



# Institutionalizing the Employer Brand in Entrepreneurial Enterprises

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## ABSTRACT

Employer brand is defined as a package of psychological, functional, and economic benefits provided by employers to distinguish them from other firms. While employer brand is considered vital to the effectiveness of organizations, it has not been clearly operationalized, particularly in the entrepreneurial literature. This article employs institutional theory as the theoretical lens to study the EB concept in the entrepreneurial enterprise. The implications of institutional theory have demonstrated significant contributions to several issues concerning the entrepreneurship studies. Based on analyzing 40 semi-structured interviews with expert personnel from 13 entrepreneurial enterprises in Jordan finds that the three pillars of this theory (cultural-cognitive, normative-professional, and regulative) are crucial in institutionalizing an attractive employer brand. We contributed to the entrepreneurial literature by discussing the concept of entrepreneurial employer branding. This study offers practical implications to the entrepreneurial enterprise in respect of how they can become very attractive workplaces to their current qualified employees and to the qualified job seekers as well.

**Keywords:** Entrepreneurial Enterprises, Institutionalizing, New Institutional Sociology Theory, Employer Brand

**JEL Classifications:** M00, M130, M510, M540

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Survival in the current turbulent business environment depends mainly on companies' ability to recruit and maintain highly qualified personnel (Tanwar and Prasad, 2016, Schlager et al., 2011). This is particularly important for growing and new entrant entrepreneurial enterprises (Fraza, 1998), because they are perceived as less attractive to the job seekers compared to larger, more well-established companies (Tumasjan et al., 2020). Therefore, it has become imperative for these companies to stand out from the crowd by understanding their employees' career values, attitudes, and preferences, and to subsequently enhance the attractiveness of their workplaces in the eyes of the existing employees and prospective talent (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003).

Although small companies have to follow the footsteps of the most successful companies in respect of recruiting talents (known as isomorphism), they also need to distinguish themselves in labor

markets (Williamson, 2000). Tumasjan et al. (2011) explained that start-ups need to adopt distinctive marketing strategies to promote an attractive workplace in labor markets by engaging mainly in employer branding activities to compete for qualified talent bringing value to their enterprises. Therefore, it could be argued that employer branding is more crucial to the smaller enterprise than for larger organizations, as they must make extra efforts in this regard due to their inherent disadvantage in attractiveness to labor (Tumasjan et al., 2020). They thus seek to build their employer brand (EB), an intangible property of firms that enhances their competitiveness (Biswas and Suar, 2016, Berthon et al., 2005).

EB has been receiving significant attention for decades. It comprises "The package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (Ambler and Barrow, 1996, p.187). However, there is a dearth of research in respect of what make a company's EB attractive in general (Maxwell and Knox, 2009), and in start-up and

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Employer Brand Definition

EB has received considerable attention from researchers and practitioners since the concept first appeared, yet it is perceived differently. For instance, Ambler and Barrow (1996) viewed it as a package of psychological, functional, and economic benefits provided by employers to distinguish them from other firms. EB can also be perceived as an internal marketing concept (Berthon et al., 2005). Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) explained that employer branding reflects development in the psychological contract theory, which explains and manages relationships between employers and employees. Kucherov and Zavyalova (2012, p. 87) regard employer branding as a progressive “HRD approach based on general branding theory which uses some branding principles and tools (e.g. target audience identification, segmentation, promotion) to make the process of people management efficient”. Similarly, Mark and Toelken (2009) considered EB as a reflection of the best intentions of the organizational development in human resource management (HRM).

The idea of the EB stems from the integration of two different roots: the first one is associated with the “recruitment communication”, which refers to the power of corporate brand; and the second refers to occupational psychology linked to the “psychological contract” (Kashyap and Verma, 2018). Moreover, the EB borrowed various ideas from marketing literature, especially product branding, with some key differences between these two concepts. *Firstly*, the object of the product branding is the goods or services offered by companies, whereas the object in employer branding is the employment opportunity, experiences, or the job itself. *Secondly*, the target audience in product branding is companies’ current and prospective consumers, whereas the employer branding is directed towards maintaining and motivating current talents and attracting prospective talents (Ewing et al., 2002). *Lastly*, in marketing products the main target of the company is gaining the loyalty of the external customers, whereas the loyalty of both internal (current) and external (prospective) employees are the key objectives of EB. Based on this understanding, we conceptualize EB as:

“An ongoing progressive institution that comprises several sorts of desirable experiences and outcomes that are communicated to both existing and potential employees, by which the employing company distinguishes itself from competitors, and at the same time, they give the firm the legitimacy to compete in the labor market over the highly qualified talents”

EB has mainly been perceived from marketing and HR disciplines, but we intend to additionally incorporate institutional theory in this domain. EB evidently leads to several desirable outcomes for institutions. Employees who experience their organizations as a great place to work become brand advocates, and thereby they recommend their companies to others via positive word-of-mouth (Kimpakorn and Tocquer, 2010). In addition, EB reduces cost of compensation and enables companies that cannot afford to offer greater remuneration the chance to compete for labor (to recruit highly qualified people)

small companies in particular (Tumasjan et al., 2011, Williamson, 2000). Kucherov and Zavyalova (2012) called for conducting more research to study small enterprises in respect of EB strategies, activities, and related human resource development (HRD) activities. This identifies a broad gap in the literature requiring extensive contributions.

This article employs institutional theory as the theoretical lens to study the EB concept in the entrepreneurial enterprise. The implications of institutional theory have demonstrated significant contributions to several issues concerning the entrepreneurship studies (Bruton et al., 2010). Specifically, we employ the neo-institutional sociology theory (NIS) (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983a, Scott et al., 2000, Suddaby, 2010), which explains how institutions emerge or disappear, and influence the activities and behaviors of individuals and organizations (Ribeiro and Scapens, 2006). NIS theory focuses mainly on the impacts of the surrounding contextual factors, such as culture and its components, on the activities of companies and their members (Scott, 1987). The major assumption of NIS is that social actors are not only motivated by the desire to achieve economic outcomes or efficiency-seeking behavior (Roy, 1999), but are influenced also by broader social and cognitive factors (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, Suddaby and Viale, 2011).

For instance, Bussin and Mouton (2019) found that when employees’ perceptions of employer branding of their own organizations are more positive, their willingness to work for a lower salary and benefits increases. Similarly, Kucherov and Zavyalova (2012) found that companies with employer brands (CEB) could save salary costs because potential employees were ready to work for them with lower salary expectations in comparison with those who chose non-EB companies. Likewise, Tanwar and Prasad (2017) found that compensation and benefits are the least influential dimension of the employer brand. This is because employees nowadays prefer psychological factors more such as a healthy workplace and more work-life balance. Furthermore, companies with strong EB are able to reduce compensation of their talents in comparison with companies with weaker EB (Ritson, 2002). Therefore, we expect that the NIS can explain why, how, and under which conditions organizations behave and make decisions in respect of creating EB, and communicating its attributes to current and prospective employees.

What motivated us to employ the institutional theory to investigate EB is the need to use a broad approach to conceptualize it. This is because employees evaluate their organization as an attractive workplace when the whole organization is perceived to be successful, therefore it is recommended to adopt a holistic approach that encompasses several organizational attributes (Maxwell and Knox, 2009). For that reason, the three NIS pillars (cultural, normative, and regulative) are useful as a conceptual framework to investigate EB and offer valuable insights to related literature.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows: literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and finally research implications, recommendations, and limitations.

through working on enhancing the psychological aspects of their companies (Kucherov and Zavyalova, 2012, Tanwar and Prasad, 2017). Aside from recruiting, EB also has positive impacts on employee retention (Tanwar and Prasad, 2017), satisfaction, and identification with companies (Schlager et al., 2011). Therefore, companies need to pay a considerable attention to the EB and try to institutionalize it in their companies due to its significant outcomes, which enhance their competitiveness and sustainability.

## 2.2. New Institutional Sociology (NIS)

NIS is a theory that focuses on the activities of individuals and organizations while considering the impact of contextual factors, such as cultural dimensions and pressures (Scott, 1987). People and enterprises are not solely motivated by economic self-interest, rather they are driven to various degrees by a diverse set of personal and organizational objectives in the context of surrounding social, cultural, and economic factors (Meyer and Rowan, 1977, Suddaby and Viale, 2011). This explains why companies sometimes choose certain courses of actions that appear irrational from the economic perspective in order to gain legitimacy; this refers to the idea of isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983b), which explains why organizations tend to be similar to one another within similar contexts (Scapens, 2006). Certainly, gaining legitimacy enables social actors to operate, expand, and gain the right to compete for available resources in their fields (Schmid, 2001). This takes forms that manifest how immediate economic self-interest and short-term profitability are actually much less significant in the broader perspective of long-term, sustainable development.

For instance, Suddaby and Viale (2011) indicated that organizations sometimes take part in downsizing activities by reducing the number of their employees, not as a result of financial difficulties but because these practices have become taken-for-granted, reflecting rational management practices (McKinley et al., 2000). Another example also explained by Suddaby and Viale (2011) concerns the number of current organizations that have embraced the idea of Total Quality Management, because it has become part of normative pressures rather than being a technique adopted to improve the financial results of organizations (Zbaracki, 1998). Therefore, studying the behaviors and activities of people should be executed through a holistic approach that comprises several aspects, which can be attained by adopting the institutional perspective, specifically the NIS, which "... comprises a rejection of rational actor model" (DiMaggio and Powell, 1991, p.8).

Institutions in NIS include cultural-cognitive, normal, and regulative "elements that, together with associated activities and resources, provide stability and meaning to social life" (Scott, 2008a, p.48). These elements (described in detail in the following sub-sections) are at the core of institutions, determining their properties, meanings, and behavior, and explaining the reasons for their change resistance. They interact and intertwine empirically on many occasions, despite being theoretically and analytically distinct, and provide different types of legitimacies (Macfarlane et al., 2013).

### 2.2.1. Cultural-cognitive pillar

The *cultural-cognitive* element refers to "shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and the frames through which meaning is made" (Scott, 2008a, p. 57). This pillar is the main dimension that differentiates neo-institutionalism, particularly NIS, from other institutional theories, by paying greater attention to the influences of societal factors on people's behavior and practices, and thereby providing a more comprehensive and deeper understanding of human existence. However, in comparison to the regulative and normative pillars, cultural-cognitive "taken-for-granted ways of thinking" generally "tend to be much slower to change, as they are somewhat abstracted from day-to-day activity" (Scapens, 2006, p. 15).

The cultural-cognitive pillar is also "a collection of internalized symbolic representations of the world" located between the stimuli of the external world and the reactions of individuals (Scott, 2008a, p.57). This assumes that meanings are created through symbols, words, marks and gestures that people attach to their behavior and activities. These meanings are sustained, modified, and developed through their role in making sense of people's actions and events that are occurring in a dynamic manner. Therefore, the cultural-cognitive pillar is a set of concepts and beliefs that guide individuals (Valdez and Richardson, 2013).

### 2.2.2. Normative pillar

The *normative* pillar comprises a set of values and norms that legitimize some activities and sanction others (Muzio and Faulconbridge, 2013). Scott (2008a, p.54-55) stated that normative pillar rules:

"Introduce a prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory dimension into social life. Normative systems include both values and norms. Values are conceptions of the preferred or the desirable, together with the construction of standards to which existing structures or behaviours can be compared and assessed. Norms specify how things should be done; they define legitimate means to pursue valued ends"

The normative pillar is a core component of institutions, implying institutional isomorphic mechanisms that effectively lead to substantial changes in societies and their organizations. This pillar stems mainly from professionalization, which mainly comprises two facets: formal education institutions (such as universities), and professional institutes and networking (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983b, p.151).

Professionalization is seen as the collective efforts of certain occupations and professions aiming to manage their activities by identifying the conditions, techniques, knowledge, and methods necessary to meet their work requirements within the boundaries of these professions (Larson and Larson, 1979). The professional institutions generate shared understandings and cognitive bases, and provide the legitimacy to their occupational autonomy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983b). They also impose new practices leading to significant and fundamental changes in "the socially constructed field-level consensus", particularly when the prospective transformations are necessary and more suitable for dealing with challenges in their contexts, in comparison with

existing practices (Greenwood et al., 2002, p.60). The influences of professions mainly occur through a set of four fundamental dynamics identified by Suddaby and Viale (2011, p.424):

“First, professionals use their expertise and legitimacy to challenge the incumbent order and to define a new, open and uncontested space. Second, professionals use their inherent social capital and skill to populate the field with new actors and new identities. Third, professionals introduce nascent new rules and standards that recreate the boundaries of the field. Fourth, professionals manage the use and reproduction of social capital within a field thereby conferring a new status hierarchy or social order within the field”

Evidently, professions have more influential roles in establishing and enforcing institutions than any other social actors in advanced communities (Daudigeos, 2013, Muzio and Faulconbridge, 2013). Scott (2008b, p. 223), in his seminal work *Lords of the Dance: Professionals as Institutional Agents*, claimed that professions play a leading role in institutional changes, more so than any other social actors in modern societies. He stated:

“... the professions function as institutional agents — as definers, interpreters, and applicators of institutional elements. Professionals are not the only, but are — I believe — the most influential, contemporary crafters of institutions”

Suddaby and Viale (2011) clarified how the professional jurisdictions work as an endogenous mechanism with invisible hands in the creation, maintenance, and transformation of related organizational fields. Such a role was proven in other studies showing the role of professionals in creating new forms of organizations (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2005), and new professional practices, consultancy, and areas of expertise (Anand et al., 2007).

### 2.2.3. Regulative pillar

The *regulative* pillar implies coercion and legalization features that are deemed the most fundamental element of institutions, comprising rules and guidelines that identify acceptable actions and monitor compliance through a set of various sorts of rewards and punishments (Muzio and Faulconbridge, 2013). It therefore has the ability to standardize and restrict (i.e. shape, if not determine) actions (Valdez and Richardson, 2013), outlining what organizations and individuals can and cannot do. The regulative pillar can be applied by written laws or codes pursued through formal institutions, such as the police and courts, or it can be embedded in informal mechanisms such as folkways, including shaming and shunning violators of expected behavior (Scott, 2008a). In addition, compliance adopts certain structures and procedures resulting sometimes from resources dependency (Hirst, 2010), which “... may be felt as force, as persuasion, or as invitations to join in collusion” (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983b, p.147-148).

### 2.3. Institutional Theory and EB

We perceive EB as an institution for several reasons: EB is a multi-dimensional construct (Tanwar and Prasad, 2017) that is still evolving (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004, Biswas and Suar, 2016), which comprises shared social understandings and meanings

(Williamson, 2000); thus, when EB is adopted, companies' activities and functions are adjusted according to certain acceptable manners, leading to the gaining of benefits or the avoidance of undesirable practices and actions. When companies work in differentiating themselves in the labor market in addition to imitating acceptable practices, they gain legitimacy to compete on the available talents in the labor market (Williamson, 2000). EB is also an institution because it involves expectation and obligation. When companies engage in EB activities and functions they send promises to current and prospective employees about what they will experience in return for their knowledge and abilities. Therefore, EB reflects a development in the psychological contract that offers strong theoretical background that underpins EB studies (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004).

EB literature highlights the importance of the training and development (Tanwar and Prasad, 2017), which is essence of the professional pillar of the institution (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983b). In addition, social-related factors such as the fun and enjoyment dimension (Berthon et al., 2005) correspond with the cultural-cognitive pillar of institutions (Scott, 2008a). However, it seems that the regulative aspect is missing in the EB literature. Therefore our approach of using the NIS is justified by the need to consider the impact of the three pillars (cultural-cognitive, normative, and regulative) that together create EB. These pillars represent the theoretical framework that was used in analyzing and discussing data in this study.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with 40 employees of 13 entrepreneurial companies in Jordan. Non-probability snowball sampling technique was adopted to select the participants. The researcher first started by interviewing three of his personal contacts working in entrepreneurial firms, and then he asked each one of them to recommend two employees from different backgrounds, in terms of managerial and educational level, area of specialty, and firm. Each interview lasted for nearly one hour. Before the beginning of each interview, the researcher explained to participants the meaning of the employer brand, after which they were asked to indicate factors that make the entrepreneurial companies attractive prospect to join or remain within as desirable places to work.

After conducting interviews, the qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six phases described by (Braun and Clarke, 2006): (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial sub-themes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report (making theoretical sense of the data). The items that were stated more than 10 times were taken into consideration. A total of 21 important attributes of the employer brand mentioned by the interviewees were grouped into the three institutional pillars. Consequently, 6 items fell into the “regulative pillar” dimension, 7 items were included in the “normative pillar” dimension, and 8 items were categorized under the “cultural pillar”.

In order to enhance the trustworthiness, credibility, and internal and external validity of findings, member-checking was undertaken (Cresswell, 1998). This technique is popularly used in qualitative research, whereby a sample of research participants are asked to check, discuss, and modify the research data or interpretation (Iivari, 2018). Five participants were invited to perform member-checking to examine the research themes and analysis to make sure that the research interpretations are consistent with their understandings and inputs (Moroko and Uncles, 2008).

The data was collected during two waves over a period of about five months. Four pilot interviews were conducted in September 2019, followed by 35 interviews from the beginning of October 2019 until the end of January 2020. 40 semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 male and 20 female employees of several entrepreneurial enterprises in Jordan. Their ages ranged from 21 to 47, with an average of 27. Their length of experiences in entrepreneurial activities ranged from less than 1 year to 14 years, with an average of 8 years. 26 participants were single, and 14 were married. In terms of highest level of education, 4 had high school diplomas, 33 had first degrees, and 3 had master's degrees.

## 4. RESULTS

### 4.1. Cultural Pillar

#### 4.1.1. Leadership top management support and commitment

Leadership appeared a key influencer in people's attitudes and values, such as commitment, which enhanced the attractiveness of the workplace among current employees. Leaders represented role models to their followers. When leaders have visions and power to allocate resources, their followers trust their steps and believe in their abilities to direct them for a better future.

"Our CEO is a very brilliant person... we admire him... he knows what he needs and where he is leading the company... he listens to us and keeps his door open... he is a powerful man who provides us with what we need to do our jobs perfectly... this increases our attachment with this company and make it a very comfortable workplace..." [Graphic designer]

An HR employee explained that leaders' commitment and support are crucial for implementing branding activities that therefore promote the culture of employer branding.

"I believe that without wise and open leadership nothing goes on one step forward... the top management support and commitment is very important to execute all that branding activities and programs..." [HR employee]

#### 4.1.1.1. Work-life balance

Work-life balance represents a key factor that some respondents indicated affects their attitudes towards their companies. Employees these days focus more on meeting their family responsibilities in addition to their professional obligations. Companies that offer flexible working settings are thus more attractive for those who have familial responsibilities.

"An attractive workplace to me is one that enables me to meet my family responsibilities in addition to my job responsibilities... yes, I need money from my job to meet my needs, but also I need time to look after my kids" [Software engineer]

#### 4.1.1.2. Social life and engagement activities

Social factors are a key aspect of the attractive workplace. When people have chance to join social activities with their colleagues they become more engaged and happy with the organizations.

"The social atmosphere is so important for me... what makes me engaged when I found myself part of the groups and enjoy together, and participating in social events and going out together for a dinner or lunch..." [Customer relations officer]

The workforce that is free from unethical practices, such as discrimination and sexual harassment, is a very attractive workplace.

"I prefer to work in an ethical workplace no discrimination, favoritism, harassments. These issues determine my willingness to keep work for this company, or leave in case I am not happy in the company" [Technical sales representative]

Good relationships are an aspect of the attractive workplace that enhance the culture of the company and thus its attractiveness.

"I spend half of my day in the company so I can't bear a bad culture... Good relationships and positive workplace make me more productive and committed to the company... If I don't feel comfortable in the company I leave directly, and don't look back at all..." [Financial analyst]

Investing in employee wellness and well-being is a key aspect of the attractive workplace that encourages employees to join a company and be loyal to it.

"Investing in employee health is one of the benefits I found in this company... they offer us a flexible package of benefits and we can chose among them based on our needs, I consider the wellness program whenever I apply or accept any job offer" [Website developer]

#### 4.1.1.3. Perceived supervisor support

Supervisory support was also found to be crucial in enriching employees' experiences in the company and enhancing their activities.

"Our department's head is so supportive... working with cooperative boss is indeed a blessing... he shares his knowledge with me. Answering my questions, and considering even my personal issues..." [Content writer]

#### 4.1.1.4. Perceived organizational support

Organizational support is a main factor that shapes employees' attitudes towards and experiences with their companies. Companies that support, recognize, and compensate employees

accordingly enhance their EB. Using intrinsic rewards to recognize employees' contribution can be an effective approach to keep them motivated and committed.

“What keeps me motivated is the support that I receive from my company, when I find that my organization really appreciates what I give to them, this makes me so happy; not necessary to give me money, but let me tell you something... if I did something good for the company, and my manager said to me ‘thank you,’ this is most important thing that could happen, more than anything else” [Business developer]

#### 4.1.1.5. CSR

Given that company identity intersects with and influences employee identity, employees therefore prefer to work in companies that consider the surrounding environment in their operations, which affects people's employer choice.

“It is really a nice thing to work in a company that considers giving back to the local community and helping people who are in need...” [IT officer]

#### 4.1.1.6. Organizational justice

Justice appeared as one of the key aspects that plays a key role in enhancing the cultural aspect of EB. Employees believe that justice should be promoted in their workplaces.

“As we say, ‘Justice is the basis of governance’. Companies have to be fair with their employees and promote this in the workplace atmosphere... the company has to offer us fair pay and treat us as humans, with respect and dignity, and not keep threatening us...” [Technical support officer]

#### 4.1.1.7. Organizational politics

Competing for organizational resources is a legitimized activity, but this should go through legal or ethical processes. It is generally unethical to seek benefits from organizations via organizational politics or making decisions to direct the organizational resources towards decision makers or their connections in a nepotistic way. Organizational politics can negatively affect the reputation of companies and thus reduce their attractiveness in the eyes of current and prospective employees.

“It is not a good place of work that is full of politics, people making decisions for their interest, and the interests of their groups or relatives, backstabbing and spreading rumors and wrong, bad news about employees... it is not an attractive place at all... I prefer to work in a healthy environment where all have the right to grow, without unethical competition and activities...” [Public relation officer]

## 4.2. Normative Pillar

### 4.2.1. Training and development opportunities/ succession planning/ leaders programs.

Offering training opportunities to employees improves the attractiveness of companies in the eyes of their workers. People are highly motivated to gain new skills and knowledge to enhance their employability in the labor market.

“I can't work for a company that doesn't offer training opportunities to its employees... you see the labor market is very competitive, and I want to stay current... this make me stick with this company... I don't think that I am out of the train...” [Quality engineer]

#### 4.2.1.1. Application part freedom

Delegation and autonomy in the workplace is also a key attribute of work design that encourages employees to stay working for their companies with a high level of satisfaction.

“... the freedom of thinking and discretion on making decision make is more motivated to do more and more... in our field we need a flexible culture that trust employees and make them feel very comfortable in the company” [Project manager]

#### 4.2.1.2. Professional certificates

Gaining globally recognized certification is also a key factor that enhances people's desire to join and remain committed to companies. People work to enhance their professional identity and employability.

“Our company invests in us... they believe that by adding value to our profile we then add values to them” [Sales consultant]

#### 4.2.1.3. Mentoring and career shadowing

Mentoring is a key factor in employee commitment and company attractiveness. In mentoring, senior employees impart their knowledge and experience to other less experienced employees, which also maintains organizational knowledge and skills, and prevents knowledge leaking outside.

“We have a culture in our company... Senior employees share their knowledge with less experience employees... I learn something new every day from my boss...” [Account manager]

#### 4.2.1.4. Gaining experience and exposure

Acquiring experience is a significant factor that enhances the attractiveness of the workplace, enriching employee profiles and motivation to stay where they learn new things.

“Gaining experience and continuing to accumulate knowledge makes me feel that I am alive... when I think I will stop learning new things I will start thinking to leave this company” [Research and development officer]

#### 4.2.1.5. Employee involvement and participation in decision making/ being informed

Giving employees the chance to know what is going on in the company also enhances the image or brand of the company.

“Being informed is very important and reflects professionalism in my company” [Computer systems analyst]

Being involved in the decision-making process of the company makes employees more attached to the firm, making it more attractive for them to stay.

“Participating in decision-making is a useful opportunity to learn how decisions are made and the process of reaching decisions... something that makes me belong to this company more” [Film and video editor]

#### 4.2.1.6. Various career path inside the company

Offering career paths to employees enhances EB in the eyes of employees and signals to employees that the firm cares about them and their development.

“Having several career paths inside the company is something indispensable, I would like to get promoted in my career but I can also close my eyes from seeing and exploring other options...” [Marketing specialist]

### 4.3. Regulative pillar

#### 4.3.1. HR policies and procedures

Institutionalizing employer brand in entrepreneurial enterprises depends largely on the maturation of HR policies and procedures. Employees prefer to work in companies that have well-established policies and procedures.

“Our HR manager is a very professional person, he developed policies and procedures for every issue concerning employees. I know exactly when and how to apply for a training course, our compensation and incentives are clear to us as well... I think I am lucky to work here in this company...” [Public relations officer]

#### 4.3.2. Incentive policies and procedures

Compensation and incentives also influence the attractiveness of companies. When everything is clear to employees, they are more likely to be motivated and willing to stay working for these companies.

“You know we all work to earn money... I prefer to work for a company where all the compensation and reward system is very clear to me from the beginning...” [Sales engineer]

#### 4.3.3. Job description

Even though some entrepreneurial enterprises avoid having confined or precise job descriptions, believing that this could limit the horizons of potential contributions from personnel, it was clear that some employees prefer to have a clear job description that identifies and delineates their responsibilities.

“I prefer to work in a company that has a clear job description; I don't like to work in a mess... I should be asked to do what I should do, not anything else” [HR specialist]

#### 4.3.4. Code of conduct

Having a code of conduct and promoting and respect it is very important for institutionalizing the employer brand.

“No one would like to work in a dirty place, companies have to offer a healthy workplace that encourages people to give more, not to think every day to leave the company... this is achieved in our company because we have a code of conduct,

enacted two years ago, and our management insists to apply all its items in this organization... nothing is better than knowing your boundaries, and others' boundaries...” [Logistician]

#### 4.3.5. Company compliance with national legislation and regulation

Respecting governmental laws and regulations enhances the image of the companies and thus encourages employees to work for and be committed to such companies.

“My company respects all the country's laws and regulations... we pay tax on time, and go with labor law... this makes me feel secure and happy. I don't expect to see the police raiding our company and putting us in prison! Ha, ha, ha... [laughing]” [Senior accountant]

#### 4.3.6. Employment contract

It was found that having well-drafted legal contracts was very important for the image of companies, along with respecting their conditions.

“... the story is different in this company... this company respects all the conditions we agreed on in the contract... I left my previous company because they didn't respect the contract between me and them... they used to delay in giving us our salary... I was working more than 15 hours a day... the company refused to pay us overtime. I can't forget the managers who kept saying that we have to be very thankful because the company offered us a job...” [Financial manager]

#### 4.3.7. Employee handbook

An employee handbook is a key source of information about the companies and the employees' responsibilities and benefits that personnel found valuable.

“I find most of my questions in the employee handbook... this makes my life very easy... nothing is better than working for people who are organized in every aspect of their work” [Order filler]

## 5. DISCUSSION

The main objective of this research is to understand the main attributes that institute EB in entrepreneurial enterprises through the theoretical lens of NIS. The main motive of adopting this approach is the desire to look at EB holistically. In addition, this research helps entrepreneurial enterprises to create attractive workplaces to be able to compete with the large companies in the labor market over qualified talents. The results showed that the cultural, normative, and regulative institutional pillars boost the process of creating an attractive employer brand.

### 5.1. Cultural Institutional Pillar

The cultural pillar is deemed the most significant pillar of institutions, which sometimes exceeds the impact of the formal regulations (Valdez and Richardson, 2013, Trevino et al., 2008). Cultural factors play a key role in differentiating attractive companies from less attractive ones (Berthon et al., 2005, Tanwar

and Prasad, 2017). Associated cultural-cognitive attributes shape companies' EB and the set of meanings and beliefs that affect employee behaviors (Valdez and Richardson, 2013), and thus attitudes toward companies.

Leaders are the main source of creating and maintaining strong organizational culture (Kavanagh and Ashkanasy, 2006, Ribiere and Sitar, 2003). Leadership is critical in facilitating the institutionalization of an ethical corporate environment (Carlson and Perrew, 1995). The results of this study are consistent with previous studies in respect of leadership being a key factor that characterizes companies' EB (Kucherov and Zavyalova, 2012, Biswas and Suar, 2016, Davies and Chun, 2009). Leaders are the most significant symbol of organizations, and can be more important symbolically than operationally in respect of managing reputation (Davies and Chun, 2009).

Employees become identified with and committed to their organization's brand when they find their leaders' behavior to be consistent with the EB values, more than by formal marketing efforts (Shaari and Hussin, 2015, Martin, 2010). Shaari and Hussin (2015) found that transformational brand leadership is the most important factor that influences employees to show brand citizenship behavior, therefore the authors recommended that leaders should work as role models for their subordinates and genuinely *live* brand values in visible operations. In addition, Biswas and Suar (2016) found that leaders are the most critical indicator of employer brands, because they are perceived as employers, whose vision, actions, attitude, charisma, knowledge, and performance all influence EB. Therefore, leadership is a key component in creating a desirable culture to enhance the attractiveness of the company.

Work-life balance was also found to be a key factor that enhances the cultural aspect of the employer brand. It reflects companies' commitment to their employees and their families. When companies provide their employees with flexible work schedules (e.g. working hours, compressed working days, and telecommuting options), they promote an attractive supportive culture and enhance the company's EB (Tanwar and Prasad, 2017).

Another key aspect that contributes to the cultural pillar refers to the social life and engagement activities. Companies can increase their employer brand through investing more in the health and wellness program, participating in the employees' personal occasions, celebrating employees' achievements with them, promoting fun and happiness, and fostering a teamwork spirit. Some researchers found fun and enjoyment to be one of the main five attributes that enhance EB (Berthon et al., 2005), and others considered the broader concept of a healthy work atmosphere to be the most significant attribute (Tanwar and Prasad, 2017). People generally enjoy working in teams, and workplaces free from stress and discrimination enable all employees to exert a positive influence over the workplace, mutually supporting each other and the company's EB. Schlager et al. (2011) found that social value has the strongest positive effect on identification with the employer.

It was found also that the perceived supervisor support is an important aspect of the attractive workplace. When people receive

support from their supervisors through open communication, involvement, participation, and transparency, this in turn enhances employees' learning, motivation, performance (Bauer and Green, 1996), and retention (Rhoades et al., 2001, Eisenberger et al., 2002), thereby enhancing trust in the company (DeConinck, 2010), and thus the EB (Biswas and Suar, 2016).

Perceived organizational support reflects the overall perception of employees of the extent to which their companies look after their well-being and value their contributions (Eisenberger et al., 1997). When employees feel that they receive fair compensation and that the company helps them to be healthy cognitively, physically, and psychologically, they feel obligated to pay back their organizations, which corresponds with the core notion of the social exchange theory (Blau, 2017). Also, acknowledging employees' knowledge and capabilities represents one of the key attributes that significantly affect the initialization of EB (Bonaiuto et al., 2013). Perceived organizational support is associated with high performance, affective attachment (Eisenberger et al., 1990), and retention (Rhoades et al., 2001), and these outcomes improve EB (Biswas and Suar, 2016).

The results showed that CSR is a key factor that enhances EB in the eyes of potential employees. Current and prospective personnel desire to work with companies who display socially responsible corporate behavior towards communities, employees, and the environment (Tanwar and Prasad, 2017). Biswas and Suar (2016) found that CSR is positively correlated with EB, and employers' commitment to social responsibility is one of the most idealized brand attributes to the fresh graduates from Italian universities (Bonaiuto et al., 2013). Therefore, companies are highly encouraged to engage in CSR activities to enhance their image in the eyes of existing and potential employees.

The dimension of organizational politics was mentioned by participants as a major negative factor in company reputation, affecting relationships, communication, reputation, decisions, and resources (Landells and Albrecht, 2019). Organizational politics was conceptualized in terms of self-serving, nepotistic behavior (Ferris et al., 2017). It leads to negative work attitudes and outcomes, such as job dissatisfaction and low organizational commitment (Chang et al., 2009). Therefore, companies have to work in a way that prevents their employees working for their own personal or clique interests, and to align their interests with those of the organization and its broader stakeholders.

## 5.2. Normative Institutional Pillar

Training represents a key aspect of the normative pillar. The majority of the participants indicated the role of offering training opportunities in enhancing the attractiveness of companies (Haider et al., 2015). This is because employees need to improve their skills and knowledge to enhance their internal and external employability. These results are consistent with previous research, which found that successful EB companies invest more in training and developing their employees (Kucherov and Zavyalova, 2012). Similarly, Tanwar and Prasad (2017) found that the second-most significant factor that affected EB was training and development, since employees are keen on improving their human

capital to be ready for future jobs. In addition, it was found that professional training is a significant attribute as people are keen to have access to professional training and get globally recognized certification to enhance their professional identity and improve their internal and external employability.

Moreover, the study found that giving employees chances to participate in decision-making has a crucial influence on the company. The availability of mentorship appeared to be a key professional career enhancement approach that enhanced company attractiveness. Offering several career paths was found to shape EB, with careers being perceived as the individual property of employees (Arnold, 1997), thus they are keen to stay adaptable and employable. Modern employees prefer to follow their inner values and remain self-directed (Briscoe et al., 2006), looking to follow several career paths characterized by multi-directional possibilities (Baruch, 2004), and an absence of boundaries (Arthur, 1994).

### 5.3. Regulative Institutional Pillar

The regulative pillar consists of job descriptions, codes of ethics, job contracts, compliance with national legislation and regulations, internal policies and procedures, and an employee handbook.

Companies with policies and procedures that organize their operations, such as standard operational procedures (SOPs) and HR policies and procedures are more attractive to current and prospective employees because of reduced ambiguity and conflicts in roles, and enhanced levels of transparency across organizations, which thus enhances their EB. For instance, Kucherov and Zavyalova (2012) found a strong relationship between the HRD and EB. In addition, EB is perceived to be the best reflection of organizational development in the HRM field (Mark and Toelken, 2009).

Companies with policies clearly delineating role expectations and salary and compensation at similar levels to market norms or higher are more attractive to the employees and job seekers. This enhances EB in the labor market and confers legitimacy.

Another main regulative EB aspect is a well-designed and identified job description, which is a core building block of HR functions and activities. It outlines the main tasks, duties, responsibilities, and internal and external formal relationships involved in employment. Job description is critical in determining EB, because offering precise job descriptions give job seekers the chance to know more about the job before applying. Job descriptions also affect employees' job satisfaction because they are used as a reference point to compare employers' promises with actual experiences. This is very important, especially for newcomers who are in the encounter stage, which has significant consequences on employees' attitudes and behaviors. Employees who are happy with their jobs stay, whereas when the employees get misleading or inaccurate information they are more likely to leave or be involved in undesirable behavior, including deviant behavior. This highlights the importance of the realistic job previews, by which accurate information is provided about the negative and positives sides of the available vacancies. Biswas and Suar (2016) found that realistic job previews positively are correlated with EB.

Moreover, in addition to the attractiveness dimension in successful EB, Moroko and Uncles (2008) found that the accuracy dimension is very important as well, since the companies have to maintain consistency between EB and the employment experience, organizational culture, and beliefs. Working according to ethical standards plays a key role in institutionalizing EB across all operational levels. Enacting, promoting, and monitoring the organizational code of conduct is vital to maintain a highly ethical atmosphere that celebrates workforce diversity, and which is free from all sorts of discrimination.

It was also found that companies that comply with national legislation and regulations receive legitimacy, acceptance, and positive reputation in the labor market. Exchange theory explains the relationship between employees and their employing organizations. The employment contract is the formal cornerstone of this relationship. A company meeting its obligations to employees enhances EB for current and prospective employees, enhancing external branding.

Also, having systematic and organized or governed workplace is very desirable to employees, and a source of guidance for newcomers. Employee handbooks help employees understand several issues in respect of their company regulations and policies, and they can be used in the orientation process.

In conclusion, this research found that entrepreneurial enterprises can institutionalize EB through focusing on the three cultural-cognitive, normative-professional, and regulative pillars.

## 6. CONCLUSION

The institutional theory has been verified to be particularly useful to entrepreneurial study. Organizational support is a main factor that shapes the employee attitudes towards and experience with their companies. To ensure the effectiveness of the employer branding programs, companies have to adopt a holistic approach that works at the strategic level. The commitment of the organizational leadership is critical in EB success.

The most significant limitation of this research is the small number of studied organizations, although though they offer insightful information about how employer branding can be institutionalized in entrepreneurial enterprises. This qualitative enquiry has limited scope for generalizability, and it is recommended to develop a scale based on the results of this exploratory research to generate larger volumes of quantitative data from a larger sample of Jordanian entrepreneurial enterprises, to build on these preliminary findings with more substantive empirical findings.

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