

With the rising global talent shortage, organisations are coming up with different approaches to attract the best talents (Guthridge, Komm, & Lawson, 2008). Acquisition of talented employees is now essential for the continued existence of an organisation and to achieve a competitive advantage among its competitors (Hadi & Ahmed, 2018). This has caused organisations to invest more on recruitment and selection of potential employees to achieve efficiency (Mishra & Subudhi, 2017).

Despite these efforts in talent acquisition, organisations' encounter challenges in attracting talented employees (Alniacik 2014). The author further stresses that companies in all sectors are encountering same challenges in finding the best talents. The intense competition emerging from the insufficient capable labour force makes it challenging for organisations to attract potential applicants (Ergun & Tatar, 2018). Organisations are thus adopting employer branding concepts to manage the scarcity of the labour force and the war for talent (Ergun & Tatar, 2018). Introduced in 1996 by Ambler and Barrow, the concept of employer branding has evolved over time, with many studies undertaken in this field.

Many have defined the employer branding concept in different ways; Graeme, Gollanb, and Grigg (2011) stated that employer branding is the process by which branding concepts, marketing, communications, and Human Resource (HR) techniques are applied to create an employer brand. Sullivan (2004) indicated that it involves managing the awareness and perceptions of current and prospective employees, and stakeholders associated with the firm (Sullivan, 2004).

Benefits of employer branding include but are not limited to the attraction of talented candidates (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Figurska & Matuska, 2013; Poonam & Mustafa, 2017; Santiago, 2018; Bhardwaj, 2019), retention of the best employees (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Dawn & Biswas, 2011; Poonam et al., 2017; Santiago, 2018), increase in the job seekers intention to apply, provision of a worldwide recognition (Poonam et al.,2017 & Sullivan, 2004) and its ability to give personality to the company (Dawn et al., 2011)

Even though employer branding has numerous benefits and despite its adoption by several organisations, it has been noted that many companies are not successful in their employer branding activities despite realising the importance of adopting a stronger employer brand (Benjamin, 2019). Many companies fail to effectively communicate their employer brand to prospective employees and to attract the best candidates (Benjamin, 2019)

Creating a successful employer brand requires managers and Human Resource specialists to have knowledge on components that are relevant in attracting prospective employees (Eger, Micik, & Rehor, 2018). Their awareness of factors that are crucial in influencing perceptions of job seekers leads to a successful employer brand (Arachchige & Robertson,

2011). According to Upadhye (2017), to create a successful employer brand, an employer is required to know the perceptions and beliefs employees have about the employer. Employers ought to have a picture of their reputation among job seekers (Fombrun, 1996) . It is a necessity for organisations to know the attributes that are most relevant to prospective employees (Hieronimus, Schaefer, & Schroder, 2005). Employees determine if the message provided by the employer matches with their needs and wants (Beyer, 2021) . This only signifies the importance of understanding their perception.

Employee's perception of an attractive employer depends on the different perceptions they develop in line with employer attractiveness. These perceptions are formed based on the potential employees' knowledge about an employer (Cable & Turban, 2001). Hoye and Saks (2011) stated that the  personality of applicants  determines the organisation they are attracted to. The applicants find themselves attracted to a company based on the belief that the company possesses their most desirable attributes (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). To meet these preferences, it is imperative to match the needs of employees with what companies offer. As a result, it is incumbent upon these companies to understand what attracts employees to a particular employer.

Lievens (2005), Arachchige and Robertson (2011) and other studies have underlined the importance of knowing key attributes that employees find attractive in the selection of a prospective employer. This understanding helps to know where to improve. Some of the attributes that are known to attract talented candidates include the ability to:  innovate, value diversity, value abilities, and knowledge, offer different careers, and ensure freedom of opinion (Bonaiuto, Illia, De Dominicis, & Canovas, 2013). Challenging work environment and career growth opportunities are also essential attributes of an employer of choice (Torricelli, 2002)

Several authors have undertaken studies on the role of employer branding in talent attraction. These studies have been carried out in many countries in the world with a few exceptions including Malawi. Alniacika, Eratb, and Akcinib (2012) stated that employer branding is not a universal concept; the attractiveness of employer branding varies in different countries. This means the attractiveness in Malawi might vary from what has been found in other studies. It is therefore not clear at the moment if employer branding plays a role in talent attraction in Malawi as there is a lack of empirical evidence. This study is thus set to fill this gap in the literature and to investigate the role of employer branding in talent attraction in Malawi.

The specific objective of this study is to investigate the attributes job seekers find attractive in their selection of a prospective employer. The study will also explore the channels job seekers use to find a prospective employer. The primary research question is:  *what attributes attract job seekers to apply for a job*? The other research question is, *which channels do prospective employees use to identify a potential employer*? The research is mostly focused on measuring what triggers a candidate's intent to apply for a job. To achieve this goal, the study used an online survey which targeted 193 literate

Malawians. The remaining chapters of the study are categorised into: literature review, methods, results, discussion of the results and a conclusion.

# 2 . Literature review

Many studies in employer branding have been undertaken in several countries except for Malawi, reviewing the literature is a step towards filling this gap. Understanding what other authors have found, will not only act as a benchmark but will also lead to the development of the hypotheses of the study. This section is divided into : introduction to employer branding, dimensions of attractiveness in employer branding, employer knowledge and organisational attractiveness, instrumental and symbolic framework, general attributes used by employees in employer selection, job seekers' intention to apply, employer reputation and channels in employer branding.

## 2.1 Introduction to Employer Branding

A brand represents attributes (tangible and intangible) intended to create awareness, identity and to build the reputation of a product, service, person, place, or organisation (Sammut, 2015). The American Marketing Association (AMA) maintains that brands are a name, sign, symbol, design, or a mixture of these with the purpose of recognising products or services of one seller and distinguishing them from those of the other seller. Organisations are using branding principles and methods to appeal to better employees (Wandhwa & Vashisht, 2017). The application of these branding ideologies to Human Resource Management (HRM) is employer branding (Wandhwa et al., 2017).

The idea of employer branding was initiated in the 1990s by Ambler and Barrow (1996). These authors suggested that the principles of relationship marketing could allow marketing and Human Resources (HR) activities to share a common framework; the principles of brand marketing could be applied to enhance corporate performance. They concluded that the measures that are used to assess relationship marketing performance could be applied to Human Resource. These measures comprise of awareness, trust, commitment, other attitudes, and behaviour (Ambler & Barrow, 1996).

Employer branding has evolved and has been defined in several ways. Employer branding is the "functional, economic, and psychological benefits associated with the employer" (Ambler and Barrow 1996, p.187). According to Shaker and Ahmed (2014) employer branding involves portraying a firm's image to prospective employees as an excellent working place. Santiago (2018) argued that employer branding is associated with benefits offered by an organisation to its employees to develop a unique identity that is appreciated by current and prospective employees. Kucherov and Zavyalova (2011) stressed that employer branding comprises of qualitative features of the employer, which are attractive to the target audience. Employer branding is consequently seen as efforts by the firm intended to promote the firm as exceptional and pleasant employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Generally, employer branding involves managing the awareness and perceptions of employees and stakeholders involved with the company (Sullivan, 2004).

It is important to differentiate some key concepts. First, it is vital to discuss the difference between an employer brand and employer branding. While employer branding is a means of conveying a company's culture, an employer brand is the sum of all traits and elements perceived by current and potential employees about an organisation's employment situation (Dawn & Biswas, 2011).

Another difference is between employer branding and corporate branding. According to Edwards (2010), employer branding involves applying principles of marketing to Human Resource (HR) activities. Corporate branding relates to how an organisation is represented to external audience (Edwards, 2010). To differentiate an employer brand and corporate brand, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) indicates that employer brands are built to be consistent with a firm's product and Corporate brand . On the other hand, the Corporate brand focuses on only the external audience (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Employer branding is divided into internal and external Branding (Kozłowski, 2012; Dawn & Biswas, 2011). Internal employer branding is centered on forming a pleasant work atmosphere and employees' advancement within the organisation. On the other hand, external employer branding is focused on outsiders (Stuss & Agnieszka, 2017). Dawn and Biswas (2011) asserted that external branding uses external sources while internal branding deals with employment experience and anticipations of existing and potential employees, respectively. According to Backhaus (2016), in internal employer branding, the organisation develops a message to create a positive image of the organisation to both outsiders and organisational insiders (internal employees). Figure 2.1 shows the two dimensions of employer branding.



*Figure 2. 1 : Dimensions of Employer Branding Source: own based on Stuss & Agnieszka,    2017*

Having understood the different concepts and categories of employer branding, it is crucial to understand the aims and benefits of employer branding. Figurska and Matuska (2013) provide that the goal of employer branding is to show a positive and attractive image to current and potential employees and to distinguish the employer from its competitors in the market. Another goal is to maintain its commitment to its employees (Backhaus, 2016). The organisation is perceived as

one that cares about its employees and addresses their anxieties  (Figurska & Matuska, 2013). It is also perceived to invest in their professional development, to observe and respond to developments in the labour market (Figurska & Matuska, 2013). Universum (2020) found the following as the reasons of companies undertaking employer branding: achieving short-term and long-term recruitment demands, enhancing retention, and improving its competitiveness.

Employer branding has numerous benefits. Figurska and Matuska (2013) highlighted the following as the benefits of companies that have a strong employer brand : hiring capable employees, having a team of motivated employees and ability to make profits. The authors further provided that a stronger employer brand increases the number of job candidates willing to work with the organisation to improve its  efficiency (Figurska & Matuska, 2013).

Organisations with a powerful employer brand attract finest potential employees and retain best employees (Alniacika 2014). Ambler and Barrow (1996) confirm that firms that use a good employer brand model achieve a higher retention rate among the best employees and can attract the best candidates. A strong employer brand helps to publicise the organisation, promote employment opportunities, and communicate excellent messages that reach the best talents (Gandhi, 2018). Overall, employer branding has shown to influence job seeker's intention to apply for jobs (Poonam & Mustafa, 2017). In support to this, Bhardwaj (2019) concluded that a successful employer branding leads to the attraction and retention of employees. Poonam and Mustafa (2017) agreed that a stronger employer brand creates attraction as well as retention of best talents and brings quality to its customers and global recognition.

Successful employer branding boosts a firm's exposure and reputation through creating an agreement between prospective employees and employers (Sullivan, 2004). This in turn leads to an increase in the quantity and quality of applicants, an increase in workers' productivity and a reduction in turnover rate among best performers (Sullivan, 2004). A right employer brand gives a personality to the company, helps in recruitment structuring, attracts the right candidates for the job, points out the company's expectations from the employees, and retains the best candidates (Dawn & Biswas, 2011). Figure 2.2 provides a summary of the benefits of employer branding.
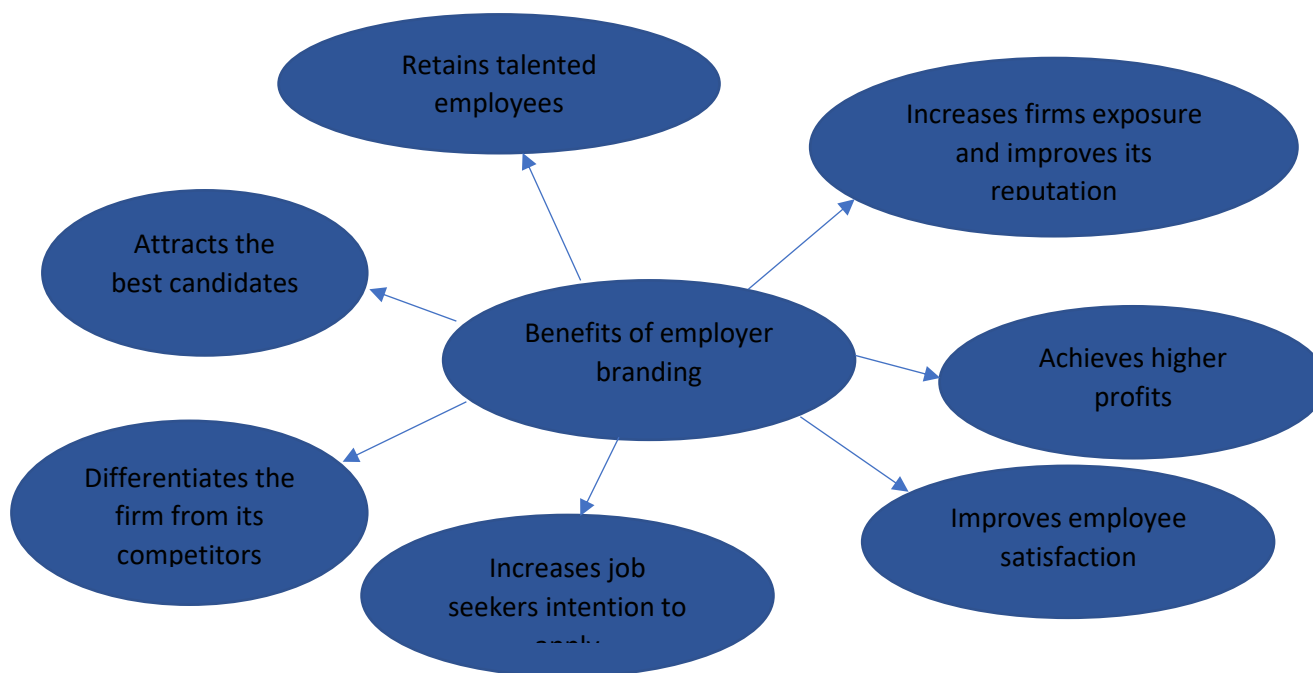
*Figure 2. 2: Summary of the benefits of Employer BrandingSource: own based from: Sullivan (2004), Figurska & Matuska ( 2013), Poonam and Mustafa (2017) and Gandhi (2018)*

To achieve the above-listed aims and benefits of employer branding, the organisation's employer brand is required to possess some essential elements. The following are the elements: a culture of continuous sharing and improvement of best practices, ability to balance between good management and high productivity, obtaining public recognition as an excellent place to work at, current employees voluntarily telling stories about the company, becoming a benchmark firm and becoming known for great work practices, increasing candidates awareness of best work practices and use of branding assessment metrics to improve the brand from time to time (Sullivan, 2004).

Another key to successful employer branding is to match employee's expectations of working in the company and the reality of working at the company (Dawn & Biswas, 2011). It is also important to build trust between the organisation and employees (Backhaus, 2016). This requires consistency between the brand message, organisation identity, and the organisation culture (Backhaus, 2016). The trust built is vital to organisation commitment as well as willingness of the employees to remain with the organisation and work engagement (Backhaus, 2016).

## 2.2 Dimensions of attractiveness in employer branding

According to Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005), employer attractiveness is associated with the benefits anticipated by potential employees which are associated with working in a particular organisation. These authors developed a 32-item

employer attractiveness scale (Empat) used to measure an employer's attractiveness. This scale is divided into different dimensions of employer attractiveness. The attractiveness of an employer has a positive relationship with an organisation's employer brand equity (Berthon et al., 2005)

The dimensions of employer attractiveness include *interest value, social value, economic value, development value,* and *application value* (Berthon et al., 2005). *Interest value* refers to the degree to which a person is attracted to an employer that provides a pleasant work environment, utilises its employee's creativity to produce quality, innovative products and uses new work practices (Berthon et al., 2005). *Social value* is associated with the degree to which a person is attracted to an employer that provides a fun and happy working environment, great working relationships and a team environment (Berthon et al., 2005). *Economic value* is the degree to which a person is attracted to an employer that offers a high salary, attractive compensation benefits, promotional opportunities, and job security (Berthon et al., 2005). *Development value* is defined as the degree to which an individual is attracted to an employer that offers recognition, improves self-worth and confidence in the individual, and offers career growth opportunities and a foundation for future employment (Berthon et al., 2005). *Application value* is linked to the degree to which a person is attracted to an employer that gives one the chance to apply what they learnt as well as well as to teach others in a caring and customer-oriented work environment (Berthon et al., 2005). These dimensions of employer attractiveness are believed to contribute to the value of employment brand. The employer attractiveness model was developed as an extension of the factors earlier developed by Ambler and Barrow (1996) on psychological, functional, and economic benefits (Berthon et al., 2005).

To attract employees and retain the best talents, organisations ought to understand the factors that lead to employer attractiveness. Incorporating these factors by organisations to their employment brands enhances the organisations' competitiveness among its competitors (Berthon et al., 2005). Figure 2.3 shows a summary of the dimensions of employer attractiveness as in the diagram below:
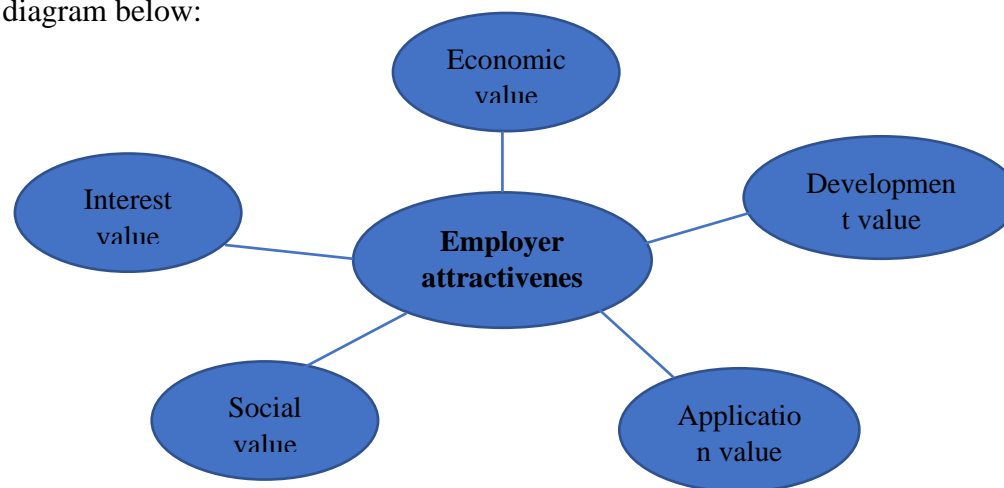


*Figure 2. 3: Dimensions of Employer attractiveness source: Own based from Berthon et al (2005)*

Most researchers have applied this model to measure the attractiveness of an employer. The effect these dimensions have on an employer's attractiveness varies depending on the job seekers' perception (Alniacika et al., 2012). The attractiveness in employer branding also varies in different countries, employer branding attractiveness is not a universal concept (Alniacika et al., 2012). Alniacika et al. (2012) found *social benefit* (appreciation from management and having a good relationship with co-workers) and *Economic benefit* (above average salary) to be the most important attributes preferred by applicants.

Eger, Micik, Gangur and Rehor (2019) discovered S*ocial value* to be a critical factor in employee attraction as it was observed to help in developing a positive organisation's status. This was followed by *Interest Value* and *Economy–Development Value* (Eger et al, 2019). Alniacick et al. (2012) pointed out that prospective employees consider *social value* as the most significant attributes and *market value as the least valued attribute.* The authors highlighted that as the respondents get older, they slightly tend to be attracted to employers who produce high-quality and innovative products and services and are customer oriented. Paolo (2016) discovered that generation X considered *development value*, *economic value*, *social value* and *interest value,* and *application value* as the most important.

## 2.3  Employer Knowledge Model and Organisation Attractiveness

Developed by Cable and Turban (2001), the employer knowledge model stipulates that what people believe in defines their behaviours. Job seekers' knowledge of a firm determines their awareness of an employment vacancy and their ability to apply for the position or accept it (Cable & Turban, 2001)

The model provides that there are many sources of information that are available to job seekers regarding an organisation. It further presents recruitment advertisements and those not associated to recruitment advertisements like word of mouth as some of the sources of information available to job seekers (Cable & Turban 2001). How a job seeker responds to forthcoming information from the environment depends on the intensity and content of the job seeker's employer knowledge (Cable & Turban, 2001). This implies that the employer knowledge job seekers have determines how they react to future information from the environment (Cable & Turban, 2001). This employer knowledge affects how job seekers process information, respond to future recruitment interventions, and behave towards an organisation regarding job search (Cable & Turban, 2001).

Cable and Turban (2001) defined employer knowledge as a prospective employee's memories and connections concerning an employer. These authors categorised job seekers' employer knowledge into three dimensions, namely: employer familiarity, employer image, and employer reputation.

Employer familiarity is associated with a prospective employer's awareness of an organisation (Cable & Turban, 2001). This familiarity is ideal for the other two dimensions of job seekers' employer knowledge (image and reputation); the absence of this familiarity implies no knowledge at all (Cable & Turban, 2001). Familiarity with the organisation helps the potential applicant to store knowledge about the organisation (Cable & Turban, 2001). It works as the anchor memory node on which job seekers can store beliefs about job attributes (Collins, 2006).

Employer image is defined as the substance of the opinions prospective employees have about an employer (Cable & Turban, 2001). Employer image is further divided into employer information, job information, and people information (Cable & Turban, 2001). These are the beliefs about the employer, the attributes about the job and the information about the people that work for the employer (Cable & Turban, 2001). Employee's perception of their employers' image is influenced by the employees' personal and professional experience. This in turn determines one's attitude or behaviour (Priyadarshi, 2012).

Employer reputation is defined as the faith potential employees have about a successful assessment of a prospective employer by the society (Cable & Turban, 2001) . The employer reputation is differentiated from employer image in that employer image involves prospective employees' own opinions about the organisation (Cable & Turban, 2001). In contrast, employer reputation involves prospective employee's opinions about the organisation with reference to what others say about the organisation (Cable & Turban, 2001).

The model discusses the relationship among employer branding dimensions. Familiarity, for instance, leads to image and reputation; it acts as a forerunner to the two and offers the means of gathering and storing information about an employer (Cable & Turban, 2001) . Employer familiarity with a company affects job seekers' beliefs about a firm, especially in terms of the characteristics that they believe the firm possesses. This suggests that the job seeker's familiarity with a firm affects employer image (Cable & Turban, 2001).

A relationship between employer familiarity and employer reputation exists as well (Cable & Turban, 2001). Employer familiarity is relevant for the development of beliefs about an employer's reputation. A job seeker must first know the employer and then develop beliefs about the employer's reputation firm (Cable & Turban, 2001) . This depends on their knowledge, and this determines the firm's evaluation (Cable & Turban, 2001) .Employer familiarity also allows prospective employees to view the employer as legit n (Cable & Turban, 2001). The model emphasises that Employer familiarity leads to the development of beliefs about the employer (Cable & Turban, 2001).

On the relationship between employer image and employer reputation, the belief job seekers have about an employer's reputation determines the image they formulate about the employer. The model provides that this is a bidirectional relationship (Cable & Turban, 2001).

The model also hints on information sources utilised by job seekers. It signals that job seekers process information from a source they consider trustworthy, and with great expertise (Cable & Turban, 2001) . Potential employees develop brand associations based on information that is not controlled by the employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The information sources are divided into internal-external dimension and experiential-informational dimension (Cable & Turban, 2001).

Internal-external information sources are associated with information, which is self-presented by the organisation, specifically made for the job seekers, and is made available to the public firm (Cable & Turban, 2001). Examples include recruitment advertisements and brochures. The experiential-information source is obtained through personal experience in any aspect of the organisation for instance through internships and interviews, among others firm (Cable & Turban, 2001). Internal sources are seen to be less trustworthy compared to external sources (Cable & Turban, 2001). The source of organisational information affects how a job seeker processes information (Cable & Turban, 2001) . These job seekers have knowledge about the attributes of a particular job in their organisation of interest (Cable & Turban, 2001).

In summary, the model stresses that the knowledge a job seeker has affects one's attraction to the company (Cable & Turban, 2001). It also affects the zeal the job seeker develops to pursue a job, the intention to form a relationship and the expectations of new employees concerning the organisation (Cable et al., 2001). Job seekers' employer knowledge defines the relevance of the information source and affects the expectations and beliefs employees have about an organisation (Cable et al., 2001). Their attraction to the organisation is perceived to affect the decisions they make concerning the organisation firm (Cable & Turban, 2001). In conclusion, the employer knowledge model emphasises that people's knowledge about an organisation influences how they react and respond to an employer in recruitment stages (Cable & Turban, 2001).  Figure 2.4 presents a summary of the employer knowledge model.
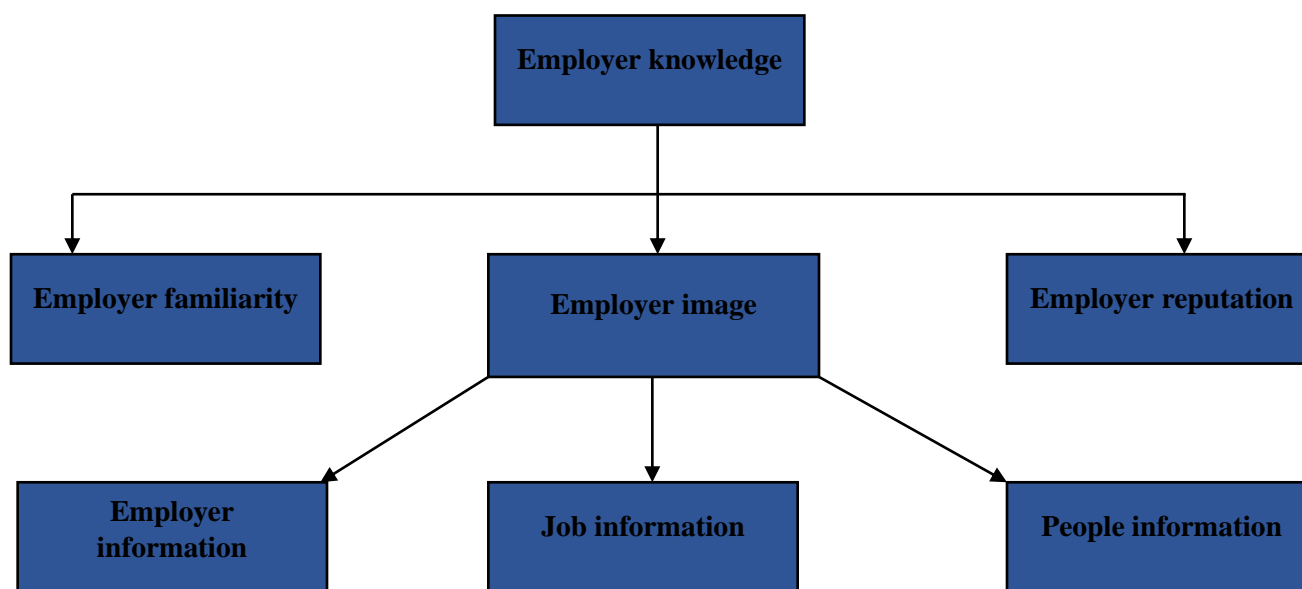


*Figure 2. 4: A summary of employer knowledge model  Source: Own summary based on Cable et al 2001.*

Lievens and Hoye (2005) conducted a research to test the applicability of the employer branding knowledge model developed by Cable and Turban in 2001. The study discovered that the three dimensions of employer knowledge (employer familiarity, employer image and employer reputation) influences job seekers' attraction to an organisation. Collins (2006) also stressed that employer familiarity; reputation and image have independent, direct relationships with the intentions and decisions of applicants. Lievens and Hoye (2005) further investigated the importance of these employer knowledge components in determining an organisation's attractiveness and how familiarity interacts with the other components. It also focused on the effects of employer dimensions on initial perceptions of organisation attractiveness. The study found out that the framework is valid, and all the three dimensions of the employer knowledge model are substantial predictors of employer attractiveness (Lievens & Hoye 2005). In another study, Lievens and Hoye (2007) underlined that organisational image and identity are linked with applicant attractiveness and employee identification, respectively.

Specifically, employer familiarity with the armed forces was found to be related to their perceived attractiveness (Lievens & Hoye 2005). This meant that employer familiarity is related to the attractiveness of an organisation (Lievens & Hoye 2005). The dimensions of employer image were also found to be related to organisational attractiveness. Similarly, employer reputation dimensions were found to be linked to the attractiveness of the armed forces. It was then concluded that all three dimensions of the employer knowledge model affect the attractiveness of an organisation (Lievens & Hoye, 2005).

Regarding the effect of reputation on organisation attractiveness, Turban and Cable (2003) conducted a study to assess how organisational reputation influences the quality and quantity of applicants applying for positions in an organisation. It was discovered that the reputation of the organisation influences the quantity and quality of applicants to an organisation. Organisations with a positive reputation attract a greater number of applicants for a job position (Turban & Cable, 2003). A firms' reputation is thus positively related to the number and quality of applicants in the organisation position (Turban & Cable, 2003). Reputation has a stronger effect on quality indicators for the interviewees than for applicants, and a firm's reputation affects the characteristics of the applicants (Turban &Cable 2003). This indicates that firms with more positive reputation have higher chances of interviewing and choosing higher-quality candidates than those with less positive reputation (Turban & Cable 2003).

## 2.4  Instrumental and Symbolic Framework

Lievens and Highhouse (2003) introduced the Instrumental and Symbolic framework. This was drawn from the market literature. They argued that an applicant's attraction to an organisation could not only be based on organisation's factors but on trait inferences (symbolic attributes). Instrumental attributes (utilitarian or functional attributes) are the product-related attributes that describe the job or organisation from a more objective, tangible, physical and factual element (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). They convey what the organisation either has or does not have (Lievens & Highhouse,

2003). Examples of these instrumental attributes include compensation benefits, location, and advancement opportunities (Kumari & Gordhan, 2018). They relate to functional benefits associated with the use of the product (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).These attributes are also linked to the ability to enable users to maximise benefits and minimise costs (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

Symbolic attributes which are the self-expressive attributes and non- product-related attributes describe the job or organisation in terms of subjective, abstract, and intangible aspect (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). This depends on how people perceive the product (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Consumers pursue these symbolic benefits for their public approval and individual expression demands (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004)

Potential applicants assign traits to organisations which permits them to express themselves (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). This is related to the Social identity theory, which explains that employees use the corporate image to evaluate how they are viewed by outsiders (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). These attributes present symbolic organisational information in the form of imagery and trait inferences that result from how people perceive the organisation as an employer (Lievens et al., 2003). Consequently, job seekers appraise an organisation using attributes that have symbolic meaning and are held in high regard by others (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

Ruey (2015, p. 8) classified the symbolic attributes as follows: "excitement *("an office environment where innovative and creativity is encouraged and valued")*, competence : (" *an office environment where capabilities are valued and encouraged*"), sophistication: ("*an office environment where the values of being trendy, classy or having charming style are treasured*"), ruggedness: *("an office environment which is lively, performance-driven and result-oriented")*, sincerity *("an office environment that is open, friendly and sincere where honesty is emphasised)*". The most valuable symbolic personality traits describe an ideal employer as one that is professional, reliable, adaptable, and organised (Eger, Micik, & Rehor, 2018). The importance of symbolic functions of a brand increases in situations when instrumental differences between brands are limited (Eger et al., 2018).

Reflecting on these symbolic attributes, sincerity is important for emotions connected to a particular employer brand (Rampl & Kenning, 2012). This is because applicants at times feel secure when in association with an employer that is sincere (Rampl & Kenning, 2012). Employee's word of mouth helps to create a sincere employer brand as they can vouch for the organisations' work once they are satisfied with it (Rampl & Kenning, 2012). Sincerity is also perceived to relate to organisational attractiveness only for people that have high conscientiousness (Schreurs, Druart, Proost, & De witte, 2009). This indicates that the effect of sincerity is stronger on people with high conscientiousness since they are more attentive and respond correspondingly (Schreurs et al., 2009).

Excitement and ruggedness are perceived to have a greater effect on brand than on brand trust (Rampl et al., 2012). Excitement is effective when identifying emotions associated with a specific employer brand (Rampl et al., 2012). Hoye and Saks (2011) also observed differences in terms of attraction to symbolic dimensions. In their study, potential applicants and companions differed substantially in their attraction to excitement and ruggedness. These two dimensions represent symbolic trait inferences that are more subjective and critically relate to people's own personality and identity than to the instrumental dimension (Hoye & Saks 2011; Lievens & Highhouse 2003). It can thus be concluded that applicants are attracted differently to organisation's personality and this depends on their personality (Schreurs et al., 2009; Hoye & Saks 2011).

Symbolic image traits define incremental variance as the attractiveness of perceptions of potential employees above instrumental attributes ( Hoye & Saks, 2011; Lievens & Hoye 2007; Hoye et al., 2013). It is worth noting that perceptions of people close to potential applicants influence applicants' perceptions of organisation attractiveness (Hoye & Saks, 2011). Organisations are distinguished from each other based on symbolic image dimensions than on instrumental dimensions (Hoye et al., 2013).

Generally, employees view an organisation as attractive when the organisation as a whole is perceived successful, when they value organisations' products attributes and when they interpret the organisations' image as attractive (Maxwell & Knox, 2009).To be successful, an employer brand has to be consistent with the realities of the organisation, be attractive to the target audience and stand out among its competitors (Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

Usually, job seekers are attracted to a firm based on the belief that the firm has the attributes they desire most and how important they view these attributes (Backhaus et al., 2004). Figure 2.5 and 2.6 summarises the instrumental and symbolic framework.
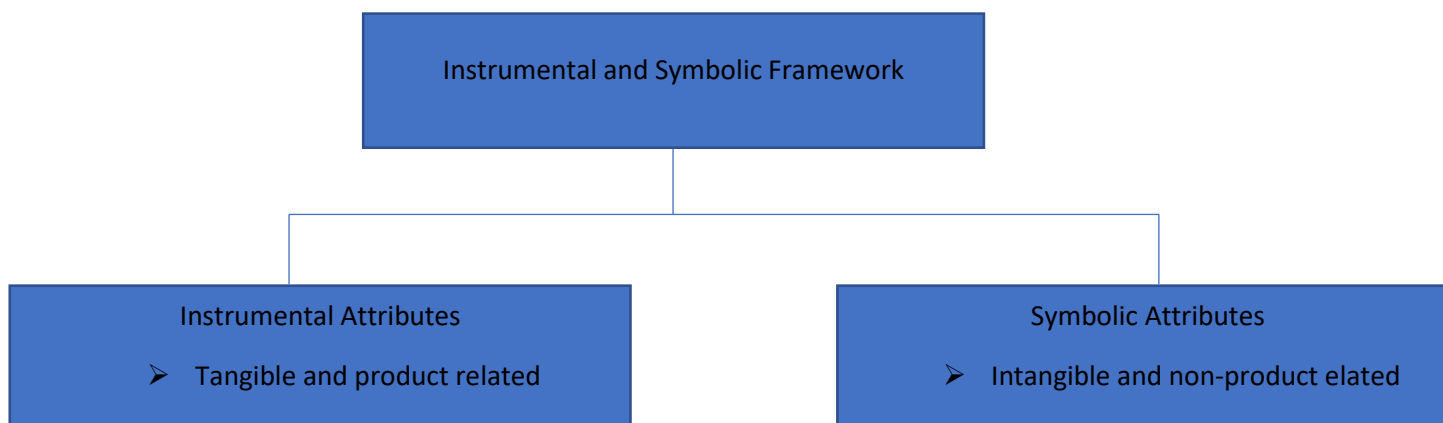


*Figure 2. 5: Instrumental and Symbolic framework   source:  source: own based from Lievens & Highhouse (2003)*
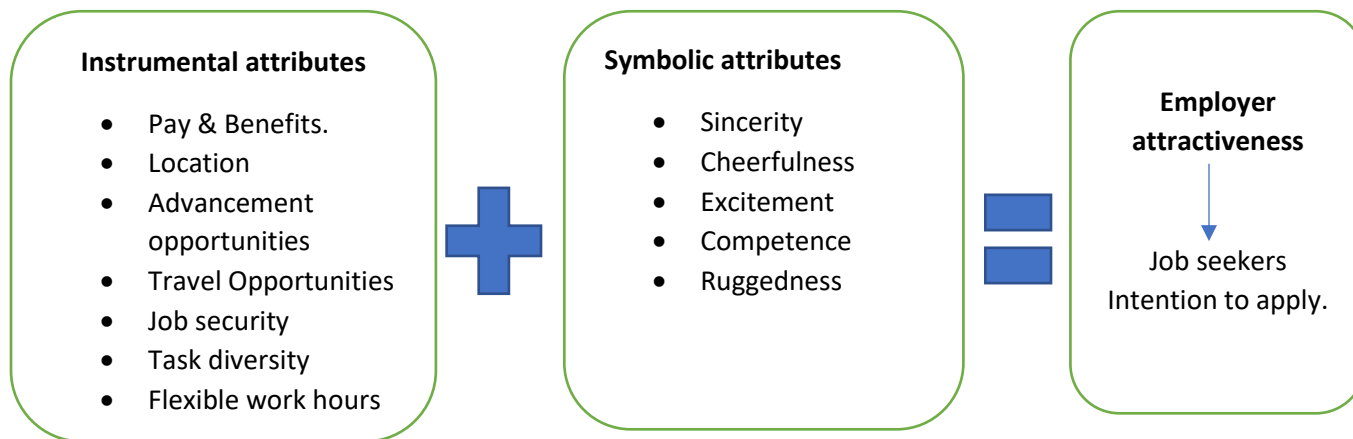
*Figure 2. 6: : Instrumental and Symbolic framework    source: own based from Lievens & Highhouse (2003)*

Some scholars have applied this instrumental and symbolic framework to determine attributes that are mostly considered by job seekers in selecting a suitable employer. Some discovered gender differences in employment attribute preferences. Bejtkovsky and  Copca ( 2020) discovered gender differences in choice of attributes in job search and selection for only employee benefits, the rest indicated no gender differences. Browne (1997) and Madhavkumar (2016) did not find any differences in the preferences of job attributes among men and women. Chow (2002) observed similarities in how men and women value advancement, compensation and foreign work opportunities. Konrad, Corrigal and  Ritchie (2000) discovered differences in job security and supervisor's nationality. The differences were however so small. These authors noted females to value job security, prestige, nice coworkers and a wonderful work environment. On the other hand, males considered nationality of the supervisor and responsibilities associated with the job to be more important (Konrad et al.,2000). Generally, the impact of gender on job attributes is weak (Chow, 2002)

Dewi, Tikson, Hamid and Mardiana (2018), discovered that *male respondents* were specifically attracted to *instrumental attributes*. These instrumental attributes included good advancement opportunities within the organisation, the ability to make use of what was learnt from the university, gaining experience, acknowledgement, and appreciation by the employer. *Female respondents,* on the other hand, were attracted to *symbolic attributes* which consists of a favourable working environment where employees are respected, sincere, helpful, encouraging and have a wonderful connection. Basing on this information, the first hypothesis is developed. The hypothesis states that:

*Hypothesis 1: There are gender differences in employment attribute preference.*

Job seekers put more value on instrumental variables (i.e., career growth opportunities and work Life Balance) than symbolic variables (i.e., Corporate Social Responsibility reputation) (Kumari & Gordhan, 2018). Arachchige & Robertson (2011) also discovered that instrumental attributes were more significant to the student group even though the students preferred both instrumental and symbolic. Similarly, Kaur & Shah (2020) found instrumental characteristics like job security and task diversity to be more substantial for prospective employees in the armed forces. Other factors that attract employees include lack of monotony and exposure to new tasks, location, roles, and responsibilities (Kaur & Shah, 2020).

Ruey (2015) discovered that instrumental attributes like career growth opportunities and competitive compensation package were highly appealing attributes to graduating students. Organisations with instrumental attributes like more social activities, advancement opportunities, and less structure are also desirable to prospective employees (Hoye & Saks, 2011). Symbolic attributes particularly sincerity; competence and excitement were attractive to graduating students (Ruey, 2015). Potential applicants are also drawn to organisations that are identified as more sincere, more exciting, more prestigious, and less rugged (Hoye & Saks, 2011). Individuals are not only attracted to instrumental characteristics but also to symbolic characteristics (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). These shape individuals' perceptions towards employer branding (Lievens & Hoye 2007; Schreurs et al., 2009; Hoye & Saks 2011; Hoye et al., 2013).

## 2.5 **Other general Attributes used by employees in employer selection**.

Some researchers have conducted studies to identify the general attributes employees look for in an employer. Some have categorised these in groups, and some have not. According to Randstard (2020), the most sought factors by prospective employees in an employer include: work-life balance, great work environment, compensation package, workplace safety, career advancement opportunities, flexible contractual forms, good training, thrilling content, and location (Randstard, 2020). This report further highlighted that the top five drivers from 2018-2020 include: attractive compensation package, work-life balance, job security, nice work environment and Career advancement. Salary and benefits were always the topmost preferred attribute (Randstard, 2020).

Krithika (2020) identified the following as significant attributes in attracting new talents: training opportunities, compensation package, positive employer attitude, employer knowledge about sales, appreciation and rewards, nice working environment, career advancement opportunities and job security. Zaharee, Lipkie, Mehlman and Neyln (2018) also found competitive compensation and benefits packages, flexible work hours, work-life balance and career development programs as attractive to technical specialists. On the other hand, Purusottama (2019) found compensation and benefits to be no longer the primary consideration for employees' decision to join an organisation.

Market value and social value determine employee attraction (Ahmad, Naved Khan, & Haquel, 2019). Kumari, Mili and Bhaghat (2020) also emphasised that social value, economic and financial benefits are essential pillars in developing an employer brand. They further stressed that value proposition is related to the formation of employer branding and it plays a role in attracting potential candidates.

Company characteristics like corporate social responsibility, development, trust, and tradition are also valuable qualities in influencing employer branding (Brusch, Brusch, & Therese, 2018). Social components, job security, exciting work content, and training offerings matter too (Brusch et al., 2018).

Kumari and Gordhan (2018), Sharma and Prasad (2018) and Zaharee et al.,( 2018) discovered that work-life balance, corporate social responsibility and career advancement opportunities positively influence employer attractiveness. In addition to these, Sharma and Prasad (2018) found the following to positively contribute to the candidate's intention to join the organisation: company's status, beliefs, acceptance, and belongingness. Zaharee et al.( 2018) stressed that millennia's have unique needs and wants.

Kumari and Gordhan (2018) highlighted that career growth opportunities had the most significant effect on both employer attractiveness and the job pursuit intention of the job seekers. On the other hand, work-life balance and corporate social responsibility had the least effect. The study also mentioned that the effect of corporate social responsibilities on employer attractiveness depended on the availability of career growth opportunities (Kumari & Gordhan, 2018) . Menke, Nuesch and Kroll (2018) concluded that flexible work schedules, teleworking and having time off have a positive relationship with organisational attractiveness.

Kucherov and Zavyalova (2012) categorised employer brand attributes into four categories, namely: *Economic attributes* (compensation package, rewards and benefits, job security and work schedule), *psychological* (solid corporate culture, interpersonal relations in the organisation, team work, objective work assessment), *functional* (content of work, training and advancement opportunities) and *Organisational* attributes (leadership in market section, company's history, consumer brand's reputation, top-managers reputation and management style).

Kucherov et al. (2012) defined *Economic attributes* as those that have an influence on employee's welfare status for example compensation benefits. *Psychological attributes* relate to the feelings that come with recognition in the organisation. *Functional attributes* are associated with the type of work, its work environment and advancement opportunities. *Organisational attributes* cover the opinions stakeholders and other groups in the external market have about the company (Kucherov et al., 2012). From these studies, it is noted that potential employees differ in terms of their preference and how they value the different job attributes.

## 2.6  **Job seeker's Intention to Apply**.

Several factors influence job seekers' intent to apply for a job. To begin with, the way messages are outlined plays a great role in influencing candidates' intent to apply (Asseburg, Homberg, & Vogel, 2018). Asseburg et al. (2018) categorised the framing of the recruitment messages into inspirational and rational framings. Inspirational framings are more effective in attracting candidates compared to rational framings (Asseburg et al., 2018). These inspirational messages mainly express symbolic attributes than instrumental characteristics (Asseburg et al., 2018).

It is noted that recruitment messages facilitated by perceived job and person organisation fit increases the intention of job seekers to apply for the job, and this depends on how the message is presented (Asseburg et al., 2018). Another factor that influences job seekers' intent to apply for a job is the applicant's perception of intrinsic and extrinsic employment attributes (Asseburg et al., 2018).

Firms use recruitment strategies to attract job seekers. There are two recruitment strategies that are used by firms to attract job seekers (Collins & Han, 2004). These are low involvement recruitment practices and high involvement recruitment practices (Collins & Han, 2004). Low involvement practices are useful for developing initial awareness as these expose job seekers to a company; they are effective when used by firms that job seekers are unaware of (Collins & Han 2004). High involvement recruitment practices affect recruitment outcomes by providing information related to the job and the company to prospective employees (Collins & Han, 2004). Both low and high involvement recruitment practices directly affect organisation level recruitment outcomes (Collins & Han, 2004).

Early recruitment activities affect a candidate's intent to apply for a job. These activities include publicity, sponsorships, word-of-mouth endorsements, and advertising (Asseburg, Hattke, Hensel, Homberg, & Vogel, 2020). They are indirectly related to intentions and decisions for the company and the perceived job attributes (Asseburg et al., 2020). Collins (2006) provides that companies' early recruitment practices are related to the dimensions of employer knowledge, and these are then related to the intentions and decisions made by applicants.

Employer brand image becomes stronger when firms combine publications and early recruitment-related activities (Collins & Stevens, 2002). Exposure to early recruitment activities is positively related to prospective employees attitudes and perceived attributes (Collins & Stevens, 2002). Advertising significantly relates to students' perceptions about employer attributes (Collins & Stevens, 2002). Making information available to students and job seekers at large can therefore help the candidates in forming positive impressions about the company. This information can be made available through job postings and many more (Collins & Stevens, 2002).

Collins and Han (2004) pointed that corporate advertising has a significant effect on applicant pool quality and quantity. It affects organisation recruitment outcomes by increasing job seekers' awareness of an organisation as an employer and creating positive beliefs about the company (Collins & Han, 2004). Similarly, Edwards (2010) reveals that general advertising campaigns about an organisation make employer branding activities effective as they boost awareness and general knowledge of the organisation for prospective and current employees. However, portraying a picture of an organisation than what it is causes unrealistic expectations among new employees, this leads to lack of satisfaction among employees (Edwards, 2010).

Normally, employee's attitudes about an organisation predict their intention to apply for a job (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009). Job attributes like the empowerment one gets in the job and location affects applicants' intentions to apply for the job (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009). Early in the job search, prospective employees rely mostly on information and appraisals from other people to evaluate job opportunities (Collins & Stevens, 2002).This also affects their perceptions of an employer (Collins & Stevens, 2002) .If these prospective employees have a positive impression of the company, then they are likely to have an intention to join the company (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009). Favourable impression and high regards for the company are thus great predictors of job seekers' intentions as well as their behaviour (Agrawal et al., 2009).

Perception about learning, advancement, social and cultural factors is not substantial predictors of application intentions (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009). Those with prior work experience are likely to apply to companies they believe will offer them challenging assignments, great responsibility, and autonomy (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009) Prior work experience plays a moderating role and interacts with the responsibility associated with the role and empowerment aspect associated with the job (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009)

Brand equity theory provides insights to help employers position themselves as an employer of choice among appropriate candidates (Chapman et al., 2005). Applicant attraction outcomes can be predicted by characteristics of an organisation, recruiter's behaviours, opinions of hiring process and recruitment anticipations (Chapman, Uggersley, Carroll, Piasentin, & Jones, 2005). How the recruitment is conducted is important, while who does the recruiting is not relevant (Chapman et al., 2005.

## 2.7  Employer Reputation

The reputation of an employer plays a huge role in attracting candidates. Collins and Han (2004)  provide that organisational advertising and the reputation of a firm plays a role in affecting organisation's recruitment outcomes. These two have a positive effect on job seekers' awareness (Collins & Han, 2004). They also influence the effectiveness of early recruitment practices (Collins & Han, 2004) .

Job seekers' perceptions about employer opportunity are affected by personal development opportunities and a company's culture (Cable & Graham, 2000). Familiarity with an employer helps predict employee's beliefs (Cable & Graham, 2000). According to Social identity theory, job seekers use organisational attributes that are public and important in personal identities when they evaluate the employer's reputation (Cable & Graham, 2000).

People prefer to work with organisations that have a positive image or reputation and are highly prestigious (Khan, 2017). None prefer to work for those with a negative image or reputation (Khan, 2017).  Cable and Graham (2000) stated that job

seekers are unwilling to be associated with firms that do not produce prestigious products and services. Organisations with a good reputation, good brand and strong market name attract talented candidates (Khan, 2017).

Employer's reputation is predicted by the industries they operate in (Cable & Graham, 2000). An organisation's reputation creates brand equity that generates the perception of the organisations' prestige (Khan, 2017). It is therefore seen that job seekers' decision to accept a job offer is associated with an organisation's reputation (Khan, 2017).

## 2.8 Channels of Employer Branding

Potential employees use different channels to learn about the employer's reputation and develop an interest to work in the company. Randstard (2020) pointed the following as the top five channels employees use to find the next job, ranked from the highest to the lowest, namely: job portals, personal connections (referrals), recruiters (agency head-hunters), Google and Company career site. Indeed.com, jobs.com, monster and recruit.net were identified as the top four job portals (Randstard, 2020). Prospective employees find it easy to access information about the company through social networking sites (Priyadarshni, Kumar, & Jha, 2017). According to Manjunath and Chaitra (2019), job applicants consider digital platforms as one of the channels for job search. They form perceptions about employer brand through their analysis on the outlook on their company website and its presence on social networking site (Manjunath & Chaitra, 2019).

From the company's perspective, Stuss and Agnieszka (2017) discovered that companies fully utilise social media such as LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as they believe that these are the most important communication channels. Koch, Gerber and De Klerk (2018) ranked LinkedIn as the most used platform for recruitment in South Africa while Twitter and Facebook were the least utilised platforms.

Companies have career job pages and participate in job fairs as a means of communication to prospective applicants (Stuss & Agnieszka, 2017). Kargas and Tsokos (2020) discovered that companies use their websites and LinkedIn as a means of attracting candidates. Facebook was observed to be mostly used by Telecom Operators to attract Millennials' who mostly use Facebook. Micik and Micudova (2018) concluded that companies utilise both career websites and social media sites to attract Millennials. Career websites were noted to be utilised more than social media sites (Micik & Micudova, 2018). Organisations also use graduate programs to attract young professionals (Kargas & Tsokos, 2020).

Traditional methods of employer branding execution through corporate websites and forums or career days have been outweighed by Facebook, LinkedIn, and more focused programs targeting different groups of people (Kargas & Tsokos, 2020). Carpentiera, Hoyea and Weijtersb (2019) found that potential applicants use social media pages' communication characteristics to deduce the personality of the employer brand which later positively affects organisational attractiveness.

In terms of the weight given to information advertised on these channels, Eger et al. (2018) discovered that candidates who viewed information about job offers on organisation´s recruitment websites rated the organisation´s profiles on social sites important, on the other hand, respondents using information on organisation´s social media profiles did not find the organisation´s profiles on social sites important. It was therefore concluded that social media sites might not be that crucial in developing employer reputation (Eger et al., 2018). Job-seekers value advertisements presented through blogs which do not have any evident connection with the firm as information posted through such platforms are perceived as trustworthy by jobseekers (Banerjee & Gupta, 2019).

Some authors have explored on the gender differences in the preference of platforms in job search. It has been noted that men and women differ in their choice of employer branding communication channel. Huang, (2017) concluded that women and men use different platforms for job search. The author also provided that these two genders use different sources to evaluate a prospective employer. It was indicated that men mostly use traditional job boards in their job search while females mostly use social media sites to search for   jobs. Men were also observed to mostly prefer usage of LinkedIn and females mostly rely on family and friends opinions. Anderson (2015) also carried out a study on gender differences in channel usage. The author concluded that there are there are gender differences on the use of different platforms by men and women. Basing on this information, the second hypothesis will be:

*Hypothesis 2: There are differences in potential employee's preference of employer branding communication channels*

## 2.9  Summary of the Literature review

The aim of the literature review was to find out what has already been done in this area of interest and to discover the results in the other studies. This helped us to come up with the hypotheses that were used to guide this study as a reference point. The literature review focused on understanding the concept of employer branding, dimensions of employer branding attractiveness, the employer knowledge model in relation to employee perceptions, the instrumental and symbolic framework, job seekers' intention to apply, the common preferred attributes by prospective employees, employer reputation and channels in employer branding.

# 3 . Methods

## 3.1 Introduction

This chapter aims at presenting information concerning the methods chosen for this study and the justification of the choices. It points out on the research objective, study population, the research approach adopted, instruments used for data collection, the data analysis, reliability, validity, and ethical considerations. A summary of the chapter is presented at the end.

## 3.2 Research objective

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of employer branding in talent attraction in Malawi through investigating the attributes considered attractive by employees in the selection of prospective employers and the channels they use to identify these employers. The main research question that guided the study was: *which attributes do employees consider attractive when selecting a prospective employer*?

## 3.3 Research Approach

A survey approach was adopted. This approach seemed to be the best choice as it provided an easy and effective way to collect data in Malawi through online platforms since the researcher was in Italy. This also provided a means of exploring more on this topic. Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill (2009) provide that data collected using a survey can be used to suggest possible reasons for relationships between variables and to produce models of these relationships. It is thus mostly used for exploratory and descriptive research.

The study also adopted a quantitative approach for data analysis. The approach refers to data collection (for example, a questionnaire) or data analysis techniques (for example, graphs and statistics) that use numerical data (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). This approach was adopted as it appeared to be the best means of testing the developed hypotheses from existing theories.

## 3.4 Target Population

The target population for this study were Malawian nationals with different education levels and ages. It was left open in terms of education levels and age categories to see the effect these might have on the preferences.

## 3.5 Sampling method and Sample Size

The questionnaires were randomly distributed online to Malawian nationals. Random sampling technique involves the selection of samples at random from the sampling frame using either random number tables from a computer or an online random number generator (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). 193 responses were collected from which some of the responses were incomplete. As such, after data cleaning, only 162 valid data responses were left.

## 3.6 Research instrument and Measures

As mentioned earlier on, an online survey was used. The questionnaire was developed via Qualtrics online platform and links were sent to randomly selected participants. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions aimed at collecting information about their demographics, attributes of a company they consider attractive and the channels they use to identify a potential employer. The closed questions were chosen as they make it easy to compare responses, enhance consistency and ease clarification of the questions through the responses.

To investigate on the attributes considered by prospective employees when selecting an employer, the study adopted measures from Lievens et al. (2005) which consists of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" on instrumental and symbolic dimensions. This scale has mostly been used to measure the attractiveness of the army through analysis of prospective employees' interest to join the armed forces. In this study, however, this scale was used to measure candidate's intent to join an organisation through analysing their attraction to a list of attributes. The scale was therefore modified to suit the study's target population. The statement used was "*I would be interested in applying for a job in a company that offers …*" Then a list of the attributes or items the company might offer followed for the respondents to choose from. These measures were adopted because they have already been used by various international studies and show a good reliability. Lievens et al. (2007) also used a similar scale. The scale was modified by adding one item on the list, adopted from Berthon et al. (2005).

Table 3.1 shows a list of the items that were adopted for the study.

| Construct | Variable (item) |
|---|---|
| *Intention to Apply*<br><br>**Instrumental Attributes** | *I would be interested to apply for a job in a company that….* |
| Social Team Activities | provides the opportunity to work in teams and to enjoy a group atmosphere |

| | |
|---|---|
| Structure | has a well-defined structure |
| Advancement | provides diverse career growth opportunities and or opportunity for higher positions |
| Travel Opportunities | offers the possibility to travel a lot and to have a lot of foreign tasks |
| Pay and Benefits | offers likelihood of making a lot of money (high salary) |
| Job Security | grants job security (opportunity to hold a permanent position ) |
| Task Diversity | Offers the opportunity to perform a variety of jobs, the opportunity to choose from a assorted range of jobs |
| Flexible working hours | Gives flexible working provisions |
| Location | The company's location is in close proximity to my home |
| **Symbolic Attributes** | |
| Sincerity (honest, sincere) | a workplace that is open, friendly, sincere and where honesty is stressed |
| Cheerfulness | has a cheerful and friendly environment |
| Excitement (Daring, Exciting) | has a daring and thrilling environment (a workplace where innovative and creative thinking are encouraged) |
| Competence (Intelligence, Technical) | an office environment where competencies are appreciated ) |
| Prestige (High status) | an office environment where the values of being fashionable, elegant or having appealing style are cherished |
| Ruggedness (Tough, Rugged) | Is tough, rugged, masculine (a workplace which is dynamic, performance-driven and result oriented) |

*Table 3. 1: Instrumental and Symbolic attributes scale source:  Lievens and Hoye, (2005)*

The item added and adopted from Berthon et al. (2005) was high-quality products and services.

For the channels, it was not easy to find an already existing scale. The study adopted a list of items from Randstard (2019) and Universum (2020) and then used a 5point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree".  The

statement phrased was "*I mostly use the following channels to identify a potential employer*". The list of items to choose from included: Company's website, LinkedIn, Facebook, opinions of family and friends, general articles on the internet, recruiters (agencies or head-hunters), job boards, physical presence, television commercials, radio, print advertising(newspapers/magazines), banners and billboards, events with employers, blogs, twitter, search engines and career guidance websites.

On the demographic part, the following items were included: age, gender, and education level and sector preferences. These were included because contribute to variations in respondent's preference in the past studies.

## 3.7  Data Analysis

The research used SPSS statistical tool to analyse the data. Cronbach alpha was used to test the consistency of the measurement scale. To present the results, descriptive statistics ranging from mean, standard deviation to frequency distribution were utilised. For hypothesis testing, independent samples to test was applied. For group differences testing, Anova test was used.

## 3.8  Quality of research

To guarantee the credibility of data, the study used reliability and validity. Reliability refers to the degree to which data collection or analysis techniques adopted generate coherent findings (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). Validity is concerned with the ability of the method to measure what it was supposed to measure (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009). To ensure reliability, measures that have proved to be reliable in other studies were adopted. These measures were also based on reliable theories to ensure consistency of results. To achieve validity, the results were assessed to see if they were aligned with the established theories and with similar measures.

## 3.9  Ethical Considerations

Participants were given a chance to participate in the survey willingly. As such, the survey only continued if they gave their consent to participate, and if they did not consent, the survey automatically ended. The participants were assured that privacy and confidentiality would be kept, and the respondents would be treated as anonymous. They were also informed that the research was done solely for academic purposes.

## 3.10 Summary of methodology

This chapter highlighted the methods that were adopted in the collection and analysis of the data. A survey approach was adopted to collect data among Malawian nationals who were randomly sampled. A quantitative approach was utilised for data analysis. Reliability, validity, and ethical consideration were used.

# 4 . Results

## 4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the study findings.

## 4.2 Sample characteristics

It was in the interest of this study to find out the gender, age, and level of education of the respondents.

### 4.2.1 Age:

The respondents' age ranged from 18 to 41+. Most of the respondents were between 24-29 years of age with a percentage of 49.4% (n=80), followed by 30-35 years of age category with 35.8 % (n=58). There was a tie for respondents of 18-23 years of age and those of 36-40 years as both had 6.2% (n=10). Only few respondents were 41 years and above; this had a percentage of 2.5%. The age difference is believed to contribute to differences in candidate's preference of attributes and their intention to apply for a job. Different generations are thus likely to have different preferences. This study did not go into further details of analysing these generation differences in line with employer attribute preferences. Figure 4.1 shows the respondent's ages.
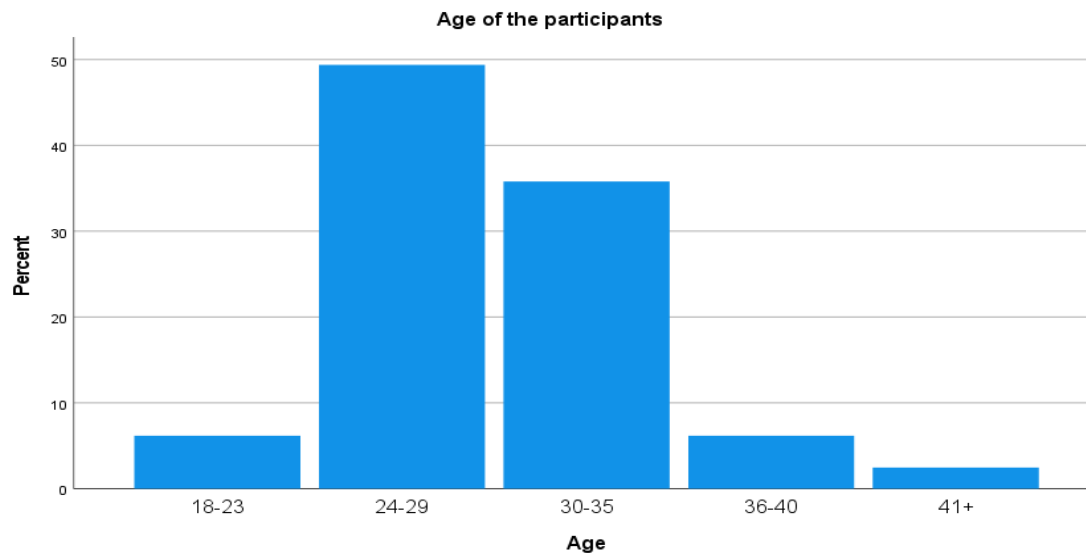


*Figure 4. 1: Age of the participants*

### 4.2.2 Gender

Regarding the Gender distribution of the respondents, 55.6% were Males (n=90), and 43.8% represented females (n=71). One respondent did not specify their gender. It can therefore be concluded that most of the respondents were Males. Gender is believed to affect a candidate's choice of attributes which in turn affects their interest in joining an organisation. It was thus relevant to understand the gender dimensions in this study.

### 4.2.3 Education

Another interesting characteristic of the respondents to look at is their education level. It was discovered that most of the respondents had reached an undergraduate degree level with a representation of 65.4% (n=106), 22.8% (n=37) had master's degree, 6.2% were professional diploma holders, 2.5% (n=4) had a professional certificate, 1.9% (n=3) had high school diplomas' and only 1.2% (n=2) of the respondents were PhD holders.

### 4.2.4 Sector preference

Another area this study looked at is the sector preference of the respondents. It was discovered that the respondents were mostly interested in the private sector with a presentation of 68.5% (n=111), only 30.9% (n=50) were interested in the public sector, and one respondent did not indicate their preference.

## 4.3 Reliability and Internal Consistency

To evaluate the reliability and the consistency of the variables in the scale, Cronbach's alpha test on SPSS was used. Two tests were done using the instrumental and symbolic scales, the first one among 10 items which yielded Cronbach's alpha of .886 and another one was done among 6 items which yielded cronbach's alpha of .930. Both of these values are good and they indicate a great reliability of the scales used in the study.

| Cronbach's Alpha | No. of Items |
|---:|---:|
| .886 | 10 |

| Cronbach's Alpha | No. of Items |
|---:|---:|
| .930 | 6 |

## 4.4  Symbolic and Instrumental Attributes

The study focused on understanding the respondents' preferences in terms of instrumental and symbolic attributes of an organisation. It specifically intended to understand the attributes that would attract prospective employees in applying for a job in an organisation. The respondent's preference of instrumental attributes was in this order (from highest to lowest): advancement (career growth opportunities), quality of products and services, job security, structure, flexible work arrangements, Pay and benefits, task diversity, travel opportunities, Social/teams' activities, and location. Table 4.1 illustrates these statistical descriptions:

|  | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Advancement (career growth opportunities) | 1 | 5 | 4.68 | .974 |
| Quality of products and services | 1 | 5 | 4.54 | .975 |
| Job security | 1 | 5 | 4.49 | 1.069 |
| A well-defined structure | 1 | 5 | 4.48 | 1.130 |
| Flexible work arrangements | 1 | 5 | 4.44 | 1.057 |
| Pay and benefits | 1 | 5 | 4.42 | 1.064 |
| Task Diversity | 1 | 5 | 4.28 | 1.026 |
| Travel opportunities | 1 | 5 | 4.26 | 1.034 |
| Social / teams' activities | 1 | 5 | 4.24 | 1.189 |
| Location | 1 | 5 | 3.62 | 1.332 |

*Table 4. 1:Instrumental attributes preference results*

In this study, therefore, career growth opportunities (advancement) topped the list as most of the respondents preferred this benefit. This finding confirms results by Torricelli (2002), which indicated career growth opportunity as one of the most significant attributes besides a challenging work environment. It also supports findings by Ruey (2015), who concluded that instrumental attributes like career opportunity and competitive financial benefits were the most attractive attributes considered by graduating students. Kumari and Gordan (2018) also stressed that career growth opportunities greatly influenced employer attractiveness among job seekers.

Apart from career growth opportunities, quality of products, job security, structure and flexible work arrangements were among the top five attributes. Most of these attributes correspond to the findings in other studies. For instance, in Randstard (2020)'s study, job security, work-life balance and career progression were among the top five attributes. Similarly, Zaharee, Lipkie, Mehlman and Neyln (2018) also found flexible work hours and career development programs as attractive to technical professionals of all generations and professional levels.

Even though many studies found compensation and benefits to be among the top list of the attributes that prospective employees find attractive, this study found this to be attractive among prospective employees but not among the top list; it was the sixth preferred attribute out of ten instrumental attributes. Purusottama (2019) also found compensation and benefits not to be the main attribute influencing prospective employees to join an organisation. Location was the last preferred attribute by the respondents; this means respondents rarely consider location as an important factor in their search for a prospective employer. This also supports findings by Agrawal and Swaroop (2009), who pointed out that compensation and location are important, but they are less powerful in their ability to predict applicants' intention.

In terms of the symbolic attributes, the respondent's preference of the attributes was in this order: competence, sincerity, cheerfulness, ruggedness, excitement, and prestige. This meant competence was the most preferred attribute, and an organisation's prestige was the least preferred attribute. Table 4.2 illustrates these statistical descriptions:

| | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Competency | 1 | 5 | 4.67 | .929 |
| Sincerity | 1 | 5 | 4.65 | .955 |
| Cheerfulness | 1 | 5 | 4.64 | .957 |
| Ruggedness | 1 | 5 | 4.55 | 1.088 |
| Excitement | 1 | 5 | 4.47 | 1.010 |
| Prestige | 1 | 5 | 4.13 | 1.091 |

*Table 4. 2: Symbolic attributes preference results*

The study's research findings are matched with findings by Ruey (2015), who found sincerity, competence, and excitement as the most attractive among prospective employees. This study's findings also support results by Hoye and Saks (2011), who indicated sincerity, excitement, prestige, and ruggedness as attributes that influence employer's attractiveness among prospective employees.

## 4.5 Channels

The study also investigated the channels that are commonly used by the respondents to identify a prospective employer.

It can be concluded based on this data presented in the table 4.3 below that Malawians mostly use company's websites and job boards in their job search. Television and Radio are the least used communication channels. Organisations should therefore work more on utilising company's websites and job boards (LinkedIn, Indeed and Monster) channels in their employer branding activities to reach a greater audience.

The study's findings confirm findings by Randstard (2020), who also found job boards to be among the top commonly used channels in a job search. Similarly, Koch, Gerber and De Klerk (2018) found LinkedIn to be the most used platform in South Africa.

|  | Minimum | Maximum | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Company's website | 1 | 5 | 4.06 | 1.110 |
| Job boards (LinkedIn, Indeed, monster etc.) | 1 | 5 | 4.06 | 1.119 |
| Print advertising (Newspapers/Magazines) | 1 | 5 | 4.01 | 1.269 |
| Social media sites (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram etc.) | 1 | 5 | 3.91 | 1.214 |
| General Articles on the internet | 1 | 5 | 3.84 | 1.113 |
| Opinions of Friends and Family | 1 | 5 | 3.68 | 1.188 |
| Career guidance websites | 1 | 5 | 3.50 | 1.344 |
| Recruiters (Agencies or head-hunters) | 1 | 5 | 3.47 | 1.342 |
| Events with Employers | 1 | 5 | 3.45 | 1.349 |
| Blogs | 1 | 5 | 3.26 | 1.285 |
| Banners and Billboards | 1 | 5 | 3.14 | 1.366 |
| Television commercials | 1 | 5 | 3.04 | 1.280 |
| Radio | 1 | 5 | 2.95 | 1.328 |

*Table 4. 3: Commonly used channels for employer identification*

## 4.6 Hypothesis testing and results

This study developed two hypotheses which have been tested using the independent samples t test. Each hypothesis will be explained in detail. The first hypothesis was that *there are gender differences in employment attribute preferences*. For easy and effective analysis, instrumental and symbolic attributes were analysed separately. Firstly, the results that will be presented will be those of the instrumental attributes and later those for the symbolic attributes. Tables 4.4 and 4.5 illustrate the results for gender difference test on instrumental job attributes.

| Group Statistics | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Gender | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
| Instrumental1 | Male | 90 | 4.3223 | 0.71319 | 0.07518 |
| | Female | 71 | 4.2483 | 1.05299 | 0.12497 |

*Table 4. 4: Group statistics on instrumental attributes*

**Independent Samples Test**

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | F | Sig. | T | df | Significance | | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | Lower | Upper |
| | | | | | | One-Sided p | Two-Sided p | | | | |
| Instrumental1 | Equal variances assumed | 5.263 | 0.023 | 0.53 | 159 | 0.298 | 0.597 | 0.07401 | 0.13954 | -0.20159 | 0.34961 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | 0.507 | 117.708 | 0.306 | 0.613 | 0.07401 | 0.14584 | -0.21479 | 0.36281 |

*Table 4. 5: Independent samples test on instrumental attributes*

The t test results for gender differences on instrumental attributes indicated no significant difference between the two means except for location which showed difference in preference between the two genders. A summary of the results for

all instrumental attributes is presented in table 4.3 and 4.4. The mean value between the two genders was 0.07, which was a very small difference. The Levene's test for equal variance indicated a P value of .023 which signaled that equal variances were not assumed. The two sided P value was .613 which is greater than .05. This means there is no significant difference between gender and the rest of the attributes. However, location showed significant differences in between the two genders as it had a significant value of .027 which implied that equal variances were not assumed, it had a P value of .041 which is less than the P value of .05. It can thus be concluded that the preference of males and females only differed on location and not on the rest of the instrumental attributes.

**Group Statistics**

| | Gender | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Symbolic1 | Male | 90 | 4.5759 | 0.70938 | 0.07478 |
| | Female | 71 | 4.3878 | 1.1402 | 0.13532 |

*Table 4. 6: Group statistics on symbolic attributes*

| | | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | Significance | | | |
| | | F | Sig. | T | df | | | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference |
| | | | | | | One-Sided p | Two-Sided p | | |
| Symbolic1 | Equal variances assumed | 5.966 | 0.016 | 1.283 | 159 | 0.101 | 0.202 | 0.18813 | 0.14669 |
| | Equal variances not assumed | | | 1.217 | 111.127 | 0.113 | 0.226 | 0.18813 | 0.1546 |

*Table 4. 7: Independent samples test on symbolic attributes*

The results for gender differences on symbolic attributes revealed no significant difference between the two genders. Table 4.5 and 4.6 presents the results. The mean difference between the two genders was 0.19; the significance value was .016 which is less than .05. This showed that there is variability between the two conditions. The two sided P value was .226 which is greater than .05. This proves that there are no significant differences in the mean of the two values. It can thus be stated that there are no significant gender differences in employee preference of symbolic attributes. Considering these

results and those of the instrumental attributes stated above, it can be concluded that gender differences were not observed in all attributes except for location. The hypothesis was thus partially supported. This supports a study conducted by Chew and Teo (1993) who indicated that the impact of gender differences on job attributes is weak. Similarly, Chow(2002) observed similarities in choice of attributes between the two genders in other attributes and discovered gender differences in choice of the other attributes .

The second hypothesis was that *there are gender differences in channel preferences*. An independent t test was carried out and the results are presented in table 4.7 and 4.8.

**Group Statistics**

|  | Gender | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Channels | Male | 90 | 3.6122 | 0.66819 | 0.07043 |
|  | Female | 68 | 3.4994 | 0.79184 | 0.09602 |

*Table 4. 8: Group statistics on Gender differences in channel preferences*

**Independent Samples Test**

|  |  | Levene's Test for Equality of Variances | | t-test for Equality of Means | | t-test for Equality of Means | | | | t-test for Equality of Means | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | | | | | Significance | | Mean Difference | Std. Error Difference | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | |
|  |  | F | Sig. | T | df | One-Sided p | Two-Sided p | | | Lower | Upper |
| Channels | Equal variances assumed | 2.54 | 0.113 | 0.97 | 156 | 0.167 | 0.334 | 0.11278 | 0.11631 | -0.11697 | 0.34253 |
|  | Equal variances not assumed | | | 0.947 | 130.132 | 0.173 | 0.345 | 0.11278 | 0.11909 | -0.12282 | 0.34837 |

*Table 4. 9: Independent sample t test on gender differences in channel preferences*

The T test for gender differences in channels preferences indicated no significant differences between the categories except for print advertising which showed difference in channel preference's between the two genders. The results for all the channels are presented in table 4.7 and 4.8. The mean value between the two genders was 0.07. The Levene's significance value of .113 indicates that equal variances were assumed between the two conditions. The two-sided p value is .334 which is greater than .05. This means that there is no substantial difference between the mean values. This suggests that there are no gender differences in the channel preferences. However, after conducting individual channel tests, significant gender differences were noted in the preference of printed advertising channel which had a two-sided p value of .023 and a mean difference of 0.486. The hypothesis was therefore partially supported. This study partly support findings by Anderson (2015) and Huang (2017) who indicated differences between men and women in the preference of employer branding communication channels.

## Group differences

### Age group differences

The study analysed group differences in age and education groups in the choice of job attributes. An Anova test was used. The results for age groups are presented in table 4.9 to 4.10.

| ANOVA | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Instrumental | | | | | |
| | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Between Groups | 2.82 | 4 | 0.705 | 0.918 | 0.455 |
| Within Groups | 120.639 | 157 | 0.768 | | |
| Total | 123.459 | 161 | | | |

*Table 4. 10: Anova table for age group differences on Instrumental attributes*

| ANOVA | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Symbolic | | | | | |
| | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Between Groups | 6.214 | 4 | 1.554 | 1.858 | 0.12 |
| Within Groups | 131.237 | 157 | 0.836 | | |
| Total | 137.451 | 161 | | | |

*Table 4. 11: Anova table for age group differences on Symbolic attributes*

The study found no statistically significant group differences among the age groups in the choice of job attributes. Table 4.9 and 4.10 provides the results. For the instrumental attributes, the F value was 0.92 with a significance value of .455. For the symbolic attributes, the F value was 1.858 with a   significance value of .12. Consequently, the significance values for both groups of attributes were greater than .05. This entails that there were no statistically significant group differences among the age groups in the choice of attributes.

**Education group differences**

The study also conducted a test on the education group differences. The results for instrumental and symbolic attributes are presented in tables 4.11 and 4.12 respectively.

| ANOVA | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Instrumental | | | | | |
| | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Between Groups | 2.53 | 5 | 0.506 | 0.653 | 0.66 |
| Within Groups | 120.928 | 156 | 0.775 | | |
| Total | 123.459 | 161 | | | |

*Table 4. 12: Anova table for education group differences on instrumental attributes*

For the education group differences among the instrumental attributes, the study found no statistical difference in the choice of the attributes. The F value was 0.653 with a significance value of .66 which is greater than .05. This demonstrates that there is no statistical difference in the choice of instrumental attributes among respondents with different education levels.

| ANOVA | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Symbolic1 | | | | | |
| | Sum of Squares | df | Mean Square | F | Sig. |
| Between Groups | 3.581 | 5 | 0.716 | 0.835 | 0.527 |
| Within Groups | 133.87 | 156 | 0.858 | | |
| Total | 137.451 | 161 | | | |

*Table 4. 13: Anova table for education group differences on Symbolic attributes*

Similarly, for symbolic attributes, the significance value of .527 is greater than .05 which signifies that there are no substantial differences among the different age groups in their choice of symbolic attributes. Considering the results for the age group differences in both symbolic and instrumental attributes, it can be stated that there were no considerable group differences among respondents of different education levels in the choice of attributes.

## 4.7  Summary of the findings:

This chapter presented the study's results. These results concentrated on the most preferred job attributes and the most commonly used channels for employer identification among Malawians. A presentation of gender differences in the preference of job attributes and channels in employer was also provided. The results showed a weak support for these two hypotheses. Finally, age and education group differences did not have any significant impact on the choice of job attribute

# 5 . Discussion of the results

Organisations compete to attract the best candidates. Employer branding helps organisations to meet the above goal by becoming an employer of choice. To be effective, organisations ought to understand what attracts prospective employees. It is also necessary to know the communication channels used by prospective employees to identify a potential employer. Having seen the need for companies to have a successful employer brand and the gap in Malawi's employer branding literature, this study was set to investigate the role of talent attraction in employer branding in Malawi. Specifically, the study aimed at investigating the attributes that influences a candidate's intent to apply for a job and to identify the platforms used by job seekers in finding a prospective employer.

The study applied the instrumental and symbolic framework to assess the attributes that are preferred by job seekers in the selection of prospective employers. It confirmed that both instrumental and symbolic attributes influence job seekers attraction to a job. This supports findings by Lievens and Highhouse (2003), Lievens and Hoye(2005), Lievens and Rai (2020).

The findings indicated career growth opportunities (advancement), quality of products, job security, structure, and flexible work arrangements to be the top six most preferred attributes among the instrumental attribute's dimensions. Lievens and Hoye (2007), Hoye and Saks (2011), and Rai (2020) also found structure to be an important attribute. Advancement was also found to be significant by Hoye and Saks, (2011), Sharma and Prasad (2018), Kumari and Gordhan (2018), Bhardwaj and Rashm (2019), Kaur and Shah (2020) and Rai (2020). Kumari and Gordhan (2018) also found work-life balance to influence job pursuit intention. Randstard (2020) also indicated job security and work-life balance among the top three attributes preferred by employees. Menke, Nuesch and Kroll (2018) identified flexible work practices to have a positive relationship with the organisations' attractiveness. It can therefore be said that prospective employees in Malawi are mostly looking for a job which will enable them to build a career, rise in professional ranks, allow them to hold a permanent position and have a good work-life balance through flexible work arrangement.

Pay and benefits were not among the most preferred attributes, it was moderately preferred. This matches with findings by Santiago (2018) and Purusottama (2019). They discovered that an average salary and compensation benefits were not among key factors that influenced candidate's intent to apply for a job. Other least preferred attributes were task diversity, travel opportunities, social or teams' activities and location. Employers should emphasise more on these top six attributes in their employer branding efforts.

Among the symbolic attributes, the top 3 preferred attributes were: competence, sincerity, and cheerfulness. These supported studies by Lievens and Hoye (2005), Lievens and Hoye (2007), Schreurs et al. (2009), Hoye et al. (2013) and Rai (2020), who found sincerity to be an important attribute. Similarly, competence was also found to be an important attribute by Lievens and Hoye (2007), Schreurs et al. (2009), Hoye et al. (2013) and (Rai 2020). Luo (2017) also found sincerity, cheerfulness, and competence to be most attractive to Chinese doctors. The least preferred attributes were ruggedness, excitement, and prestige. Ruggedness was also found to be the least preferred attribute by Hoye and Saks (2011) and Rai (2020), who indicated that it is negatively related to the attractiveness of a job. This proved that prospective employees are looking for an honest, cheerful, and friendly environment where their competencies are valued.

The study developed the following hypotheses': (H1) *there are gender differences in employment attribute preferences* (H2a) *There are gender differences in employees usage of job search channels*

Regarding the first hypothesis, the study observed gender differences on only location attribute as the rest of the attributes indicated no significant gender differences in attribute preference. This supports the study by Bejtkovsky and Copca (2020), these authors did not find significant gender differences among the rest of the attributes as well. However, they observed gender differences in employee benefits which are contrary to this studies finding as employee benefits showed no significant gender differences as well. Browne (1997) and Madhavkumar (2016) did not find any differences in the preferences of job attributes among men and women. Similar to the study's finding, Chow (2002) observed similarities in how men and women value advancement and compensation. Dewi, Tikson, Hamid and Mardiana (2018) also observed gender differences in job attributes preferrences. Generally, the issue of gender differences in job attributes preferences brings different results in many studies with some observing the differences and some not finding any differences between the two genders.

The second hypothesis was that there are gender differences in the usage of channels. The study observed gender differences on only print and advertising. This was contrary to the findings by Anderson (2015) and Huang, (2017) who observed gender differences in the usage of the channels. The study also conducted group difference tests for age and education in line with the job attributes. The study found no group statistical differences in the choice of the attributes among respondents.

Employers are supposed to use the right channels in their employer branding communication if they aim to be effective. It was thus in the interest of this study to discover the commonly used channels by Malawian job seekers in their search for a prospective employer. The results identified the top six commonly used channels by prospective employees as the following: companies' websites, job boards (LinkedIn, Indeed and Monster), print advertising (newspapers/magazines), social media sites, general articles on the internet and opinions of family and friends. Similar to the study's findings,

Chihabra and Sharma (2014) concluded that job portals were commonly used channels prospective employees adopted inorder to learn about an employer. Randstard (2020) also found job portals and referrals to be among the top channels used by employees to find a job. The least used channels included: career guidance websites, head-hunters, events with employers, blogs, billboards and banners, television commercials and radios. Employers in Malawi can thus focus on using these top six channels in their employer branding communication to easily reach the prospective employees.

It can be said that job attributes significantly contribute to talent attraction, and indeed, employer branding plays a role in talent attraction in Malawi. For effective employer branding, organisations are supposed to know where to concentrate their efforts, organisation attributes to emphasise on and which channels to prioritise to reach the right audience. These study results will therefore help organisations in Malawi to improve their employer branding strategies.

## 5.1 Conclusion

The study proved that employer branding does play a role in talent attraction. It confirmed that both instrumental and symbolic attributes affect a candidate's attraction to a job. The study provided further insights on the attributes that are mostly preferred by prospective employees in Malawi and the commonly used channels in identification of a prospective employer. It thus contributes to the literature on the attributes that are relevant in employer attractiveness and the candidate's intent to apply. It is believed that this study's findings will help employers in Malawi to know what to focus on in their employer branding strategies to attract talented employees and to use the right channels in their dissemination of information. Based on this study's findings and the literature review, it can be concluded that employers need to focus on the right attributes to attract talented employees. It is recommended that organisations should concentrate on both instrumental and symbolic attributes in their employer branding efforts as they influence a job candidates attraction to an organisation.

## 5.2 Managerial Implications

Apart from confirming on the applicability of instrumental and symbolic framework, the study provides the attributes that prospective employees find attractive in an employer; understanding these attributes might help employers to know what prospective employees want in an employer. This might therefore help managers to best design their employer branding activities and other Human Resources Management interventions to attract the right candidates. Organisations may, for instance, concentrate on putting more efforts on career growth opportunities (advancement), quality of products, job security, structure, flexible work arrangements, sincerity, competence, and cheerfulness, among others. Understanding these attributes is thus important in developing a good recruitment strategy and a successful employer brand. Currently, there is insufficient research in this area to guide employers in Malawi.

This study will also provide insights to Human Resources managers to know which channels to target in their employer branding communication as it identifies the commonly used channels by prospective employees. Job boards, companies' websites, and social media sites are best channels to use in reaching out to prospective employees in Malawi.

## 5.3 Study Limitations and directions for future research

It is worth noting that this study has some limitations despite the great contribution it makes to Malawi's literature on employer branding. To begin with, the study focused on only the symbolic and instrumental attributes. Even though the study considered a great number of variables, it left out other variables that can determine an employee's attraction to an employer and a job seekers' intention to apply. Other studies can conduct a similar study using other scales and variables as these might bring different results.

The second limitation is that the study only focused on talent attraction. It thus focused on only the attributes considered attractive by potential employees. It ignored what could be attractive for existing employees. Other studies can also investigate the attributes that are attractive for existing employees in Malawi. Future research can also replicate this study using a larger sample.

Another limitation is that the study cannot determine the cause-and-effect relationships among the variables as it adopted a cross sectional design. The study also used convenience sampling as it was easy to reach the participants and to finish the data collection in good time. However, this might not be a true representation of the population, the results might be biased and other relevant variables which needed to be controlled might not have been controlled.

# 6 . Research Summary

There is a rise in the global talent shortage which is causing organisations to compete for limited labour force (Guthridge, Komm, & Lawson, 2008). As a means of attracting the best talents amidst this rising global talent shortage, organisations are coming up with different approaches to attract these talents (Guthridge, Komm, & Lawson, 2008). These organisations are investing more on recruitment and selection of potential employees to achieve efficiency and a competitive advantage (Mishra & Subudhi, 2017).

Despite the effort's organisations are making in talent acquisition, they still meet challenges in attracting talented employees (Alniacik 2014). It is this extreme competition due to inadequate labour, which is making it challenging for organisations to attract the best talents (Ergun & Tatar, 2018). To manage this scarcity of the labour force and to win this war for talent, organisations are adopting employer branding (Ergun & Tatar, 2018).

Employer branding was introduced in the mid 1990's by Ambler and Barrow. Many have defined the employer branding concept in different ways; Shaker and Ahmed (2014) indicates that employer branding involves portraying a firm's image to prospective employees as an excellent working place. According to Kucherov and Zavyalova (2011), employer branding comprises of qualitative features of the employer, which are attractive to the target audience. It is consequently seen as efforts by the firm intended to promote the firm as exceptional and pleasant employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

Benefits of employer branding include attraction of talented employees, retention of best employees (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Figurska & Matuska, 2013; Santiago, 2018; Bhardwaj, 2019), increase in the job seekers intention to apply and provision of a global recognition (Poonam et al.,2017 & Sullivan, 2004). Despite the adoption of employer branding and the benefits that come this adoption, many organisations are not successful in their employer branding efforts (Benjamin, 2019). Several organisations fail to effectively communicate their employer brand to the target audience (Benjamin, 2019).

To achieve a successful employer brand, organisations need to have sufficient knowledge of attributes that attracts prospective employees' (Eger, Micik, & Rehor, 2018). The employer must know the perceptions and believes that prospective employees have about the organisation (Upadhye 2017). Having the awareness of factors that influence job seekers perceptions leads to a successful employer brand (Arachchige & Robertson, 2011). It is therefore important to understand the key attributes that employees find attractive in the selection of a prospective employer (Lievens 2005; Arachchige &Robertson 2011). Knowledge of these attributes helps organisations to know where to improve.

Many authors have carried out studies on the role of employer branding in talent attraction. These studies have been carried out in many countries in the world with a few exceptions including Malawi. The attractiveness in employer

branding varies in different countries, (Alniacika, Eratb & Akcinib 2012). The attractiveness of employer branding in Malawi might therefore differ from what has been found in other countries. Meanwhile, it is not clear if employer branding plays a role in talent attraction in Malawi since no study has been undertaken in this field.The motivation for this study was thus to fill this gap in literature and to investigate the role that  employer branding plays in talent attraction in Malawi.

The specific objective of the study was to investigate the attributes that job seekers find attractive in their selection of an employer. The other objective was to identify  the channels that job seekers use to identify a potential employer. The primary research question was:  *what attributes attract job seekers to apply for a job*? The other research question was, *which channels do prospective employees use to identify a potential employer*?

To achieve the studies objectives, the author reviewed some literature to have a thorough understanding of the topic and to use these studies as a point of reference. What follows is what has been found in these other studies. To begin with, Organisations implement employer branding with the aim of achieving short term recruitment needs, to secure long term recruitment demands, to improve retention and to make itself unique among its competitors (Universum ,2020). The purpose of employer branding is to depict a positive and attractive image to current and potential employees and to distinguish the employer from its competitors (Figurska & Matuska, 2013).

A powerful employer brand helps to publicise the organisation, promote job opportunities, and to communicate excellent messages that reach the target audience (Gandhi, 2018).  A successful employer branding helps in boosting a firm's exposure and reputation through creating an accord between prospective employees and employers (Sullivan, 2004). The right employer branding also provides a personality to the employer, helps in recruitment restructuring, attracts talented candidates, conveys company's expectations to the employer and keeps the best employees (Dawn & Biswas, 2011)

To have a powerful employer brand, the organisation is expected to have some vital components. Some of these elements include: a culture of continuous sharing and improvement of best practices, an ability to balance between good management and high productivity, gaining public recognition as the best place to work at, being known for great work practices   and the ability of current employees to voluntarily tell stories about the company (Sullivan, 2004). Matching employees' expectations of working in the company and the reality of working at the company is another crucial factor in achieving a successful employer brand.

Employer branding is divided into internal and external employer branding. Stuss and Agnieszka (2017) provides that internal employer branding focuses on forming a pleasant work atmosphere and employee's advancement within the organisation while external employer brand concentrates on outsiders, for example professionals and students.

Employer branding is associated with employer attractiveness. The dimensions of employer attractiveness are *interest value, social value, economic value, development value,* and *application value* (Berthon et al., 2005. *Interest value* refers to the degree to which a person is attracted to an employer that provides a pleasant work environment, utilises its employee's creativity to produce quality products and uses new work practices (Berthon et al., 2005). *Social value* is the degree to which a person is attracted to an employer that provides a fun and happy working environment, great working relationships and a team environment (Berthon et al., 2005). *Economic value* is the degree to which a person is attracted to an employer that offers a high salary, attractive compensation benefits, promotional opportunities, and job security (Berthon et al., 2005). *Development value* is the degree to which an individual is attracted to an employer that offers recognition, improves self-worth and confidence in the individual, and offers career growth opportunities and a foundation for future employment (Berthon et al., 2005). *Application value* is degree to which a person is attracted to an employer that gives one the chance to apply what they learnt at school as well as to teach others in a caring and customer-oriented work environment (Berthon et al., 2005).

Another interesting model that was relevant for this study was the employer Knowledge model. This model was developed by Cable and Turban in 2001. The model asserts that what people believe defines their behaviours. The potential employees' knowledge of a firm determines their awareness of the employment vacancy and their ability to apply for the position or accept it (Cable & Turban, 2001). How people in search for jobs respond to forth coming information from the environment depends on intensity and content of the job seeker's employer knowledge (Cable & Turban, 2001). These authors stressed that the knowledge prospective employees have about the organisation affects their attraction to the organisation, the zeal they develop to pursue the job and the expectations they have concerning the organisation. The employer knowledge potential candidates have therefore determined how they react and respond to an employer in early recruitment stages (Cable & Turban, 2001).

Cable and Turban (2001) defined employer knowledge as a prospective employee's memories and connections concerning an employer (Cable & Turban, 2001). These authors categorised job seekers' employer knowledge into three dimensions, namely: employer familiarity, employer image, and employer reputation. Employer familiarity refers to a prospective employer's awareness of an organisation. (Cable & Turban, 2001). Employer image is defined as the substance of the opinions prospective employees have about an employer (Cable & Turban, 2001) and employer reputation is defined as the confidence potential employees have about a successful assessment of a prospective employer by the society (Cable & Turban, 2001) . Lievens and Hoye (2005) conducted a research to test the applicability of this employer branding knowledge model and it was discovered that the three dimensions of employer knowledge influences job seekers' attraction to an organisation.

The study also reviewed the instrumental and symbolic framework, and this formed the basis of the study. The framework was introduced by Lievens and Highhouse in 2003. These two authors contended that an applicant's

attraction to an organisation could not only be based on organisational factors but on trait inferences as well. The instrumental or organisation factors are the product related attributes that describes the job or organisation from an objective, tangible, physical and realistic element (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). They relate to functional benefits associated with the use of the product (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004) Examples of instrumental attributes are: pay, benefits, location, and advancement opportunities (Kumari & Gordhan, 2018)

Symbolic attributes on the other hand are the self-expressive attributes and non- product-related attributes that describe the job or organisation in terms of subjective, abstract, and intangible aspect (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). This depends on how people perceive the product and not what it has linked to peoples' need to maintain their identity or self-image (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Consumers pursue these symbolic benefits for their social approval and individual expression demands (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). The categories of symbolic attributes include excitement, competence, sophistication, ruggedness, and sincerity (Ruey, 2015). *Excitement* is associated with a workplace where innovativeness and creativity are appreciated, *sophistication* describes a workplace where being classy, trendy, or pleasant is valued, *ruggedness* applies to a workplace that is performance driven, lively and result oriented and lastly *sincerity* applies to a workplace that is friendly, sincere and where honesty is encouraged (Ruey, 2015).

Some authors applied the instrumental and symbolic framework to determine which attributes are mostly considered by prospective employees in their selection of an employer. Dewi, Tikson, Hamid and Mardiana (2018) conducted such a research and they discovered that male respondents were attracted to instrumental attributes. These instrumental attributes included good advancement opportunities within the organisation, ability to apply what waas learnt from the university, gaining experience, recognition and appreciation by the employer. Female respondents were found to be attracted to symbolic attributes. The list of these symbolic attributes were a favourable working environment where employees are respected, are genuine, helpful, encouraging and have a wonderful connection. Similarly Bejtkovsky and Copca ( 2020) also noted gender differences  in the respondents selection of an employer based on employee benefits, the rest of the other attributes did not show any gender differences. Basing on this information, the study's  first hypothesis was developed which was:

*Hypothesis 1: There are gender differences in candidate's preference of job attributes*

Other authors investigated which attributes are mostly preferred between instrumental and symbolic attributes. This determines the value that job seekers put on the attributes. Kumari and  Gordhan, 2018 observed that  job seekers place more value on instrumental variables than symbolic variables. Similarly, Arachchige and Robertson (2011) also discovered that instrumental attributes were more significant to the student group even though the students preferred both instrumental and symbolic attributes. Kaur and Shah (2020) also found instrumental attributes like job security and task diversity to be more substantial for prospective employees in the armed forces.

Ruey (2015) discovered that instrumental attributes like career opportunity and competitive financial benefits were highly appealing attributes to graduating students. The author also found symbolic attributes particularly sincerity, competence, and excitement to be attractive to graduating students (Ruey, 2015). This meant both instrumental and symbolic attributes proved attractive to prospective employees. Hoye and Saks (2011) found that participants are drawn to organisations that are more sincere, more prestigious, and less rugged. Individuals are thus not only attracted to instrumental characteristics but also to symbolic characteristics (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

Apart from these attributes, it was also in the interest of this study to understand what influences a job seekers intention to apply for a job. Asseburg et al. (2018) indicates that the way messages are framed plays a magnificient role in influencing a job candidates intent to apply. These authors categorised the framing of the recruitment messages into: inspirational and rational framings. Inspirational framings are effective in attracting candidates compared to rational framings (Asseburg et al., 2018). These inspirational messages mainly express symbolic attributes than instrumental attributes (Asseburg et al., 2018). Another factor that influences job seekers' intent to apply for a job is the applicant's perception of intrinsic and extrinsic employment attributes (Asseburg et al., 2018).

Firms adopt recruitment strategies to attract prospective employees. The commonly used recruitment strategies are the low involvement recruitment practices and the high involvement recruitment practices (Collins & Han, 2004). Low involvement practices play a great role in developing the job seekers initial awareness of the company (Collins & Han 2004). High involvement recruitment practices affect recruitment outcomes by providing information that is related to the job and the organisation (Collins & Han 2004). Also, early recruitment events like promotions, sponsorships, word-of-mouth testimonials, and advertising affects a candidate's intent to apply for a job (Asseburg et al.,2020).

The other factors that influence the attraction of prospective employees are the organisational advertising and its reputation. Collins and Han (2004) provide that organisational advertisement and the reputation of a firm plays a crucial role in affecting organisation's recruitment outcomes. These two have a positive effect on job seekers' awareness and they influence the effectiveness of early recruitment practices (Collins & Han, 2004)

Apart from the factors that influence organisation attractiveness, the study also reviewed the channels that prospective employees use to identify a potential employer. According to Randstard (2020), the top 5 commonly used channels are: job portals, referrals, agency head-hunters and company career site. (Priyadarshni, Kumar, & Jha, 2017) indicated that job seekers found information about the company through social networking sites. Koch et al. (2018) ranked LinkedIn as the most used platform for recruitment in South Africa while Twitter and Facebook were the least utilised platforms. Some studies noted gender differences in the usage of the job search channels. For example Anderson (2015) and Huang (2017) concluded that there are there are gender differences on the use of different channels by men and women. Basing on this information, the second hypothesis was developed:

*Hypothesis 2: There are differences in potential employee's preference of employer branding communication channels*

Having reviewed the secondary data, the study also utilised the primary data to meet the studies objectives. For the data collection, a survey approach was adopted. The approach was used as it provided an easy and effective way for collecting data in Malawi through online platforms while the researcher was in Italy. A quantitative approach was adopted. Saunders et al. (2009) defines a quantitative approach as data collection or data analysis techniques that uses numerical data. The quantitative approach appeared to be the best means of analysing the study's hypotheses.

The target population for this study were Malawian nationals with different education levels and ages. The questionnaire was used for the data collection. The questionnaire was developed via Qualtrics online platform and links were sent to randomly selected participants. It consisted of closed ended questions. The questions were about the demographics, attributes, and channels. These questionnaires were randomly distributed online to Malawian nationals.193 responses were collected from which some of the responses were incomplete. As such, after data cleaning, only 162 valid data responses were left.

To investigate the attributes that attract employees to apply for a job at an organisation, the study adopted the symbolic and instrumental attributes scale from Lievens et al. (2005). This scale comprised of a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" on instrumental and symbolic dimensions. To identify the commonly used channels, the lists of attributes adopted were from Randstard (2019) and Universum (2020). A 5point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree" was adopted used.

The research used SPSS statistical tool for data analysis. Cronbach Alpha was used to test the consistency of the measurement scale. To present the results, descriptive statistics ranging from mean, standard deviation to frequency distribution were utilised. For hypothesis testing, linear regression analysis was applied.

Examining the study's results, the respondents ages ranged from 18 to 41. The majority of the respondents were between 24-29 years old. In terms of the gender dimensions, 55.6% were Males (n=90), and 43.8% represented females (n=71). One respondent did not reveal their gender. It was also in the interest of the study to identify the education levels of the participants and the sector preferences. Most of the respondents had reached an undergraduate degree level, this had a percentage of 65.4% and only 1.2% of the respondents were PhD holders. For sector preference, most of the respondents were interested in the private sector with a presentation of 68.5% (n=111), only 30.9% (n=50) were interested in the public sector and one respondent did not indicate their preference.

One of the study's objectives was to identify the attributes that attract respondents in applying for a job. The study found the preferred attributes to be in this order (from the most preferred to the least preferred): advancement (career growth opportunities), quality of products and services, job security, structure, flexible work arrangements, Pay and benefits, task diversity, travel opportunities, Social/teams' activities, and location. These findings confirm results by

Torricelli (2002), Ruey (2015) and Kumari and Gordan (2018) who discovered career growth opportunities to be the most valuable characteristic affecting employer's attractiveness. It also supports findings by Randstard (2020) who indicated job security, work-life balance, and career progression to be among the top five preferred attributes. Zaharee et al. (2018) found flexible work arrangements and career growth opportunities to be attractive as well. In this study location was the least preferred attribute and compensation and benefits was moderately preferred. This supports findings by Agrawal and Swaroop (2009), who pointed out that compensation and location are important but they are less powerful in their ability to predict applicants' intention to apply for a job.

In terms of the symbolic attributes, the respondent's preference was in this order: competence, sincerity, cheerfulness, ruggedness, excitement, and prestige. Competence was consequently the most preferred attribute, and an organisation's prestige was the least preferred attribute. This study supports findings by Ruey (2015) who found sincerity, competence, and excitement as the most attractive among prospective employees. Hoye and Saks (2011) identified sincerity, excitement, prestige, and ruggedness as attributes that influence employer's attractiveness among prospective employees.

The other objective of the study was to identify channels that are commonly used by employees in identification of a prospective employer. The study found companies websites, Job boards, print advertising and social media sites as the commonly used channels. Television and Radio were discovered to be the least used channels in prospective employer identification. These findings support the study by Randstard (2020) who identified job boards to be among the commonly used channels. Koch et al (2018) found LinkedIn to be among the most used platform in South Africa.

The study also tested the hypotheses. The first hypothesis was that *there are gender differences in employment attribute preferences.* This hypothesis was partially supported as all attributes indicated no gender differences except for location which showed gender differences in attribute preferences. This supports the study by Bejtkovsky and Copca (2020); these authors did not find significant gender differences among the rest of the attributes as well. However, they observed gender differences in employee benefits which are contrary to this studies finding as employee benefits showed no significant gender differences as well. Browne (1997) and Madhavkumar (2016) did not find any differences in the preferences of job attributes among men and women. Similar to the study's finding, Chow (2002) observed similarities in how men and women value advancement and compensation

The other hypothesis (2a) was that *there are gender differences in channel usage.* This hypothesis was partially supported the rest of the channels did not indicate gender differences except for print advertising. The study's results were contrary to the findings by Anderson (2015) and Huang, (2017) who observed gender differences in the usage of the channels. The study also conducted group difference tests for age and education in line with the job attributes. The study found no group statistical differences in the choice of the attributes among respondents.

In conclusion, the study confirmed the applicability of instrumental and symbolic framework in talent attraction in Malawi. It also proved that employer branding does play a role in talent attraction in Malawi. The study also partially supported the fact that gender differences exists in employment attributes preferences as well as in channel usage. It also provides insights on the attributes that are mostly preferred by potential employees in Malawi and the commonly used channels for employer identification. Based on this study's findings and the reviewed literature, it can be concluded that employers need to focus on the right attributes to attract talented employees. It is suggested that organisations should concentrate on both instrumental and symbolic attributes in their employer branding efforts as they both influence a candidate's intent to apply.

This study will fill the gap in employer branding literature that is there in Malawi. Knowledge that employers may get from knowing the attributes that employees find attractive might help them to best design their employer branding activities to attract the right candidates. According to this study's results, attributes like advancement, quality of products, job security, flexible work arrangements, sincerity, competence, and cheerfulness are likely to attract talented candidates. Understanding these attributes may also help human resources personnel's in developing good recruitment strategies. The study also provides insights on the commonly used channels in employer identification; this knowledge will help employers to know which employer branding channels to use to reach the right candidates. As per the study's findings, employers should concentrate on job boards, companies' websites, and social media sites in the employer branding communications.

The study has some limitations despite its great contribution it makes to Malawi's literature. Firstly, the study only focused on instrumental and symbolic attributes. This meant that it ignored other attributes that attracts potential candidates. Other studies can conduct a similar study but using other scales and variables that are likely to affect prospective candidates' intent to apply for a job. Another limitation is that the study only focused on talent attraction. It thus ignored factors that might attract existing employees as its focus was only on potential employees. Other studies might explore on the factors that can influence retention of existing employees. One other limitation is that the study cannot determine the cause-and-effect relationship among variables as it adopted a cross-sectional design. The last limitation is that that the study used convenience sampling as it was easy to reach out to the participants. However, the results might not be a true representation of the population, they might be biased and the other variables which needed to be controlled might not have been controlled.

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