



THE EFFECTS OF SYMBOLIC IMAGE DIMENSIONS ON EMPLOYER ATTRACTIVENESS IN TERMS OF EMPLOYER BRANDING CONCEPT

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ABSTRACT

Purpose- Employer branding has been subject to various studies in strategic human resource field in order to attract high-skilled potential employees and retain existing employees to create competitive advantage over its competitors with creating high intellectual capital assets. Present study aims to focus on the effects of symbolic image dimensions of employer on employer attractiveness.

Methodology- In order to test propositions, questionnaires are conducted on 181 last year bachelor, master and PhD students which are considered as potential employees for organizations in Turkish universities between the years 2016-2017. Data gathered from questionnaires are analyzed through SPSS program.

Findings- All the suggested hypothesis regarding to research model are accepted and findings are consistent with the literature.

Conclusion- Analysis results revealed that symbolic image dimensions of employer have significant positive affect on employer attractiveness. All three dimensions of symbolic image have significant effect on all four dimensions of employer attractiveness.

Keywords: Employer brand, employer branding, employer attractiveness, organizational attractiveness, symbolic image

JEL Codes: M50, M51, M54

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, our current business environment is dealing with severe and various challenges of intensive competition, high degree of risk, uncertainty in environment and rapid technological changes. Organizations seek ways to deal with competition in order to survive in long run and reach their desired organizational outcomes within the competitive market. "This has resulted in the changing skills and competency requirements for organizations." (Srivastava and Bhatnagar, 2010) "Growing importance of intangible assets and intellectual capital, development of service based economies as well as overall importance of corporate branding makes employer branding a strategic must." (Martin et al., 2005) Because of the most precious and costly capital is human capital, organizations should recognize the value of their high skilled employees, and try to find out ways of attracting potential high skilled job seekers. This would lead organizations to invest more on new trend asset which is 'intellectual capital'. From this point of view, the concept of "Employer Branding" has received much attention during last decades. Due to this reason, this study proposes a theoretical background and research model for employer branding, along with organizational attractiveness, instrumental and symbolic benefits. Within the instrumental and symbolic framework proposed by Lievens and Highhouse (2003), this study aims to come up with affects and consequences of instrumental and symbolic dimensions on employer attractiveness in terms of employer branding concept. The study begins with literature review of employer branding concept, instrumental-symbolic framework and employer attractiveness. Research methodology, sample and data collection, instruments of the research and analysis will be shown in second section. Findings section comprises final research model, suggested hypotheses and regression analyses results. Conclusion and recommendations will be discussed in last section of the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Employer Brand

The term 'employer brand' have first been mentioned by Ambler and Barrow (1996), defines the employer brand as "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company." "Functional benefits that Employer Brand offers are defined as developmental and useful activities. Economic benefits represent the monetary and material rewards. And last, psychological benefits are the feelings such as belonging, direction and purpose." (Ambler and Barrow, 1996) "Employer branding is therefore concerned with building an image in the minds of the potential labor market that the company, above all others, is a 'great place to work' (Ewing *et al.*, 2002). According to Lloyd (2002), "employer brand is the sum of a company's efforts to communicate to existing and prospective staff that it is a desirable place to work." The employer brand puts forth an image showing the organization as a "great place to work." (Sullivan, 2004). Kimpakorn and Tocquer (200) stated that employer branding is "An organization's image as seen through the eyes of its actual and potential employees." From these definitions it is clearly understood that main objective of organizations is to attract new high skilled employees and retain existing staff in order to gain competitive advantage from its competitors to survive in long run and reach organizational goals in efficient and effective manner. Human capital is the most valuable and precious capital of an organization. "The practice of employer branding is predicated on the assumption that investing in human capital brings value to the firm, and through skillful investment in human capital, firm performance can be enhanced." (Backhaus, and Tikoo, 2004) Main objective of organizations in long run is to gain competitive advantage with scarce resource in environment. Hence organizations try to think of ways to invest and improve on human capital. Resource based view supports this comment, suggesting that characteristics of a firm's resources can contribute to sustainable competitive advantage. (Barney, 1991)

Employer branding is a strategic must for organizations to establish and improve in today's uncertain and rapid changing environment in order to sustain its productivity and competitive advantage through differentiating the organization from its existing competitors in the market. The term employer brand entails improving human capital assets for organizational requirements. The aim is to create well recognized perception of the organization as a good employer and grate workplace for them which would lead to attract new employees. In this point of view, the concept is considered as a topic in strategic human resource management. Actually it derived from the human resource practices, but on the other hand the concept entails efficient and effective applications for strategic management and organization practices on the purpose of gaining and sustaining competitive advantage in order to reach strategic goals of the organization. This would lead organization to position itself as a unique employer according to its strategic plans and decisions. According to Sullivan (2002) "employer branding is a possible way to position organization as a unique and differentiated employer in the eyes of potential employees, striving towards differentiating the organization from its competitors, and creating their own uniqueness as an organization."

The first study regarding to Employer Branding was conducted by Ambler and Barrow (1996) with describing Employer Branding as "The package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company." Researchers handled the concept in terms of employees' side of view in the organization. They realized and expressed the importance of employer brand for the organizations to differentiate themselves rather than investing all effort on consumer and corporate brand. The idea of creating a successful employer brand is actually about creating functional, economical and psychological benefits which employees would identify with the organization. This enables organization to attract new high skilled employees and retain existing employees in order to increase the intellectual capital of the organization. Ewing, Pitt, Bussy and Berthon (2002) stated that "the anticipated permanent shortage of skilled workers in the new economy creates unique challenges for knowledge-based organizations in particular, who will increasingly need to differentiate themselves in order to successfully attract talented employees." They introduced the stakeholder theory-which considers employee as a stakeholder- into the marketing framework in terms of employment brand as an emerging trend. Cable and Turban (2003) examined the beliefs that potential job seekers holds about their potential employers which they called it "employer knowledge". According to authors, potential employees' perception and attitudes about an organization creates value for the organization. Because how job seekers' pursue, understand and associate the information about the organization is an indicator of organizations image outside. The research addresses the source and dimensions of employer knowledge and draws a framework about why potential employees' perception and knowledge represents an important asset for the organization during the recruitment process. Lievens and Highhouse (2003) introduced the 'instrumental-symbolic framework' that denotes the main components of organizations' image as an employer. According to this framework, image of organization comprises both instrumental and symbolic dimensions. Instrumental dimensions are in behalf of job and organizational characteristics which are more visible and monetary based factors comparing to symbolic factors. Symbolic dimensions are more about intangible, subjective factors which employees' associate them with the organization. The results of the study show that it is easier to differentiate organizations on the basis of trait inferences of organization rather than job/organizational characteristics. Also trait inferences about

organization had more incremental variance comparing to job/organizational characteristics in terms of organizations perceived attractiveness. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) defined employer branding as "Process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity... concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors." They conceptualized and examined the relationship between organizational career management and employer branding concept. The study emphasizes the importance of human capital regarding to internal marketing term. Research draws a framework about developing an employer brand in three crucial steps which are developing a value proposition, external marketing and internal marketing of employer brand. Berthon et al. (2005) developed a scale for measuring the employer attractiveness in terms of employer branding concept. Scaled is comprised of five factors which are social value, interest value, development value, economic value and application value. These five factors are dimensions of employer attractiveness in the sense of potential employees. Authors claimed that "attracting employees with superior skills and knowledge comprises a primary sources of competitive advantage." Moroko and Uncles (2008) examined characteristics of successful employer brand in their study. According to authors there are two key dimensions for a successful employer brand which are attractiveness and accuracy. Research indicates the similarities and characteristics consistent with corporate branding theory and employer brand which are grouped under three heading; being noticeable and known, being seen as relevant and resonant, and being differentiated from direct competitors. Davies (2008) explored the role of employer branding with four chosen dimensions which are relevant to the employer branding concept. Perceived differentiation, satisfaction, affinity and loyalty were selected from the consumer branding literature and they were found relative with the employer branding concept. Kashyap and Rangnekar (2014) examined the leadership perspective of employer branding concept. Rample (2014) analyzed the relationship between employer brand associations and employer first-choice brands. Study revealed that work culture and content are main predictors of employer attractiveness.

2.2 Instrumental and Symbolic Image Dimensions

Lievens and Highhouse (2003) introduced the 'instrumental-symbolic framework' which denotes the main components of organizations' image as an employer. According to this framework, image of organization comprises both instrumental and symbolic dimensions. Authors posit that potential job seekers initial attraction to an organization cannot be explained solely on the basis of traditional job and organizational attributes. Potential applicants' attraction is also based on symbolic meanings which they may associate it with the organization. In previous studies, scholars have claimed that organizational attractiveness is influenced by instrumental functions which mean job and organizational characteristics such as payment, location, career development opportunities, organizational structure etc. However, according to Lievens and Highhouse (2003), "these job and organizational characteristics are less useful for organizations to help them differentiate themselves from their competitors because prospective applicants either perceive no differences among them across organizations within the same industry or because there are simply not many differences to be perceived." Due to this reason, authors revealed that prospective employees' attraction to an organization cannot be explained solely. Their initial attraction is also based on trait inferences which they call it symbolic functions or symbolic meanings. "Applied to a recruitment context, the instrumental-symbolic framework proposes that job seekers' attraction to organizations can be explained by their perceptions of both instrumental attributes and symbolic traits as key components of organizations' image as an employer." (Lievens et al, 2007). Authors also claim that symbolic meanings are better tools for potential applicants in order to differentiate the organizations. Applied to a recruitment context, the instrumental-symbolic framework proposes that job seekers' attraction to organizations can be explained by their perceptions of both instrumental attributes and symbolic traits as key components of organizations' image as an employer (Lievens et al, 2007). Instrumental meanings or instrumental attributes are the tangible, product-related, physical or in broad 'job/organization' related attributes which are *pay, benefits, job security, educational opportunities (or career development) and task diversity*. Authors claimed that symbolic meanings (trait inferences) describes the job or the organization in terms of subjective and intangible attributes trait inferences which are *sincerity, innovativeness, competence, prestige and robustness*. "These symbolic image dimensions describe the organization in terms of subjective, abstract, and intangible traits." (Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, & Mohr, 2004) Instrumental and symbolic dimensions are significant predictors of employer attractiveness. With regards to employer branding, previous researches have shown that organizations which are investing on the symbolic dimensions would come up with high degree of organizational attractiveness. According to Baş, Hoyer and Lievens (2012), "symbolic traits explained significant incremental variance beyond instrumental attributes and accounted for a greater amount of predictable variance. In addition, organizations were better differentiated from each other on the basis of symbolic image dimensions (sincerity and innovativeness) than on the basis of instrumental dimensions (task demands)."

2.3. Employer Attractiveness

"Since competition for the best employees became almost as fierce as competition for customers (Berthon et al., 2005), "organizations have to differentiate themselves from their competitors and to be seen as attractive employers for prospective applicants and current employees." (Lievens, Highhouse, 2003)". It is an obligation for organizations to understand and identify what attracts the potential employees and job seekers to an organization. The image of the

organization which is perceived by potential employers has been identified as one of the major indicator for potential job seekers. Berthon (2005) defines organizational attractiveness as "the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization." Prospective employees perceive the organization with its desirable attraction. "Thus, employer attractiveness is used to predict organizational pursuit." (Highhouse et al., 2003) Organizational attractiveness concept is closely related to employer branding concept in terms of organizations perceived image by its current and potential employees. Due to the lack of high skilled employees and shortage in labour market, it has become increasingly important for organizations to seen attractive by potential job seeker employees. It has also become difficulty for organizations to create and image or change the image to attract the right employees for the organization, a process called employer branding. (Edwards, 2010) Potential and prospective employees' feelings and impressions to an organization are strategically determined in terms of perception of organizational attractiveness. According to Rynes et al. (1991) perceived organizational attractiveness refers to the degree "how a prospective employee perceives the organization as a place to work which can be describes as the desirability of the organization in the view of potential employees eyes." Sullivan (2004) introduced to literature "great place to work" concept. This argument is directly about job satisfaction which would lead desirable organizational commitment, retention and lower turnover rates. These consequences determine the degree of attractiveness in organization. Organizations should seek to find ways to improve satisfaction levels of its existing employees. Highly satisfied employees would positively affect the prospective employees with word of mouth marketing. Actually, this five dimension structure is readjustment of three dimension proposed by Ambler and Barrow (1996). They introduced three dimensions which are psychological benefits, functional benefits and economic benefits. Interest value and social value are extension of psychological benefits dimension; Development value and Application value are extension of functional benefits dimension; and of course both study has the common dimension which is economic value.

In the light of literature, the study argues that symbolic image dimensions of employer have positive significant effect on employer attractiveness in terms of employer branding concept.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Aim and Theoretical Research Model

Research aims to come up with affects and consequences of symbolic image dimensions on employer attractiveness in terms of employer branding concept. Research aims to examine; (1) the relationship between symbolic image dimensions and employer attractiveness provided by employer branding, (2) to gradate the usefulness of each dimension in order to differentiate organizations. (3) To reveal the variances of sub-dimensions of symbolic image over employer attractiveness

3.2. Sample and Data Collection

The survey of the research is conducted on 181 Turkish university students who are prospective employees to organizations operating in Turkish market. Last year students of faculty of economics and administrative sciences in various universities in Turkey are chosen as a sample. Questionnaires were distributed to students and some questionnaires were distributed through online survey program. Questionnaires obtained from 32 students eliminated because they did not meet the criteria that 'respondent should study in faculty of economics and administrative sciences.' Data gathered from 181 questionnaires were analyzed through SPSS program. Theoretical model and related hypothesis tested through regression analysis after factor and reliability analyses were done.

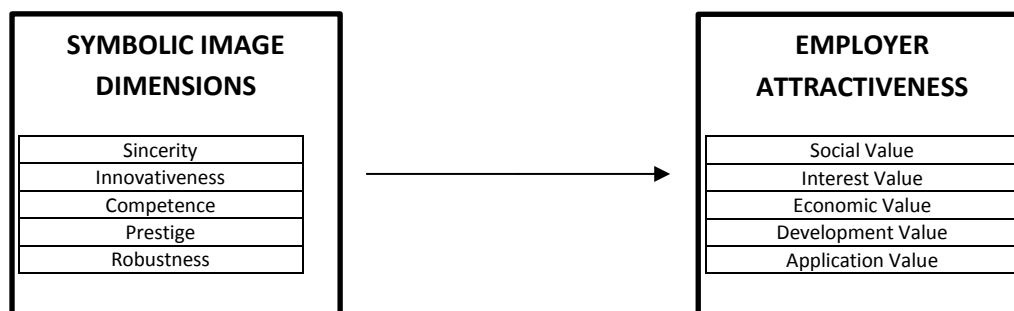
3.3. Instruments of the Research and Analysis

This research designed to be a quantitative research and required data is collected with survey method. Survey is formed with 3 sections and 49 questions. The first part is consists of 10 demographic questions in order to determine the demographic features of respondents. Second part consists of questions related with employer brand attractiveness to measure the perceptions, attitudes and expectations of prospective employees from an organization. EmpAt scale which was proposed by Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005) is used in order to measure employer attractiveness. Third section contains 14 item questions related with symbolic image dimensions which describes the job or the organization in terms of subjective and intangible attributes aligned as sincerity, innovativeness, competence, prestige and robustness which is also adopted from Lievens and Highhouse (2003). Overall, excluding demographic questions, 39 questions asked to respondents with using 5 Likert-type scale in order to measure instrumental and symbolic dimensions and employer attractiveness. 6 items are deleted because they showed weak loading under factors. Also 3 items are excluded from symbolic dimensions scale in order to increase the reliability of the scale with increasing Cronbach's Alpha value.

3.4. Theoretical Research Model

Theoretical research model shown in Figure 1 illustrates that five dimensions of symbolic image have significant positive affect on five sub-dimensions of employer brand.

Figure 1: Illustrates the Theoretical Research Model



4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1. Factor and Reliability Analysis

5 factors were loaded under the employer attractiveness variable but one factor had less Cronbach’s alpha value then 0, 70. So fifth factor is excluded from the model and remaining four factors are named as ‘social environment, reliability, economic benefits, acceptance and belonging’ in accordance with original scale and meanings of the questions. The Cronbach’s Alpha values for each factor exceeds the 0, 70 as shown in Table.1 which means all the loaded factors were reliable in the questionnaire. 3 factors were loaded under the symbolic dimension variable and factors are named as ‘Trustworthiness, innovativeness, and prestige’ in accordance with original scale and meanings of the questions. The Cronbach’s Alpha values for each factor exceeds the 0, 70 as shown in Table.2 which means all the loaded factors were reliable in the questionnaire.

Table 1: Illustrates Factor Loadings and Cronbach’s Alpha Values for Employer Attractiveness

FACTOR NAME	ITEM NUMBER	FACTOR LOADING	CRONBACH'S ALPHA
SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT	A12. Ideal/current organization should value and make use of your creativity.	,709	0,886
	A8. Having a good relationship with your colleagues is important.	,682	
	A2. A fun working environment is important.	,688	
	A6. Gaining career-enhancing experience is important.	,648	
	A11. Having an innovative employer (novel work practices/forward-thinking) is important.	,644	
	A9. Supportive and encouraging colleagues is important.	,601	
	A10. Working in an exciting environment is a must.	,524	
ECONOMIC BENEFITS	A24. An above average basic salary is important for me.	,734	0,863
	A21. Job security within the organization is important.	,725	
	A25. An attractive overall compensation package is important.	,699	
	A15. Good promotion opportunities within the organization is important.	,619	
	A23. Happy working environment is important.	,597	
RELIABILITY	A13. Ideal/current organization should produce high-quality products and services.	,727	0,794
	A16. Having a humanitarian organization (which gives back to society) to work is important for me.	,721	
	A14. Ideal/current organization should produce innovative products and services.	,667	
	A18. Opportunity to teach others what you have learned is important.	,648	

ACCEPTANCE & BELONGING	A7. Having a good relationship with your superiors is important.	,747	0,776
	A1. Recognition/appreciation from management is important.	,597	
	A19. Acceptance and belonging within the organization is important.	,571	

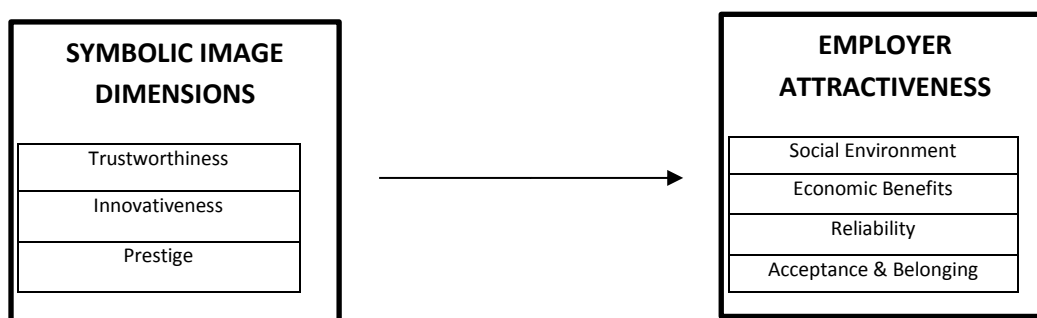
Table 2; Illustrates Factor Loadings and Cronbach’s Alpha Values for Symbolic Image Dimensions

FACTOR NAME	ITEM NUMBER	FACTOR LOADING	CRONBACH’S ALPHA
TRUSTWORTHINESS	S14. It should be tough and steady.	,844	0,879
	S10. It should be well respected and highly regarded.	,826	
	S9. It should be a leader.	,807	
	S11. It should be prestigious.	,770	
PRESTIGE	S1. Ideal organization should be honest.	,802	0,863
	S3. It should be down-to-earth.	,763	
	S13. It should be rugged.	,743	
	S2. It should be sincere.	,705	
INNOVATIVENESS	S4. It should be trendy.	,848	0,696
	S5. It should be contemporary, up to date.	,724	
	S6. It should be exciting.	,630	

4.2. Modified Research Model and Hypotheses

Figure 2 illustrates the modified research model. Regarding to factor analysis results, two dimensions of symbolic image have been deleted out and remaining factors have been named in accordance with the meanings of questions and previous dimensions.

Figure 2: Modified Research Model



- H1: Trustworthiness significantly and positively affects social environment.
- H2: Trustworthiness significantly and positively affects economic benefits.
- H3: Trustworthiness significantly and positively affects reliability
- H4: Trustworthiness significantly and positively affects acceptance & belonging.
- H5: Innovativeness significantly and positively affects social environment.
- H6: Innovativeness significantly and positively affects economic benefits.
- H7: Innovativeness significantly and positively affects reliability.
- H8: Innovativeness significantly and positively affects acceptance & belonging.
- H9: Prestige significantly and positively affects social environment.
- H10: Prestige significantly and positively affects economic benefits.
- H11: Prestige significantly and positively affects reliability.
- H12: Prestige significantly and positively affects acceptance & belonging.
- H13: Symbolic image dimensions significantly and positively affects overall employer attractiveness.

4.3. Correlation Coefficients

Table 3 illustrates the correlation coefficients. As shown in Table 3, all correlation coefficients are below which is on the satisfying level to apply the regression analysis.

Table 3: Correlation Coefficients

	Prestige_av	Innovativeness_av	Trust_av	Socen_av	Reliability_av	Accepbelong_av	Econben_av
1	1						
2	,401*	1					
3	,401*	,530*	1				
4	,457*	,533*	,638*	1			
5	,548*	,533*	,583*	,621*	1		
6	,461*	,510*	,626*	,703*	,623*	1	
7	,558*	,524*	,687*	,699*	,577*	,690*	1

*p <0, 01

4.4. Regression Analysis Results

Regression analysis is conducted to analyze the hypotheses related to the research model after factor and reliability analysis was done. Figure 1 illustrates the research model and hypotheses are given below.

Table 4: Illustrates the Regression Analysis Results on Symbolic Image Dimensions-Employer Attractiveness Relation

Regression Model	Independent Variable	Dependent Variable	Standardized β	Sig.	Adjusted R2	F Value	Model Sig.
1	Trustworthiness	Social Environment	,447	,000	0,195	44,586	,000
2	Prestige	Social Environment	,666	,000	,440	142,307	,000
3	Innovativeness	Social Environment	,693	,000	,478	165,541	,000
4	Trustworthiness	Economic Benefits	,556	,000	,305	79,966	,000
5	Prestige	Economic Benefits	,709	,000	,500	180,947	,000
6	Innovativeness	Economic Benefits	,677	,000	,455	151,174	,000
7	Trustworthiness	Reliability	,513	,000	,259	64,069	,000
8	Prestige	Reliability	,613	,000	,373	107,968	,000
9	Innovativeness	Reliability	,475	,000	,222	52,229	,000
10	Trustworthiness	Acceptance & Belonging	,456	,000	,204	47,090	,000
11	Prestige	Acceptance & Belonging	,638	,000	,403	122,570	,000
12	Innovativeness	Acceptance & Belonging	,706	,000	,496	178,052	,000

As shown in Table 4 three dimensions of symbolic image (which are Trustworthiness, Innovativeness and Prestige) have significant positive affect on 4 dimensions of employer attractiveness (which are Social Environment, Economic Benefits, Reliability, Acceptance & Belonging) H1,H2,H3,H4,H5,H6,H7,H8,H9,H10,H11 and H12 are supported with the significance less than 0,05 and satisfied adjusted R square and beta values.

Table 5: Illustrates the Multiple Regression Analysis Results on Symbolic Image Dimensions-Overall Employer Attractiveness

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	2,352	,205		11,452	,000
Prestige_av	,465	,048	,590	9,787	,000
2 (Constant)	1,582	,203		7,798	,000
Prestige_av	,324	,045	,411	7,228	,000
Innovativeness_av	,345	,044	,447	7,847	,000
3 (Constant)	,898	,194		4,628	,000
Prestige_av	,178	,043	,226	4,172	,000
Innovativeness_av	,211	,041	,273	5,099	,000
Trust_av	,414	,052	,469	8,022	,000

a. Dependent Variable: EmpAt_Overall

As shown in Table 5, multiple regression analysis has been done in order to test the relationship between symbolic image dimensions and overall employer attractiveness. Results revealed that there is positive relationship between variables. Thus H13 is also accepted.

5. CONCLUSION

Study reveals the importance of symbolic traits in the perception of potential and existing employees related to employer organization. All three dimensions of symbolic image have significant effect on all four dimensions of employer attractiveness. Organizations are aware that the most precious capital is human. With creating highly regarded symbolic traits, organizations would attract high skilled employees to their organization in order to create sustainable competitive advantage among its competitors which is the first objective of organizations in today's competitive market.

The findings of the study are consistent with the literature on employer brand, attractiveness, instrumental and symbolic framework. For instance Baş, Hoye and Lievens (2012) examined the effects of instrumental and symbolic framework on employer branding with using different employer attractiveness scale. Study showed that symbolic image dimensions have significant effect on employer branding concept. However, our study does not replicates the previous researches with using 4 factors dimensions of employer attractiveness. Firstly, our study directly examines the relationship between symbolic traits and employer attractiveness. Previous researches were more consisted on analyzing the instrumental and symbolic dimensions and compering the meanings and incremental variances of these dimensions. Second, EmpAt scale (Berthon et al., 2005) which is used to measure employer attractiveness in the study consists of 5 dimensions which are development value, social value, interest value, economic value and application value. Our factor loadings according were different. Items were grouped under 4 main factor which named more consistent regarding to the question in order to prevent ambiguity.

Among symbolic image dimensions, Prestige has more average incremental variance over other dimensions with high r2 loadings to four dimensions of employer attractiveness. This is not surprising when considering the collectivistic structure of Turkish culture. It is a useful hint for organizations to strategically differentiate themselves with creating high regarded prestigious perception for employees.

The study has some limitations. The study is conducted on 181 students who are studying in faculty of economics and administrative sciences and who are studying in business management master, PhD programs. It is recommended that further studies can be done with conducting questionnaires not only management and economic students but also with students who are studying in other disciplines in order to have comprehensive measurement. Also in the research one independent variable (instrumental dimensions) of the instrumental-symbolic framework was excluded due to the results of previous researches. The reason is that previous researches have shown that symbolic dimensions have incremental variance over instrumental dimensions. Further researches can be done with including instrumental dimensions as another independent variable.

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