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A Study on Employer Branding from Business Student Perspective

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Abstract: ***Employer branding has emerged as a strategic priority in human resource management, shaping how organizations position themselves in the talent marketplace. While prior research has predominantly examined employer branding from organizational and HR practitioner perspectives, there remains a notable gap in understanding how business students — the primary target segment for most graduate recruitment campaigns — perceive, evaluate, and respond to employer brand stimuli. This research paper investigates employer branding through the lens of MBA and BBA students across institutions in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar, Maharashtra, offering a demand-side analysis of the factors that influence employer attractiveness. Employing a mixed-methods research design, data were collected through a structured survey administered to 285 business students and supplemented by focused group discussions with 40 participants. Findings reveal that organizational culture, growth opportunities, compensation competitiveness, and brand reputation constitute the four primary determinants of employer attractiveness for business students. Notably, digital presence and social media engagement have emerged as significant influencers of employer brand perception in the post-pandemic talent landscape. A conceptual Employer Brand Attractiveness Index (EBAI) is proposed as a diagnostic tool for organizations seeking to align their talent value propositions with student expectations. The study contributes original empirical insights into employer branding from the perspective of the next generation of business professionals and offers actionable recommendations for corporate recruiters and HR practitioners targeting the campus talent pool.***

Keywords: Employer Branding, Employer Attractiveness, Business Students, Talent Acquisition, Employer Value Proposition, Campus Recruitment, HR Branding, Organizational Culture, Graduate Talent Market, Maharashtra.

I. INTRODUCTION

In an era of intensifying competition for skilled human capital, organizations have increasingly recognized that attracting and retaining top talent requires more than competitive compensation packages. The concept of employer branding — the process by which organizations communicate their identity as employers and cultivate a distinctive reputation in the labor market — has gained substantial theoretical and practical traction since Ambler and Barrow (1996) first introduced the term in academic discourse. Employer branding encompasses the totality of an organization's efforts to present itself as a preferred place to work, integrating values, culture, career development opportunities, and workplace experiences into a coherent and compelling employer narrative.

For business schools and management institutions, the employer branding landscape holds particular relevance. MBA and BBA graduates represent a high-value talent segment actively sought by organizations across sectors including banking, consulting, technology, manufacturing, and fast-moving consumer goods. Campus recruitment programs, employer presentations, and graduate talent initiatives constitute significant investments for leading corporations. Yet, despite this investment intensity, relatively little empirical research has examined how business students actually construct their perceptions of employers, what signals they rely upon, and how these perceptions translate into application intentions and ultimately employment decisions.

The Indian business education ecosystem presents a particularly interesting context for this inquiry. With over 3,800 AICTE-approved management institutions enrolling approximately 400,000 students annually, India represents one of the world's largest and most diverse graduate business talent markets. In the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, institutions such as the International Centre of Excellence in Engineering and Management and affiliated colleges produce substantial cohorts of management graduates annually, representing a geographically proximate talent pool for regional, national, and multinational employers. Understanding how these students evaluate and prioritize employer attributes is therefore of direct practical value to organizations operating campus recruitment programs in the region.

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This research paper addresses this gap by conducting an empirical investigation of employer branding perceptions among business students in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar. The study examines the relative importance students assign to different employer brand attributes, explores the information sources through which employer brand perceptions are formed, and identifies the factors that most significantly influence employer attractiveness ratings. A conceptual Employer Brand Attractiveness Index (EBAI) is proposed as a structured diagnostic framework for organizations seeking to benchmark and enhance their employer brand positioning relative to student expectations.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *Theoretical Foundations of Employer Branding*

The theoretical lineage of employer branding draws upon multiple disciplinary streams. Ambler and Barrow (1996) conceptualized the employer brand as the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company. This foundational definition established the employer brand as a value proposition — a structured offering through which organizations seek to attract, engage, and retain talent in competitive labor markets.

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) developed this framework further by articulating the dual dimensions of employer branding: external employer branding, directed at attracting prospective employees, and internal employer branding, focused on engaging and retaining current employees. Their employer branding model established that employer brand associations influence both employer attractiveness (a critical antecedent of application intention) and organizational commitment (a key driver of retention). This distinction between attraction and retention dimensions is foundational to the present study, which focuses specifically on the external employer branding dimension as perceived by prospective student employees.

Lievens and Highhouse (2003) applied a signaling theory perspective to employer branding, demonstrating that prospective employees use observable employer brand signals — including organizational reputation, product/service quality, and recruiter behavior — as proxies for unobservable employment attributes such as organizational culture and development opportunities. Their work established that both instrumental attributes (concrete job features such as salary and location) and symbolic attributes (abstract organizational traits such as innovativeness and prestige) independently contribute to employer attractiveness, with symbolic attributes demonstrating stronger differentiation power in competitive talent markets.

In the Indian context, Saini, Rai, and Chaudhary (2014) investigated employer attractiveness among management students across Indian business schools, finding that career development opportunities, organizational culture, and compensation structure ranked as the three most influential employer attractiveness factors. Their study highlighted the growing importance of learning culture and mentorship access as employer brand differentiators for Indian management graduates, reflecting a shift from purely compensation-centric employment decision-making toward a more holistic evaluation of the total employment experience.

B. *Employer Branding and Talent Attraction*

Person-Organization fit theory (Kristof, 1996) provides a psychological foundation for understanding how prospective employees evaluate employer brands. The theory posits that individuals are attracted to organizations whose values, culture, and personality they perceive to be congruent with their own. In the employer branding context, this implies that the most effective employer brands are those that articulate a clear and authentic organizational identity, enabling prospective employees to assess the degree of fit between organizational and personal characteristics.

Cable and Turban (2001) extended this framework by demonstrating that employer brand knowledge — the beliefs and associations prospective employees hold about an employer — mediates the relationship between recruitment activities and application intentions. Organizations with stronger and more differentiated employer brands benefit from higher application rates, more qualified candidate pools, and greater selectivity in hiring. Their research established employer brand equity as a measurable construct with demonstrable impact on recruitment outcomes, providing a rationale for treating employer branding as an investment rather than a cost.

Moroko and Uncles (2008) proposed a framework for evaluating employer brand effectiveness along two primary dimensions: reach (the breadth of awareness the employer brand achieves among target talent segments) and resonance (the depth and quality of employer brand associations formed among aware candidates). Their work highlighted the importance of segmenting the talent marketplace and tailoring employer brand communication to the specific expectations and values of target talent groups — an insight directly applicable to the campus recruitment context where business students constitute a distinct and identifiable talent segment with characteristic expectations and decision-making frameworks.

C. Digital Employer Branding and Generation Z

The emergence of digital platforms has fundamentally transformed the channels through which employer brands are communicated and perceived. LinkedIn, Glassdoor, Indeed, and employer-specific career websites have become primary information sources through which prospective employees research potential employers prior to application. Sivertzen, Nilsen, and Olafsen (2013) demonstrated that social media platforms have become significant employer brand touchpoints for younger talent segments, with organizational social media presence and employee-generated content exerting measurable influence on employer attractiveness perceptions.

Generation Z talent — born roughly between 1997 and 2012 — represents the primary demographic cohort currently populating business school programs globally. Research by Deloitte (2023) and the IBM Institute for Business Value (2022) documents distinctive career preferences among this cohort, including strong emphasis on organizational purpose and social responsibility, preference for employers with strong sustainability commitments, and high valuation of flexibility in work arrangements. Understanding the specific employer brand expectations of Gen Z business students is therefore essential for organizations seeking to optimize campus recruitment effectiveness in the current decade.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

A. Primary Objectives

1) To identify and rank the key employer brand attributes that most significantly influence employer attractiveness among business students in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar.
2) To examine the information sources and media channels through which business students form their perceptions of potential employers.
3) To assess the relationship between employer brand awareness, perceived organizational prestige, and student application intentions.
4) To develop an Employer Brand Attractiveness Index (EBAI) as a diagnostic framework for organizations seeking to benchmark and enhance campus employer brand positioning.

B. Secondary Objectives

1) To investigate sectoral differences in employer attractiveness perceptions among business students pursuing different specializations.
2) To examine the role of corporate social responsibility, sustainability commitments, and organizational purpose in shaping employer brand evaluations.
3) To assess the impact of digital employer branding activities — including LinkedIn presence, Glassdoor ratings, and virtual recruitment events — on student employer perceptions.
4) To provide actionable recommendations for HR practitioners and campus recruitment teams seeking to strengthen employer brand positioning among business student talent pools.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, integrating quantitative survey methodology with qualitative focus group discussions. The quantitative phase provides statistical breadth through the systematic measurement and analysis of employer brand attribute importance ratings across a representative student sample. The qualitative phase provides contextual depth through exploratory discussion of the meaning, sources, and dynamics of employer brand perceptions. A convergent parallel design was employed, with quantitative and qualitative data collected simultaneously and integrated at the interpretation stage.

B. Sample and Data Collection

The study population comprised MBA and BBA students enrolled in management programs at five institutions in Chhatrapati Sambhajinagar and the broader Marathwada region. A stratified random sampling approach was used to ensure proportionate representation across year of study (first-year and second-year), specialization (HR, Finance, Marketing, Operations), and gender. A total of 285 valid survey responses were collected, exceeding the minimum sample size of 270 derived from Cochran's (1977) formula for finite population proportions at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error.

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Supplementary qualitative data were collected through four focus group discussions, each comprising 10 participants selected purposively to represent a diversity of specializations, gender identities, and campus recruitment experience levels. Focus groups were conducted in a semi-structured format, exploring themes including employer information-seeking behavior, perceptions of employer brand communication channels, and the factors that prompted application or non-application to specific employers.

C. Research Instrument

The primary data collection instrument was a structured questionnaire comprising four sections. Section A captured respondent demographic and academic profile information. Section B assessed employer brand attribute importance using a 21-item scale adapted from Berthon, Ewing, and Hah's (2005) Employer Attractiveness (EmpAt) scale and supplemented with digital employer branding items drawn from Sivertzen et al. (2013). All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale anchored at 1 (Not at all important) and 5 (Extremely important). Section C assessed employer brand information sources and digital engagement patterns. Section D measured application intention toward pre-specified employer brands using a three-item scale. The instrument was pre-tested with 30 students prior to main data collection, and minor revisions were made based on clarity feedback.

D. Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics 27. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis (Cronbach's alpha), factor analysis (principal component extraction with varimax rotation), and one-way ANOVA were employed. Qualitative focus group data were transcribed, coded thematically using NVivo 12, and analyzed through inductive thematic analysis. The Employer Brand Attractiveness Index (EBAI) was developed as a weighted composite score derived from the factor analysis results.

V. KEY FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

A. Respondent Profile

Of the 285 valid respondents, 54.4% were male and 45.6% were female. The majority (61.4%) were second-year students with prior internship exposure. Specialization distribution comprised HR (28.4%), Finance (32.3%), Marketing (26.3%), and Operations (13.0%). Approximately 67% of respondents had participated in at least one campus placement interaction with recruiting organizations.

Respondent Category	Number	Percentage (%)
Male	155	54.4
Female	130	45.6
First-Year Students	110	38.6
Second-Year Students	175	61.4
HR Specialization	81	28.4
Finance Specialization	92	32.3
Marketing Specialization	75	26.3
Operations Specialization	37	13.0

Table 1: Respondent Profile Summary

B. Employer Brand Attribute Importance Rankings

Factor analysis of the 21-item employer attractiveness scale yielded five interpretable factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, collectively accounting for 68.3% of total variance. The five factors were labeled: (1) Career Growth and Learning (CGL), (2) Compensation and Security (CS), (3) Organizational Culture and Climate (OCC), (4) Brand Reputation and Prestige (BRP), and (5) Social Value and Purpose (SVP). Reliability analysis confirmed acceptable internal consistency for all five factors (Cronbach's alpha range: 0.71–0.84).

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Employer Brand Factor	Mean Score (1-5)	Rank	Cronbach's Alpha
Career Growth & Learning (CGL)	4.62	1	0.84
Organizational Culture & Climate (OCC)	4.48	2	0.79
Compensation & Security (CS)	4.31	3	0.81
Brand Reputation & Prestige (BRP)	4.19	4	0.76
Social Value & Purpose (SVP)	3.87	5	0.71

Table 2: Employer Brand Factor Importance Ratings

Career Growth and Learning emerged as the highest-rated employer brand factor (M = 4.62, SD = 0.51), underscoring the primacy of professional development opportunities in business students' employer evaluations. Qualitative focus group data corroborated this finding, with participants consistently citing structured mentorship programs, internal rotation opportunities, and access to professional certifications as key employer brand differentiators.

As one participant articulated: the company may offer good pay, but if there is no path forward, no structured learning, then one feels stuck — that matters more.

Organizational Culture and Climate ranked second (M = 4.48), reflecting students' heightened sensitivity to workplace environment quality following the pandemic-era shift toward remote and hybrid working. Students expressed strong preferences for organizations demonstrating psychological safety, inclusion, and collaborative team cultures. Compensation and Security, while still highly rated (M = 4.31), ranked third — suggesting that while financial considerations remain important, they do not unilaterally determine employer attractiveness among business student cohorts.

C. Employer Brand Information Sources

Analysis of employer brand information-seeking behavior revealed that digital channels dominate business students' employer research activities. LinkedIn was identified as the primary information source by 78.2% of respondents, followed by company career websites (64.8%), peer-to-peer networks and alumni referrals (61.1%), Glassdoor reviews (47.7%), and YouTube employer brand content (38.6%). Traditional information sources such as employment newspapers and physical career fairs were cited by fewer than 20% of respondents.

Information Source	% Respondents Using	Importance Rating (1-5)
LinkedIn	78.2%	4.51
Company Career Website	64.8%	4.38
Peer & Alumni Networks	61.1%	4.29
Glassdoor Reviews	47.7%	4.17
YouTube Employer Content	38.6%	3.94
Instagram / Social Media	33.0%	3.76
Campus Placement Events	29.5%	3.88
Physical Career Fairs	18.2%	3.21

Table 3: Employer Brand Information Sources

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D. Sectorial Preferences

One-way ANOVA revealed significant sectorial differences in employer attractiveness perceptions across student specializations ($F(3, 281) = 8.42$, $p < 0.001$). Finance specialization students demonstrated significantly higher employer attractiveness ratings for banking, financial services, and consulting organizations. HR specialization students showed stronger preference for organizations with well-articulated employer branding programs, visible HR leadership, and demonstrated people-first cultures. Marketing students rated FMCG, media, and technology companies most favorably, while Operations students showed the broadest sectoral preferences, with manufacturing and logistics firms receiving relatively higher ratings compared to other specializations.

E. The Employer Brand Attractiveness Index (EBAI)

Based on the factor analysis results and the relative importance weights derived from regression analysis of application intention, the Employer Brand Attractiveness Index (EBAI) is proposed as a composite diagnostic measure of employer brand strength from a student perspective. The EBAI is computed as a weighted sum of normalized organization scores across the five employer brand dimensions:

$$EBAI = 0.30(CGL) + 0.25(OCC) + 0.20(CS) + 0.15(BRP) + 0.10(SVP)$$

The dimensional weights (CGL: 30%, OCC: 25%, CS: 20%, BRP: 15%, SVP: 10%) were derived from standardized regression coefficients predicting application intention ($R^2 = 0.58$, $F(5, 279) = 77.23$, $p < 0.001$). The EBAI enables organizations to benchmark their employer brand strength relative to competitors on dimensions that directly predict student application behavior, providing a prioritized improvement agenda for campus recruitment teams.

VI. DISCUSSION

A. Theoretical Contributions

The findings of this study make several contributions to the employer branding literature. First, the dominance of Career Growth and Learning as the primary employer attractiveness driver among business students extends and contextualizes prior work by Saini et al. (2014), confirming that Indian management graduates prioritize developmental value over immediate financial compensation in employer evaluation — a finding with implications for how organizations calibrate their employee value propositions in campus recruitment contexts.

Second, the prominence of Organizational Culture and Climate as the second-ranked employer brand dimension reflects a broader generational shift in workplace values that has been documented internationally but is now empirically demonstrated in the Marathwada regional context. The weight assigned to psychological safety, inclusion, and collaborative culture signals that organizations with toxic or hierarchical cultures face structural disadvantages in campus talent markets irrespective of compensation competitiveness.

Third, the role of digital employer branding channels — particularly LinkedIn and peer networks — as dominant information sources challenges organizations still relying primarily on traditional campus presence and print media for employer brand communication. The finding that 78.2% of respondents use LinkedIn as a primary employer research tool underscores the strategic importance of systematic digital employer brand management, including employee advocacy programs, thought leadership content, and responsive social media engagement.

B. Practical Implications

The study findings yield several concrete recommendations for organizations seeking to strengthen employer brand positioning among business student talent pools:

1) Redesign Employer Value Propositions (EVPs) to foreground career development, mentorship, and learning culture. EVPs anchored primarily in compensation and benefits messaging are likely to underperform with business student audiences.

2) Invest in authentic digital employer brand content, particularly LinkedIn posts featuring employee stories, day-in-the-life content, and leadership insights. Glassdoor management responses and ratings maintenance should be treated as reputation management priorities.

3) Develop structured campus engagement programs that provide tangible evidence of organizational culture rather than relying solely on traditional recruitment presentations. Case competitions, live business challenges, and mentorship programs offer differentiated employer brand touchpoints.

4) Leverage alumni networks as employer brand advocates. Peer referral emerged as a high-credibility information source; organizations should systematically activate alumni in talent pipeline roles.

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5) Customize employer brand communication by student specialization. Finance-track students respond to different signals than HR or Marketing students; generic campus employer branding misses the segmentation opportunity.

VII. CONCLUSION

This research contributes original empirical evidence on employer branding perceptions among business students in the Marathwada region of Maharashtra, addressing a significant gap in the demand-side employer branding literature. The study establishes that Career Growth and Learning, Organizational Culture and Climate, and Compensation and Security constitute the three most influential dimensions of employer attractiveness for business students, with digital channels — led by LinkedIn — dominating employer brand information-seeking behavior.

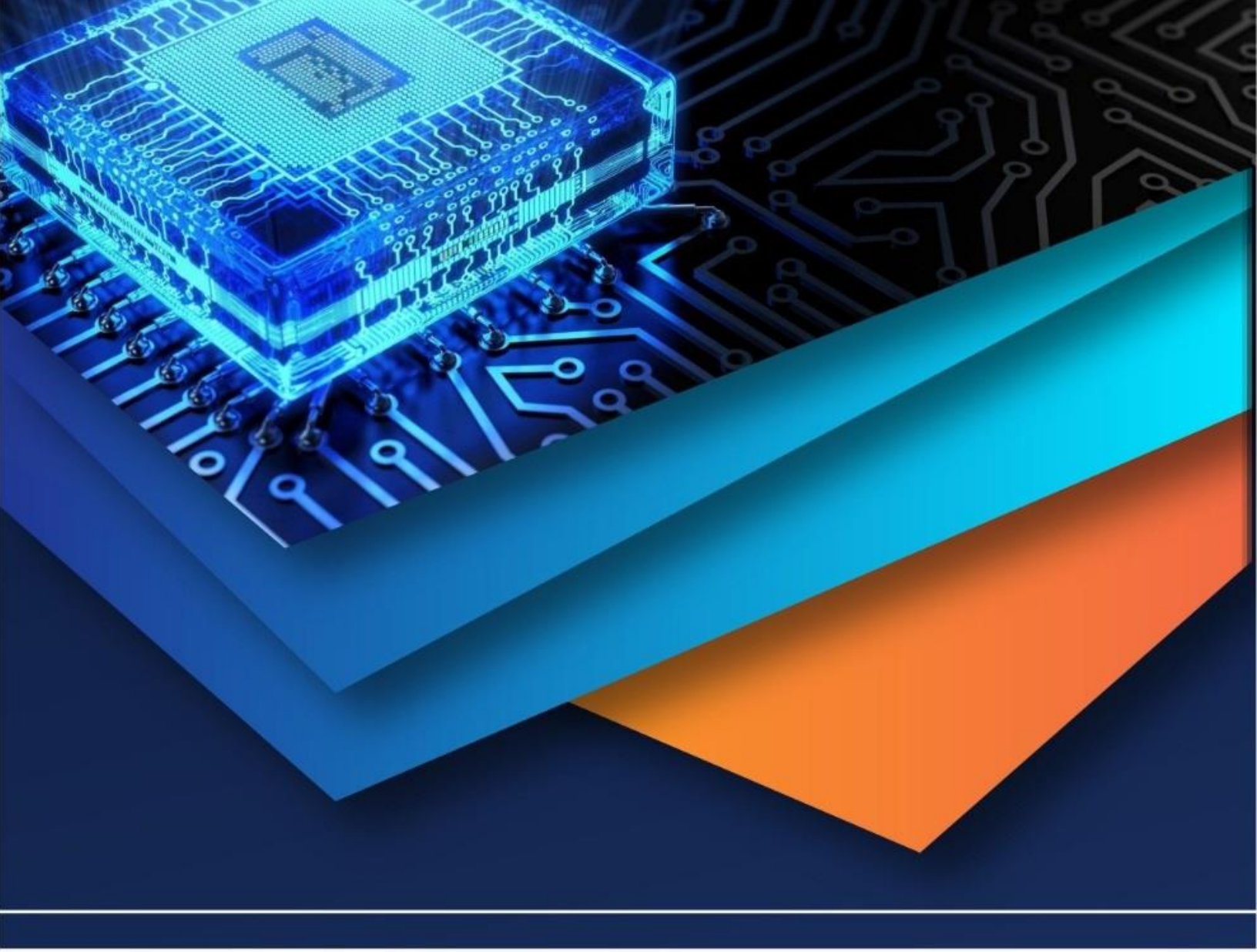
The proposed Employer Brand Attractiveness Index (EBAI) offers a structured, empirically grounded diagnostic framework that organizations can deploy to benchmark and prioritize employer brand investments relative to student talent expectations. The findings underscore that employer branding is no longer a peripheral HR activity but a strategic necessity for organizations seeking to build competitive talent pipelines in an increasingly crowded graduate recruitment marketplace.

Future research should extend this analysis longitudinally to track how employer brand perceptions evolve through the recruitment, selection, and onboarding experience, and explore whether employer brand expectations vary across tier-1 and tier-2 management institution cohorts. The application of conjoint analysis and discrete choice modeling to employer brand attribute trade-offs represents a promising methodological direction for subsequent studies.

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