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### Third party employment branding: What are its signaling dimensions, mechanisms, and sources?

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## CHAPTER 5

# THIRD PARTY EMPLOYMENT BRANDING: WHAT ARE ITS SIGNALING DIMENSIONS, MECHANISMS, AND SOURCES?

Brian R. Dineen, Greet Van Hoye, Filip Lievens  
and Lindsay Mechem Rosokha

### ABSTRACT

*Massive shifts in the recruitment landscape, the continually changing nature of work and workers, and extraordinary technological progress have combined to enable unparalleled advances in how current and prospective employees receive and process information about organizations. Once the domain of internal organizational public relations and human resources (HR) teams, most employment branding has moved beyond organizations' control. This chapter provides a conceptual framework pertaining to third party employment branding, defined as communications, claims, or status-based classifications generated by parties outside of direct company control that shape, enhance, and differentiate organizations' images as favorable or unfavorable employers. Specifically, the authors first theorize about the underlying mechanisms by which third party employment branding might signal prospective and current employees. Second, the authors develop a framework whereby we comprehensively review third party employment branding sources, thus identifying the different ways that third party employment branding might manifest. Third, using prototypical examples, the authors link the various signaling mechanisms to the various third party employment branding sources identified. Finally, the*

*authors propose an ambitious future research agenda that considers not only the positive aspects of third party employment branding but also potential “dark sides.” Thus, the authors view this chapter as contributing to the broader employment branding literature, which should enhance scholarly endeavors to study it and practitioner efforts to leverage it.*

**Keywords:** Third party employment branding, organizational image, reputation, signaling, recruitment; credibility, comparability

### **THIRD PARTY EMPLOYMENT BRANDING: A REVIEW OF SIGNALING DIMENSIONS, MECHANISMS, AND SOURCES**

In the last several years, companies have been increasingly challenged to attract, recruit, and retain high-skilled employees. For example, 45% of employers claim they cannot find sufficient skilled labor to fill their vacancies (Manpower Group, 2018). In 2018, job openings in the United States outnumbered jobless individuals for the first time on record (Morath, 2018) while the lowest birthrate in 30 years foretells that these challenges may persist for decades (e.g., Wilkie, 2018). In a more recent and foreboding turn of events, observers report that more than 20% of workers are either simply skipping interviews or failing to show up the first day of work (Davidson, 2018). Moreover, even if they are able to recruit good workers, and those workers actually show up for their first day, companies struggle to retain them.

Several other particular trends illustrate the intricacies of this contemporary landscape. For example, in the United States, as the baby boomer generation continues to transition to retirement and the millennial generation has become the fastest growing workforce segment, companies are turning their recruitment efforts toward younger workers. Observers often describe this generation as comprising ambitious, achievement-oriented individuals that have high expectations of the companies for which they work. Given that they are always on the lookout for something different and better, they might be more prone to job shopping and job hopping than prior generations. Sources vary in their estimates of early-stage job search, with the bureau of labor statistics suggesting the figure could be as high as eleven job searches before the age of 44 (BLS, 2010). Although such statements about generations may sometimes over-generalize, sources document that, while millennials are intent on having engaging and fulfilling work, less than 30% are currently engaged in their jobs (Adkins, 2016), suggesting they may be open to different job opportunities.

Also trending is the ease of communication via Internet and smartphone technology, as it increasingly blurs the line between work and life. Evidence for the thinning of work–life boundaries suggests more than two-thirds of employees continue working past traditional daily office hours and 61% of US employees claim to work while on vacation (Glassdoor, 2014). As one outgrowth of this

blurring of work and non-work roles, employees believe it is more important to find emotional meaning and attachment in their job beyond the tangible benefits that it might provide, and this seems especially pertinent to younger workers.

Finally, another important trend that may suggest a different role for emotional attachment versus non-attachment is the rise of the gig (on-demand) economy. A McKinsey Global Institute survey of about 8,000 respondents in Europe and the United States revealed that 20–30% did some kind of independent work (Manyika et al., 2016). Although such contingent labor provides companies with substantial flexibility to scale their activities up and down in light of business and economic imperatives, it also challenges their recruitment and retention practices. These independent contractors, freelancers, 1099ers, or temporary workers embody a free agency mentality, and hence their connection to companies may be quite loose (Allen, Eby, Chao, & Bauer, 2017; Ashford, Caza, & Reid, 2018). Yet, they may still be drawn to aspects of the employment package other than emotional attachment; for example, reviews from fellow gig workers about flexible schedules, or stories about a company's proclivity to expose its workers to other key industry players via its partnerships.

The above are only a few of the examples that might challenge companies to attract, recruit, and retain high-skilled workers. Due to this altered employee recruitment and retention landscape, effective *employment branding* for attracting and retaining talent has become even more critical than in the past (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). Employment branding can be defined as an approach to recruitment and retention that “involves internally and externally promoting a clear view of what makes a firm different and desirable as an employer” (Lievens, 2007, p. 51; see also Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Scholars introduced employment branding in the recruitment field over 20 years ago (Ambler & Barrow, 1996) and have refined its meaning since (e.g., Backhaus & Tikoo 2004; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). For example, Ambler and Barrow (1996, p. 187) defined the term “employer brand” as

the package of functional (developmental and/or useful activities), economic (material or monetary reward), and psychological (feelings such as belonging, direction, and purpose) benefits provided by employment and identified by the employing company.

Lievens and Highhouse (2003) further refined this characterization into instrumental (e.g., tangible, utilitarian) and symbolic (e.g., subjective, reflecting the match with perceived self-identity) organizational attributes. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004, p. 502) defined employment [employer] branding as “the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity, and the employer brand as a concept of the firm that differentiates it from its competitors.”

The concept of branding originates from the marketing domain. The idea of brand equity serves as its central premise, meaning that products have symbolic and emotional appeal beyond their tangible aspects (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993). The typical example is that products from different manufacturers (e.g., mobile phones) might have very similar functional benefits but are still perceived quite differently in terms of what they express about the user's personality. Since the concept's inception, several popular employment branding books (e.g., Schumann & Sartain, 2009) have been published and company efforts to brand themselves have

become widespread. For instance, according to a recent survey, 59% of companies invested more in their employer brand than the year before. This survey also revealed that 83% of the companies believe their brand has a significant impact on their ability to hire top talent (LinkedIn, 2017).

Similar to this growing practical interest, research on employment branding has begun to proliferate. For example, Theurer, Tumasjan, Welp, and Lievens (2018) found in their review that the number of peer-reviewed publications related to employment branding doubled in the last five years. Researchers have especially made progress in better understanding the image that job seekers have about employers (e.g., Belt & Paolillo, 1982; Cable & Turban, 2001; Gatewood, Gowan, & Lautenschlager, 1993; Highhouse, Zickar, Thorsteinson, Stierwalt, & Slaughter, 1999; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003; Slaughter, Cable, & Turban, 2014; Slaughter, Zickar, Highhouse, & Mohr, 2004; Turban & Keon, 1993; Van Hove & Saks, 2011). This stream of employer image research has focused on the antecedents of employer image (e.g., websites, recruitment ads, testimonials; for a review, see Yu & Cable, 2012) as well as its dimensions (e.g., employer image attributes, for reviews see Gardner, Erhardt, & Martin-Rios, 2011; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Theurer et al., 2018).

A common thread running through these practical and scientific developments is that they focus predominantly on how companies brand themselves as good employers. That is, they focus on branding that is *within the company's direct control* (e.g., Gardner et al., 2011; Theurer et al., 2018). Company-controlled branding approaches help companies convey a carefully crafted brand message to prospective applicants and the general public. However, in this era of social media, there is increased recognition that corporate reputation and the employer brand are not properties that the company prescribes and controls solely. Nowadays current/former employees and other external stakeholders (e.g., applicants and customers) increasingly define and shape the employer brand *outside* of a company's direct control (Etter, Ravasi, & Colleoni, 2017; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Van Hove & Lievens, 2009). That is, now more than ever information flows are outside of company control, meaning there are many more sources and means by which third parties can brand organizations as places to work. By extension, organizational familiarity, which influences overall brand equity and branding outcomes (Cable & Turban, 2001; Collins, 2007; Collins & Han, 2004), may derive from many more sources than before. Fine (2008, p. 78) states that much of what we know about organizations "has been gathered second-hand through individuals and institutions." Indeed, for reasons we will expand upon in this chapter, there is good reason to believe that these outside branding sources can be even more crucial than internal company controlled employment branding efforts. For example, there is evidence that workplaces that are branded by external entities may attract talent (e.g., Turban & Greening, 1997), reduce turnover (e.g., Dineen & Allen, 2016; Saini, Rai, & Chaudhary, 2014), and in turn ultimately enjoy improved firm performance (Fulmer, Gerhart, & Scott, 2003). However, being outside company control, these external entities may also negatively brand a company, which may in turn lead to undesirable outcomes.

In this chapter, we formally define *third party employment branding* as communications, claims, or status-based classifications generated by parties outside

of direct company control that shape, enhance, and differentiate organizations' images as favorable or unfavorable employers (see also Dineen & Allen, 2016).<sup>1</sup> A company's overall employer image then results from a cocreation of company-controlled employment branding and third party employment branding. However, a key aspect of third party branding in particular is that it comprises the choices and opinions of other entities outside a particular company's control. It is well established that under conditions of uncertainty people look to others' opinions and choices as they assess information and make choices (e.g., Rao, Davis, & Ward, 2000; Rao, Greve, & Davis, 2001; Fiske & Taylor, 2013). Thus, it is crucial to better understand this aspect of an overall corporate brand image.

It is apparent that the information flows and branding processes occurring *outside* of a company's direct control via current/former employees and other external entities are quickly becoming equally or perhaps even more important than company-crafted employment branding. However, little is known about how such branding sources shape the overall employment brand. Specifically, there is a dearth of theorizing and empirical research focused on third party employment branding. This leaves various key questions unanswered, such as: Which signals do third party employment branding messages send to prospective applicants? What are the key mechanisms through which third party employment branding practices signal to prospective and current employees? To what extent do these mechanisms operate differently for various types of third party employment branding? We are also unclear about the constellation of third party employment branding sources that exist, on which dimensions they are distinguishable, and about their relative effects.

This chapter provides a framework by which researchers might begin answering these important questions. Accordingly, we have the following four goals. First, we aim to theorize about the underlying mechanisms by which third party employment branding might signal prospective and current employees. Second, we develop a framework by which we comprehensively review third party employment branding sources, thus identifying the different ways that third party employment branding might manifest. Third, using prototypical examples, we link the various signaling mechanisms to the various third party employment branding sources identified. Finally, we propose an ambitious future research agenda that considers not only the positive aspects of third party employment branding, but also potential "dark sides."

In keeping with these goals, our chapter makes the following *conceptual and practical* contributions. First, adopting an attributions perspective, we explicate three key signaling dimensions and related receiver attributions: consistency, consensus, and distinctiveness. For each, we further derive subdimensions specific to third party employment branding as well as two overarching signaling mechanisms: credibility and comparability. This delineation enables finer-grained insights into "why" and "how" third party employment branding provides signals to prospective or current employees, which might in turn influence recruitment and retention efforts.<sup>2</sup>

Second, our framework distinguishes between third party employment branding emanating from personal versus impersonal sources, and further parses these

sources as detached versus attached to the organization. We then illustrate the many ways in which third party employment branding can influence credibility and comparability perceptions among prospective and current employees. Accordingly, this framework extends prior work on third party employment branding that has mostly considered best employer certifications/competitions (e.g., Dineen & Allen, 2016; Fulmer et al., 2003). Third, our more comprehensive conceptual treatment of third party employment branding is also evidenced by the fact that we consider not only typical positive outcomes, but also potential effects of negative third party employment branding, and even “dark side” effects of positively framed third party employment branding. Finally, beyond developing theory pertaining to third party employment branding, this chapter is also practically useful, insofar as the recommendations flowing from our chapter should help companies better manage or at least anticipate effects of third party employment branding on job seekers, current employees, and company outcomes as a whole.

The structure of this chapter is as follows. We start by presenting our third party employment branding framework, which distinguishes between different signal dimensions, their subdimensions, and broader mechanisms by which receivers perceive third party employment branding messages. The next section then delves into the proposed framework of third party employment branding sources. Using this framework, we describe and exemplify these different sources of third party employment branding, using extended prototypical examples. Next, we discuss several critical outcomes of third party employment branding, both at the individual and organizational level. We conclude with several intriguing avenues for future research on third party employment branding.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND TAXONOMY OF THIRD PARTY EMPLOYMENT BRANDING SIGNALING CHARACTERISTICS**

To this point, we have defined third party employment branding as communications, claims, or status-based classifications generated by parties outside of direct company control that influence organizations’ images as favorable or unfavorable employers. Given the criticality of third party employment branding and its many manifestations, it is important to develop theory to better guide academic efforts to study it and practitioner efforts to understand and leverage it. Fig. 1 presents an overarching theoretical framework and taxonomy that identifies key characteristics underlying third party employment branding. Throughout our introduction and development of these various characteristics, we discuss existing third party employment branding literature, although sparse to date. We also integrate broader literatures that address critical aspects of our model. We begin by reviewing key signaling and reputation theoretical perspectives particularly pertinent to third party employment branding.



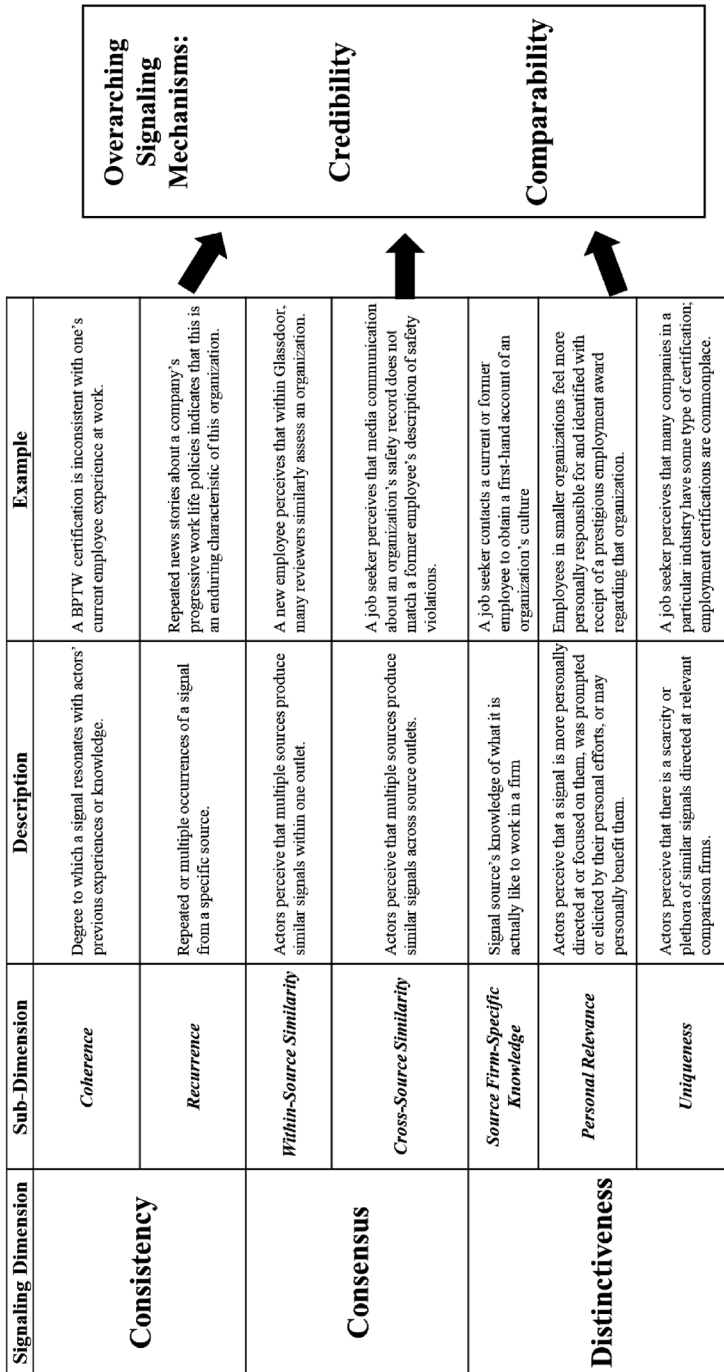


Fig. 1. Third Party Employment Branding Signaling.



*Third Party Employment Branding: Corporate Reputation and Signaling Theory Links*

Given that third party employment branding mainly focuses on perceptions of and claims about organizations' employment practices that exist outside direct company control (Dineen & Allen, 2016), whereby these practices are thought to create value for organizations (Huselid, 1995), it is intimately tied to reputation (Theurer et al., 2018; Turban & Greening, 1997). Therefore, it is critical to first appropriately situate third party employment branding in the corporate reputation literature. Rindova, Williamson, Petkova, and Sever (2005, p. 1033) defined reputation as "stakeholders' perceptions about an organization's ability to create value relative to competitors." Although stakeholders can be internal, a key element implied by this definition is *external perceptions* of the organization versus perceptions held by organizational insiders. Lievens, Van Hoye, and Anseel (2007) specifically referenced the differences between employees' own perception of the image of their organization, and their assessment of *others' perception* of the image of the organization (see also, Cable & Turban, 2001; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Highhouse, Brooks, & Gregarus, 2009; Theurer et al., 2018). Moreover, they identified construed external image as insiders' experience that their organization is perceived positively or negatively by outsiders. This is critical, because it represents insiders' best assessment of how outsiders will assess them personally, concerning their organizational membership. Thus, it is a "powerful mirror" (Lievens et al., 2007, p. S46) by which individuals gauge the value of their organization and themselves. Correspondingly, Lievens et al. (2007) found that while employees' own perceptions of instrumental and symbolic organizational attributes influenced their organizational identification, construed external perceptions of these characteristics explained even more variance in employee identification.

Rindova et al. (2005) develop perceived quality and prominence reputation dimensions. Of these, third party employment branding pertains most to the prominence dimension. Within this dimension, these authors detail three subdimensions, all of which exhibit significant relationships with prominence in their research. These subdimensions comprise media rankings of various sorts, certifications of achievements, and affiliations with high-status others. All three are conceptually relevant to third party messages about organizations. For example, formal third party certifications or rankings naturally fit this characterization. However, more informal word of mouth messaging regarding organizations is also relevant, as third parties who engage in word of mouth often certify organizations' achievements, even if informally. Finally, research suggests that the status or reputation of third parties bears on their ability to affect the employment brand (e.g., Boivie, Graffin, & Gentry, 2016). For example, Baum and Überschaer (2019) found that third party endowed awards only assist firm recruiting efforts when the award is well-known and the company is not. By contrast, if well-known companies receive lesser-known third party awards, effects can even be adverse. Additionally, Collins (2007, p. 180) states that some of "the effectiveness of recruitment practices depends on the degree to which job seekers have already

developed employer knowledge through exposure to non-recruitment sources of information such as product awareness.” Similarly, the effectiveness of third party branding should also depend on the opinion of and degree to which receivers (e.g., job seekers, current employees) have knowledge and awareness of the branded employer or of the third party entity conducting the branding.

Lange, Lee, and Dai (2011) differ somewhat from Rindova et al. (2005), depicting reputation in three parts: being known, being known for something in particular, and generalized favorability (vs. lack of favorability). Our approach is most pertinent to the “being known for something” characterization because we specifically consider reputation for company employment practices. Lange et al. (2011) also review research suggesting that judgments are central to the “being known for something” aspect, and that these judgments typically pertain to an organization’s ability to meet an audience’s needs and reflect stakeholder perceptions of likely firm behavior or expected behavior in an exchange relationship (e.g., Basdeo, Smith, Grimm, Rindova, & Derfus, 2006; Love & Kraatz, 2009; Standifird, 2001). Lange et al. (2011) also review work suggesting that reputation is a firm asset. This is interesting in our context, insofar as assets are typically thought to be “owned” by a firm, whereas third party employment branding is largely outside of a company’s control. Similarly, Lange et al.’s (2011) review details many possible antecedents of firm reputation, but most or nearly all of these are company controlled, rather than third party originated.

More recently, Ravasi, Rindova, Etter, and Cornelissen (2018) detailed six means by which organizational reputation forms and propagates. Their theorizing clearly coalesces with third party employment branding. First, they detail a *game theoretic perspective* by which rational actors rely on signals to infer unobservable attributes. In the employment context, actors often operate under information asymmetry when gauging the likely experience of working for a company, as well as company intentions vis-à-vis their current employees (Connelly, Certo, Ireland, & Reutzel, 2011; Stiglitz, 2000). Although current employees, for example, may know their current employer well, they often lack information about potential *alternative* employers, and thus may be unable to adequately compare their current organization to other possible organizations.

Similarly, prospective employees often lack information about prospective employers, and how those firms’ employment value proposition might compare to other firms in an industry or geographical region. Correspondingly, reputational signals provide otherwise difficult to obtain information about an entity, such as employment conditions within a company. As reviewed by Dineen and Allen (2016), signaling theory’s broad tenets are thus readily applicable to third party employment branding, because it allows for cross-organizational comparisons to a greater extent.

More specifically, absent clear information about alternatives, actors seek credible environmental cues or short cuts to differentiate between choices and thus assist their decision-making (Spence, 1973). A strict signaling perspective entails tangible sender signaling costs, as well as requirements that the signal be both observable (e.g., Connelly et al., 2011), and hard to fake (Bangerter, Roulin, & Konig, 2012). Importantly, signal costs, observability, and faking proneness

can vary considerably across third party sources, compared with official within-organizational branding sources. For example, as we will detail more below, social media-related third party employment branding is not usually as costly to senders and tends to have lower relative observability (although, as we will also discuss, it can be prone to faking).

Fombrun and Shanley's (1990) work set a foundation for expanding the strict signaling perspective to comprise a wider variety of potential information cues that do not necessarily incur costs or require direct observability. Correspondingly, Ravasi et al.'s (2018) second *reputational perspective* is perhaps even more applicable to how firms might strategically use or rely on third parties to manage their reputations. Specifically, we agree with Ravasi et al. that while third party employment branding is often largely outside company control, companies will still take action to either solicit or respond to third party branding. For example, companies might strive to attain employment-related certifications, and scholars have discussed the dissemination of repair signals (e.g., via the media) when external sources threaten reputations (Etter et al., 2019; Pfarrer, Decelles, Smith, & Taylor, 2008). We address these possible company attempts to manage third party employment branding in more detail toward the end of the chapter.

Third, and also pertinent to third party employment branding, Ravasi et al.'s (2018) *macro-cognitive perspective* recognizes the role of third party intermediaries in information/signal exchange between actors, such as between companies and job seekers. Their fourth, *cultural-sociological perspective*, is similar to the macro-cognitive perspective, although the cultural-sociological view portrays this process as occurring over a more extended time whereby reputations transmute into "objective social facts." For example, unions, as third party agents, have propagated for years the mantra that "Walmart treats its workers poorly" (e.g., changewalmart.org), which for right or wrong has essentially transmuted into such a "social fact."

However, the media or "Best Places to Work" (BPTW) certifying bodies also can act as cultural-sociological agents, such that repeated reputational rankings like BPTW or media accounts can, over time, become "social facts" (e.g., "SAS Corporation is a perennial BPTW") (Ravasi et al., 2018; Rindova, Martins, Srinivas, & Chandler, 2018). In particular, Ravasi et al. detail how macro-cognitive and cultural-sociological reputational processes can evolve, because the associated third parties that propagate reputation in this way are believed to have superior access to observable and evaluative data across organizations, thereby rendering them more influential in reputation construction and associated quality assessments. Rindova et al. (2005), for example, cast the media as a gatekeeper with reputation imbuing power. Challenging this perspective, however, is the notion that social media now introduces the possibility of bypassing traditional external gatekeepers and allowing individuals and groups to act as third party gatekeepers (Etter et al., 2019).

Fifth, Ravasi et al.'s (2018) *micro-cognitive reputational perspective* is pertinent to understanding the actual receipt and processing of third party messages. Specifically, this perspective explains how receivers likely interpret signals differently, whether directly from organizations as the game theoretic or strategic

perspectives would suggest, or from the broader third party information marketplace, as the macro-cognitive and cultural-sociological perspectives would suggest. Furthermore, the micro-cognitive perspective suggests that elements of the signal itself, such as cue diagnosticity (e.g., Skowronski & Carlston, 1987) or confirming evidence, will influence processing depth; for example, such that more personally relevant or previously believed information will be processed more carefully and embedded in eventual behaviors. Etter et al. (2019) add to this perspective by recognizing the hyper-emotionality that now accompanies many third party social media recounts of organizational employment situations. Thus, by extension, actors process signals under bounded rationality by using cues, heuristics, emotions, and other mental shortcuts. This approach therefore contrasts with a pure signaling approach, which assumes that actors process signals uniformly.<sup>3</sup>

Taken together, it is apparent that mingling the broader reputation and signaling theoretical perspectives is highly relevant to third party employment branding. For example, similar to reputation, there are many ways in which third party employment branding can initiate and propagate. Third parties act as intermediaries that can shape perceptions of organization reputation under situations of receiver uncertainty. Further, organizations can proactively take steps to influence these third party accounts, and thus direct third parties to render social facts that are beneficial to the organizations. However, receivers may process these third party signals differently depending on how they are sent and in what context they are received. In addition, there exist a wide variety of signals and signal paths.

In turn, the breadth of possible third party employment branding sources implies widely differing source credibility levels and means by which cross-organizational comparisons may be fostered. Thus, as shown in Fig. 1, two overarching signaling characteristics proposed by Dineen and Allen (2016) – signal credibility and comparability – are pertinent to our approach throughout this chapter. Specifically, actors first judge how credible they believe signals are, by way of their trust in the signal's source and content. While they also judge company generated branding messages in this manner, we argue that these judgments vary less than they do across the wide array of available third party sources. Second, they judge the degree to which the signal allows them to compare across organizations. The latter judgment thus pertains to the signal's utility, or usefulness as a differentiator between current or prospective employment opportunities, and strongly distinguishes third party signals from company-generated signals. Dineen and Allen (2016) specifically elucidate how credibility and comparability mechanisms are particularly pertinent to the signaling perspective, and we expand on their work to consider third party employment branding signals more broadly.

### *Overarching Signaling Mechanisms Pertinent to Third Party Employment Branding*

#### *Credibility*

First, and highly related to signaling theory's "cost of signaling" requirement, source credibility is a critical element of third party employment branding that typically incurs costs to attain and maintain. Third party source credibility also

likely varies more than that of organization-generated signals. As Dineen and Allen (2016 p. 93) explain, credibility “pertains to Gardner et al.’s (2011) identification aspect and regards the relative authenticity or legitimacy of third party generated information versus company generated claims.” Connelly et al. (2011) term this signal honesty, referring to the extent to which unobservable signaled qualities are actually thought to be true. Thus, credibility pertains to the trust recipients are willing to extend to the message and source; that is, whether they believe them to be true.<sup>4</sup> In turn, with enhanced message and/or source credibility perceptions, recipients are more likely to use such information as cues or shortcuts, thus discouraging detailed message processing. That is, whether a message emanates from a source such as the Fortune Best 100 Companies to Work For or from a friend, receivers grant the organization “cognitive legitimacy” via simply belonging to a certain credible category; for example, best company to work for or endorsed by a friend. No further scrutiny is required by an evaluator (e.g., Bitektine, 2011, p. 160; Gardner et al., 2011), either with regard to current or future messages. Importantly, less detailed processing does not imply that credible messages have less impact on decisions. However, their impact is enhanced only insofar as they cause receivers to make more expedient and less carefully considered decisions or actions.

We argue that receivers will typically view third party employment branding signals as more credible or legitimate than company generated and controlled signals. However, these third party signals will also exhibit more credibility variance. On the one hand, third parties generally have less motivation to promote the organization, and thus may be more likely to send purer, realistic messages, compared to internal company messaging. In many cases, third parties desire for others to know the “true nature” of organizational employment practices. For example, the media or former employees may wish to keep organizations honest, whereas current employees may wish to attract new colleagues who are fully aware of what they are getting into.

Company generated branding signals can sometimes be less credible, given the incentives organizations have to self-promote their brands. This is particularly true when negative information would be the most honest information. Of course, the realistic recruitment literature has shown benefits of providing forthright information; for example, in the form of realistic job previews (e.g., Phillips, 1998; Premack & Wanous, 1985) or likely fit indications (e.g., Dineen & Noe, 2009). However, per Bangerter et al.’s (2012) handicap principle, only the most “fit” senders can afford to send negative signals or even signals that are not overly positive. Thus, most firms are prone to burnishing themselves rather than presenting their “true selves.”

In addition, third parties by definition typically use external evaluator nominations, whereby these evaluators are thought to be better positioned to judge whether a company is conforming to some normative behavior or set of behaviors. This typically imbues these evaluators with greater credibility. For example, certification signals may be more credible because there are often costs associated with them, in terms of entry fees and risks should the company fail to place, but also because they are granted by trusted third party evaluators thought to possess superior knowledge of company norms.

On the other hand, it is important to note that third party signal credibility can sometimes be lower, and thus overall third party variance higher. For example, Dabirian, Kietzmann, and Diba (2017, p. 198) provide this interesting perspective:

Not only can individuals tell and access these stories online at any time and from any location, but also because employees can now remain anonymous, they have no reason anymore to hold their tongues. And while such publicly available information can be beneficial for job seekers who want to learn about potential employers, the risk is that frustrated employees may start exaggerating or telling outright lies and that good businesses will end up being portrayed as terrible places to work.

Thus, several likely factors bear on third party source credibility. We explore these in greater detail as we develop our signaling dimensions below.

### *Comparability*

Even if third party credibility is established, third party messages still may not be very useful to recipients. Thus, as a second main element that is highly related to signaling theory's observability requirement, Gardner et al.'s (2011) differentiation aspect, and Rindova et al.'s (2018) comparative orderings perspective, third party employment branding signals typically allow for enhanced *comparability*, meaning they generally allow current or prospective employees to engage in relative cross-organizational comparisons, to a greater degree than information provided by individual organizations. That is, at their core, third party employment branding signals help generate a reputation by which people can assess how a firm will likely behave or perform in the future *relative to other organizations in a set* (Bitektine, 2011; emphasis added). Barrow and Mosely (2005) claim that the branding process relies on brand distinctiveness, by which people are able to distinguish one brand's attributes from another. They further recognize that a brand adds value when it is not only known and noticeable, but also relevant, resonant, and unique. Moroko and Uncles (2008) found that differentiation is a key factor related to branding outcomes.

Specifically, the branding process relies on brand distinctiveness, whereby brand associations depend on people's ability to distinguish one brand's attributes from another. For example, Dineen and Allen (2016) discuss how employees might use comparative third party employment branding signals (in the form of BPTW certifications) to conclude that, "not only do I think I'm treated well, but I know I'm treated relatively better than employees at company X." By contrast, purely company-generated signals only allow employees to gauge their current or potential treatment, rather than how this treatment compares to other possibilities (e.g., "I'm treated well here, but I'm not sure if it's better than at other places").

This aspect of observability also implies the uniqueness of third party employment branding information, compared to company generated information. Specifically, institutional theory suggests that company employment branding efforts will coalesce over time. That is, more and more companies must rely on third parties to enhance and differentiate their branding efforts because their



own claims have lost their signaling value (e.g., company websites have become relatively similar and bland, saying things like “we will take your career to a new level” and providing boilerplate employee testimonials; see also, Bangerter et al., 2012). Similarly, Bitektine (2011) explains that industry players tend to adhere to certain industry norms, in terms of employment practices, and attain legitimacy among evaluators as they adhere to them. However, via comparability, receivers are better positioned to observe a more complete constellation of relevant choices in their decision set when they consider third party employment branding information alongside company generated branding information. Even so, as we detail more in our next section, third party sources can still vary greatly in their comparability, and some sources such as BPTW certifications have become more susceptible to the institutional pressures described above for company generated information. For example, companies are now almost expected to provide a portfolio of third party certifications as part of their overall branding efforts. Based on an internet search, Love and Singh (2011, p. 180) note that many organizations claim to be a “best employer.” This can depreciate the value of these awards, as they lose their uniqueness.

Conceptually, signal comparability pertains to organizational status, by which an organization is recognized as fitting in a ranked order of similar organizations (e.g., Bitektine, 2011), and achieves a professional position of social standing or prestige (George, Dahlander, Graffin, & Sim, 2016; Rindova et al., 2018). These status judgments are more powerful than legitimacy judgments, because the latter characterizes a firm as the “same” as benchmarked peers, whereas the former provides differentiated status information (Bitektine, 2011; Deephouse & Carter, 2005). For example, Ravasi et al. (2018) suggest that third parties are often in a unique position to evaluate multiple companies using common metrics. Theurer et al. (2018) detail the importance of differentiation, which suggests an ability to compare across companies on certain dimensions (see also, Gardner et al., 2011). Bangerter et al. (2012) propose that organizations not only try to attract applicants, but also further position themselves relative to competitors. Lange et al. (2011) casts the generalized favorability aspect of reputation as particularly helpful in fostering cross-organizational comparisons. For example, Fischer and Reuber (2007) specifically detail how actors compare favorability assessments across firms. Finally, Turban and Cable (2003, p. 733) define reputation as “public evaluation of a firm *relative to other firms*” (emphasis added to original). Thus, social comparison salience increases via third party evaluations.

These foundational credibility and comparability signaling mechanisms pertain to the degree to which third party sources can advance (or inhibit) overall company employment branding efforts. It is important, however, to further unpack these mechanisms, in terms of specific message characteristics that precede them. Fundamentally, when receivers determine credibility and comparability as they process third party employment branding information, they make attributions about the information. Thus, we draw on the attributions literature next to examine likely antecedent mechanisms related to third party employment branding message credibility and comparability. Specifically, we propose three primary dimensions, shown on the far left side of Fig. 1. These dimensions derive



from Kelley's (1967, 1973) covariation-based attribution theory. Specifically, Kelley (1967, 1973) describes how people infer causes of behavior or explain and make sense of events by assessing information related to consistency, consensus, and distinctiveness. In our context, we argue that these assessments yield overall judgments of third party source credibility and comparability. In turn, receivers judge the overall favorability of the employment value proposition that the third party message implies, and thus likelihood of behaving in accordance with the message.<sup>5</sup>

Scholars have applied these three attribution dimensions to other areas of management science. For example, Bowen and Ostroff (2004) used this classification to describe how employees perceive HR systems more or less uniformly. Specifically, these authors detail how HR systems may not exert appropriate effects on firm level outcomes unless employees view them through a common lens, which derives from consistency, consensus, and distinctiveness. We develop these three primary attribution dimensions in more depth below and explain how various subdimensions of each might affect signal credibility and comparability, which in turn help explain third party employment branding potency.

#### *Key Signaling Dimensions Foundational to Credibility and Comparability Judgments*

##### *Consistency*

Drawing on Kelley (1973), Bowen and Ostroff (2004) describe consistency as occurring when events-effects present themselves the same across time and perceptual modalities. Specifically, their approach relates to how messages (or HR practice constellations, in their particular context) must cohere with what organizations and their members actually espouse. For example, senior managers must live out the values and goals implied by the HR practices. Signals must also be stable and reliable over time to be consistent.

Applying this general framework to our context, we define signal consistency as the degree to which perceived signals match receiver expectations, in terms of content and repetition. Specifically, receivers will deduce a signal's consistency as a critical part of making attributions about the signal and acting on it. As shown in Fig. 1, signal consistency can manifest in two primary ways. First, signals may be more or less consistent with actors' experiences or knowledge. Specifically, *signal coherence* refers to the degree to which a signal resonates with actors' previous experiences with or knowledge about a company and its employment practices, or with the institutional norms surrounding companies in a given industry. For example, Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000) claim that organizational identity may be reaffirmed by the employer brand message or may be altered over time as insiders revise their interpretations. Messages that are inconsistent with organizational identity may destabilize it, requiring insiders to rethink and reconsider the way they understand the organization. Overall, the coherence subdimension of consistency relates mostly to third party source credibility. That is, the outcome of this comparison between expected and encountered information likely affects credibility perceptions.

Actors are more responsive to signals when they resonate with or are consistent with prior experiences or knowledge (Ravasi et al., 2018), via enhanced credibility perceptions. They tend to downplay or completely ignore signals that are inconsistent with prior expectations, judging them an aberration (Etter et al., 2019). For example, Barnett (2014) suggests that people confirm prior beliefs by selecting and attending to information consistent with those beliefs. By contrast, attending to or acting on inconsistent information might cause cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

Signal coherence is likely more salient to current rather than prospective employees. Specifically, current employees tend to have a firmer, more established sense for their companies' employment brand. In turn, when current employees perceive externally generated signals about their company, they will immediately assess whether those signals cohere with their current well-understood experiences. For example, the lead author is currently involved in a study in a firm perennially ranked as a "Best Place to Work" in a statewide BPTW competition (Pratt & Dineen, 2018a). While most employees have expressed positive affect toward these certifications during employee interviews conducted as part of this study, some have expressed contempt toward the certification, indicating that it does not seem genuine and is incoherent with their everyday experience in this company.

Though perhaps not as salient to them, prospective job seekers will also assess signal coherence; that is, whether the signal coheres with their past experiences with or knowledge of an organization (Cable & Turban, 2001). Specifically, as these authors review, newly encountered information more easily associates with similar past information, making it more likely the receiver will find the information useful and credible. For example, consumers-turned-job-seekers often have prior experiences with companies, perhaps by observing how their employees are treated.

A second consistency subdimension shown in Fig. 1 – *signal recurrence* – refers to the temporal stability or repetition of a signal. That is, repeated or multiple occurrences of the signal characterize it as recurrent and thus consistent (Connelly et al., 2011; Fischer & Reuber, 2007). For example, a third party certification such as BPTW is recurrent if a company earns it multiple times (e.g., annually). The critical perception in this case is signal reliability or solidity: is the signal something that is firmly established across time or occurrences, and thus can be relied upon as realistic, or is it merely an aberration?

Interestingly, there are competing perspectives regarding the efficacy of recurrence in generating positive responses to third party messages. These are linked to the respective overarching credibility and comparability mechanisms. On the one hand, recurrence may increase signal credibility. That is, third party signals that occur multiple times appear more certain and thus trustworthy and credible. For example, Dineen and Allen (2016) developed a *crystallization* hypothesis, by which a signal gains efficacy only after repeated occurrences. Specifically, they hypothesized that turnover benefits would only materialize after repeated BPTW certifications. Although Dineen and Allen (2016) failed to find evidence for this effect, perhaps it would materialize via other third party employment branding sources, such as social media or news outlets.

On the other hand, recurrent third party employment branding signals may fail to provide any unique information about a workplace. Thus, over time, their efficacy may diminish and their utility as a comparative information source decrease. Based on Rindova, Pollock, and Hayward's (2006) theorizing on "celebrity firms," and how the media can create firm celebrity similar to how it creates individual celebrity, Dineen and Allen (2016) termed this a *celebrity effect*, and found supportive evidence. Specifically, the negative effect of third party employment branding certifications on employee turnover was strongest after an initial certification, but diminished after subsequent certifications. This is similar to findings in the social network literature regarding redundant versus non-redundant information, whereby redundant information is less useful than non-redundant information (e.g., Granovetter, 1973). Specifically, whereas an initial third party branding episode may facilitate novel and useful comparisons across employment opportunities, subsequent repetitive third party information may fail to meaningfully add to comparative evaluations.

### *Consensus*

As shown in Fig. 1, a second dimension relevant to third party employment branding messages is consensus, defined as message coalescence within or across sources, such that messages are similar to each other and thus foster similar interpretation. Thus, key to this dimension is the degree to which a particular message appears to agree with other messages in the environment. These messages can derive from multiple actors within a given source (e.g., multiple Glassdoor reviewers), or across different sources (e.g., a Glassdoor reviewer and published media story). Bowen and Ostroff (2004) characterize consensus as agreement among individuals' views of event-effect relationships, and they point out that consensus emanates from message sender agreement. Thus, it has more to do with agreement among signal senders than it does with signal receivers. Specifically, an important distinction between consistency and consensus is that consistency refers to *how messages cohere with an actor's prior experiences or how they repeat over time*. Consensus refers to *agreement across message senders (either within or across sources)*. Thus, for example, sources can exhibit consensus with each other, yet resultant similar messages still may not be consistent with an actor's prior experiences. Consensus can occur in two ways, as we detail in the respective subdimensions below.

As shown in Fig. 1, a first subdimension is *within-source similarity*, which refers to similarity (i.e., consensus) across the messages transmitted by different senders within a given source. For example, as indicated above, when multiple Glassdoor reviewers provide similar perspectives about an organization, or current employees uniformly describe their organization's employment practices, this form of similarity is present. In addition, within-source similarity considers not only message similarity, but the depth of similarity, such that 10 similar messages (e.g., 10 similar Glassdoor reviews) are more meaningful than only two or three. In the consumer area, Yao, Fang, Dineen, and Yao (2009) found that customer review consensus exhibited a main effect on purchasing decisions, and that review level

(e.g., positive or negative reviews) exhibited a stronger relationship with purchasing decisions when there was a stronger consensus across reviews versus less of a consensus. In the context of online employer reviews, Könsgen, Schaarschmidt, Ivens, and Munzel (2018) observed that low consensus reviews about a particular employer led to lower perceptions of company trustworthiness and application intentions than high consensus reviews with the same mean (moderately positive) rating.

Dabirian et al. (2017) detail an interesting use of crowdsourcing to create consensus-rich third party information. Specifically, they describe how, to prevent the impact of unreliable accounts, social networks comprising current and former employees are sought and invited to share employment related stories. The advantage of this crowdsourced platform is that it relies on a strength-of-numbers strategy. That is, by attracting many employees to share their stories, the consensus-rich accounts from the many positive ones distill the potentially unreliable voices of a few negative employees. At the same time, however, Etter et al. (2019) suggest that the rise in social media posts tends to create more rather than less diffused and emotionally charged accounts of organizational practices.

Second, *cross-source similarity* refers to similar employment branding messages that emanate from different third party sources, such as from a media source and former employee reviewers on Glassdoor. This pertains also to research suggesting that organizations may have multiple reputations that need to be identified and managed (Ertug et al., 2016; Etter et al., 2019; Rindova et al. 2005). Of the overarching credibility and comparability signaling characteristics, and as indicated above, consensus will likely impact credibility perceptions the most. Specifically, when multiple sources or multiple senders within a source triangulate the characterization of a company's employment practices, the credibility of any specific message increases. For example, Vergne (2012) discusses disapproval incidents in particular, in terms of how a firm can avoid deleterious effects of a negative incident by spreading itself out more with opposing reports of positive incidents. In our context, this suggests the value of soliciting or being the recipient of increased numbers of third party claims from varied sources as a way of neutralizing or discrediting a single negative claim. On the other hand, there is little in the way of increased marginal comparability through additional message consensus.

### *Distinctiveness*

A final signaling dimension in Fig. 1 – distinctiveness – refers to how unique or personally identifiable an employment branding signal is. This dimension ties into aspects of message personal relevance, of which a rich literature base exists (e.g., Dineen & Noe, 2009; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). Also relevant is the degree to which the signal is unique and novel in the environment. Bowen and Ostroff (2004) similarly characterize distinctiveness as the degree to which an event-effect is highly salient or observable. We detail the key distinctiveness subdimensions below.

A first form of distinctiveness is *source firm-specific knowledge*, which refers to how much firm-specific knowledge a sender possesses about an organization's

actual employment practices. When source messages are more, as opposed to less firm-specific, it follows that they are likely more distinct, in terms of specifically referencing the organization and its employment practices. That is, the source is a legitimate authority regarding the organization (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Thus, first-hand firm experience, by which a sender has directly experienced and observed organizational employment practices, is critical to firm-specific knowledge. Moreover, while it is possible to observe these company employment practices otherwise (e.g., as a customer), it is altogether different to experience them first-hand as a current or former employee.

There are two perspectives linking firm-specific knowledge to source credibility. On the one hand, information from sources possessing firm-specific knowledge is likely more credible because it is a first-hand account (Theurer et al., 2018). However, senders with firm-specific knowledge may feel accountable to organizational constituents, and thus may “say the right thing” rather than “saying the accurate thing.” In terms of comparability, it likely decreases as firm specific knowledge increases, given that associated messages are not as generic, and thus not as standardized and comparable across companies.

*Signal personal relevance* is a second distinctiveness subdimension. A signal’s personal relevance refers to the degree to which a receiver can personally identify with the signal, or that the signal is relevant to them specifically (see also, Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Personal relevance implies receiver attention to signals (Connelly et al., 2011; Dineen & Noe, 2009), and it can occur in at least three ways. First, the branding signal may refer to something that is particularly important or salient to the receiver. For example, an older person may encounter the American Association of Retired Person’s (AARP’s) “Best Employers for Workers over 50” list (AARP, 2013) more personally, or a pregnant job seeker may find a testimonial from a former woman employee who was able to successfully reengage her work after maternity leave because of her company’s outstanding work–life policies more personally relevant than a single male would.

Second, the branding signal may be more personally relevant and thus impactful to the extent that the receiver feels personally responsible for the signal’s content. For example, Dineen and Allen (2016) found that the negative effects of BPTW certifications on turnover were stronger in smaller companies. They attributed this to higher organizational identity among workers in smaller companies, and concomitant greater “ownership” of the BPTW accolade (e.g., “I played a part in this”), although they did not have “black box” data to this effect. For example, those in upper management may find employment branding signals to be more personally relevant, because upper managers often have direct authority over policies and culture shaping, which can beget positive or negative third party signals.

A third potentially interesting angle on signal personal relevance is the notion of signal instrumentality, or how personally useful the signal might be to a receiver. For example, when firms receive BPTW recognition, employees may react to this news with positive effect, as this symbolism may allow them to communicate something about themselves (e.g., Gardner et al., 2011). Yet, they may also benefit professionally by basking in the reflected glory of their organization.

For example, DelVecchio, Jarvis, Klink, and Dineen (2007) found that job seekers view working for a strong brand as a way to build resume power. Pratt and Dineen (2018a) have also found preliminary evidence in interviews with financial services firm employees that some of these employees, who work for a firm consistently certified as a BPTW, view this as a “resume builder,” such that they might personally benefit from it. Employees may also believe a BPTW certification provides other instrumental benefits, such as making it easier to attract new customers. Related to this, Kilduff, Crossland, Tsai, and Bowers (2016) found that “acolytes,” or actors who are tied to high reputation industry leaders (in their context, National Football League coaches), derive short term benefits in the external labor market, irrespective of their actual human capital, by signaling fitness for promotion.<sup>6</sup>

*Signal uniqueness* is a third and final distinctiveness subdimension shown in Fig. 1. Uniqueness refers to signal differentiation versus commonality. Specifically, receivers will not only assess the above-described signaling characteristics, but also the rarity or novelty of the signal itself. For example, in certain industries, it may be normative that a firm achieves some type of third party family-friendly certification. However, if all or nearly all industry players are certified in this manner, this renders family-friendly signals less visible overall (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004), and thus less impactful than a more unique signal. Uniqueness will mostly affect prospective employees as they evaluate organizations. Specifically, as these individuals are in the process of scanning across multiple organizations to make job choice decisions, they are most likely to encounter saturated (i.e., non-unique) signals (e.g., commonplace phrases on web sites such as, “we value diversity” or “we encourage teamwork”). Signal uniqueness is particularly important to consider in the context of third party certifications, given the growth in this industry. For example, since the inaugural Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For list over 20 years ago (Levering & Moskowitz, 1998), BPTW and other similar competitions have proliferated, to the point where firms are almost universally recognized for something. Solely examining publicly available rankings, the Reputation Institute compiled a list of 183 rank lists that “regularly provided rankings of companies in 38 countries” (Fombrun, 2007, p. 145). Of the 183 lists identified at the time, 61 ranked based on reputation, 73 ranked using the quality of a company’s workplace, 15 rated companies based on corporate citizenship, and 11 assessed company financial performance. The number of “ranking entrepreneurs” (institutions that publish rankings) have increased considerably and turned this form of third party branding into a thriving industry (Rindova et al., 2018, p. 2177).

Depending on its manifestation, uniqueness can either increase or decrease signal credibility. On the one hand, unique signals may appear aberrant, lacking in social proof. However, unique signals may also appear more genuine to receivers, increasing their credibility. That is, when signals deviate from normative expectations, they might appear more realistic because the sender incurs risk by deviating from established signaling norms. Finally, unique signals that only certain companies transmit foster comparability by setting companies apart from each other, in terms of targeted third party employment branding messages.



## TAXONOMY OF THIRD PARTY EMPLOYMENT BRANDING TYPES

Keeping the above third party employment branding signaling dimensions and subdimensions in mind, we turn now to developing a taxonomy of third party employment branding types. Our work here is in keeping with Connelly et al. (2011, p. 59), who state, “there may be opportunity for management scholars to develop a conceptually based typology of signals that appear in organizational contexts.” Our intent in this section is to identify several ways in which third party employment branding can occur, while acknowledging that our coverage may not be fully comprehensive. Fig. 2 illustrates these branding types, which cross two overarching dimensions to yield the 2 × 2 matrix shown.

A first dimension that characterizes third party employment branding types is *source personableness*, which refers to whether the signal appears to emanate directly from an individual versus being sponsored or proclaimed by a formal entity such as a news outlet or certifying body. Specifically, *personal sources* provide signals on a person-by-person basis, often via word of mouth communication, social media, or other online information exchange medium. That is, personal sources refer to actual communication between individuals.

Impersonal sources, on the other hand, derive from external, *non-human* entities, such as media outlets or organizations whose purpose is to brand organizations. Of course, individuals are still technically responsible for impersonal source signals (e.g., someone has to author a news story). However, communication essentially flows from the entity to a receiver. For example, if a story about a company’s employment practices appears in the *New York Times*, receivers tend to perceive it as emanating from the *New York Times* versus from the specific author of the story.

*Source attachment* is a second dimension that characterizes third party employment branding types. That is, a signal source is either attached to or detached from the organization. The implication here is that the organization retains a degree of control over attached sources (although the branding signal is still ultimately in the hands of these sources). Detached sources are largely outside company control. Attached sources also have a current formal relationship with the company in question. For example, current employees are formally tied to their organizations, even though they may send branding signals that are largely outside company control. Or, when companies enter certification competitions, they enter into a relationship with the certifying organization, in terms of providing private company and employee survey information. By essentially soliciting such certifications when they enter these competitions, resulting signals exhibit a degree of organizational attachment.

	Personal	Impersonal
<b>Attached</b>	<i>Current Employees</i>	<i>BPTW-type certificate competitions</i>
<b>Detached</b>	<i>Former Employees, Current or Former Job Applicants, Customers, other Boundary Spanners</i>	<i>Media External Advertisements</i>

Fig. 2. Taxonomy of Third Party Employment Branding Types.



Highly related to the attached/detached nomenclature is the notion of *source accountability*. This refers to the degree to which signal sources are accountable to focal organizations, in terms of how those sources signal information about those organizations. That is, signalers might expect that their messages will be subject to certain levels of scrutiny or evaluation by those in position to formally or informally sanction those messages (Frink & Klimoski, 1998, 2004). This is especially the case when actors have previously committed to a public position on an issue. For example, if an attached actor has said good things about their company's employment offerings in the past, it will be difficult to later retract or change this statement (Tetlock, Skitka, & Boettger, 1989). In this latter case, even if these actors now feel differently or their feelings have changed, they will likely engage in "retrospective rationality" (Staw, 1980) and send and defend signals that mirror their original commitments. Actors may also feel accountable to specific relationship partners in the organization. For example, accountability to one's work peers or to a friend who was recently fired may cause a current employee to "break ranks" with the organization and vent their legitimate frustrations via third party social media channels.

While formal, organizationally controlled signalers (e.g., Marketing or HR executives in charge of company publicity) are of course highly accountable and beholden to the organization and its mission and agenda, third parties are outside formal organizational control, per our definition. Even so, third parties may sense relative levels of accountability, and craft and send their signals as such. For example, third parties may feel pressured or obliged to conform to official organizational branding when crafting their own branding signals. Or, third parties may have a shared personal interest in the organization's success, and thus be incentivized to send signals that unnaturally bolster the organization's brand. In turn, signals may yield false consensus, such that there is more consensus than actually exists, and signals are unnaturally similar to company-generated branding efforts. For example, consider a former employee who is no longer attached to the organization versus a current employee. The former employee can signal via twitter how he or she wishes, with no perceived repercussions, whereas current employees may more directly benefit from their organization's success and thus may feel accountable to "tweet the right things."

Taken together, combining the personal/impersonal and attached/detached branding types yields the four main source types shown in Fig. 2. Specifically, personal-attached sources are individuals who are currently and directly tied to the organization, such as current employees. Personal-detached sources are individuals who are neither directly nor formally tied to the organization but may have former links to the organization, such as former employees or customers. Impersonal-attached sources are formal representatives or entities solicited by or otherwise somehow tied to the organization or sought by the organization, such as certification bodies. Finally, impersonal-detached sources are formal third party representatives or entities that are not tied to the organization in any meaningful way.

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to detail all possible source configurations, it is important at this point to specify that we do not consider the

personal-impersonal and attached-detached axes as discrete, but instead recognize they are more of a continuum, with several example third party employment branding sources operating within the range of each. For example, we might consider employees' "significant others" to be personal sources that are likely closer to the detached end of the spectrum, even though they are somewhat attached to the organization via their spouse who actually works for the organization. Business partners might be another example, in which they are relatively personal, but still operate as a formal entity and thus might be somewhat impersonal. They may have a day-to-day connection with the organization, and are thus somewhat attached. However, they do not have the same in depth experiences with company employment practices as current employees, and thus fall somewhere between attached and detached. In the sections that follow, we develop illustrative prototypical examples allowing us to discuss each of these four primary third party employment branding types depicted in Fig. 2, in terms of their conceptual linkages with the signaling dimensions and subdimensions in Fig. 1.

#### *Personal Third Party Employment Branding*

In personal third party employment branding, communication generated by one or more individuals, outside direct company control, affects an organization's image as a favorable or unfavorable employer. This implies that personal third party employment branding represents a particular type of word-of-mouth communication, and relates to Bitektine's (2011) idea of judgment formation as a social process (see also Etter et al., 2019; Gardner et al., 2011). In a recruitment context, Van Hoyer and Lievens (2009, p. 343) have defined word-of-mouth as "an interpersonal communication, independent of the organization's recruitment activities, about an organization as an employer or about specific jobs." Its independence and person-to-person transmission thus represent key characteristics of word-of-mouth, similar to personal third party employment branding. For example, employees represent their employer's brand as ambassadors and are often the faces of their organization, meaning their voice and opinion can significantly influence their organization's brand. Social media can accentuate these effects exponentially. Importantly, however, not only can current employees affect an organization's brand, but also prior employees and applicants (Cascio & Graham, 2016).

First, even though some company activities might increase the chance that word-of-mouth will occur (e.g., offering internships, sharing stories about its successes with the media), the organization has no direct control over the occurrence and content of word-of-mouth endorsements (Collins & Stevens, 2002). Moreover, given its independent nature, word-of-mouth can contain positive as well as negative information (Keeling, McGoldrick, & Sadhu, 2013). Second, word-of-mouth represents a personal information source, as it occurs between people, not organizations or other entities. Whereas word-of-mouth is typically associated with face-to-face communication, current/former employees, applicants, and customers can provide it through all sorts of internet media sites such as Glassdoor, Indeed, Facebook, or Twitter (Könsgen et al., 2018; Van Hoyer, 2014).

In fact, “word-of-mouth” (web-based word-of-mouth, Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2007a) has rapidly increased in importance given the enormous rise of social media (Dineen & Allen, 2013; Roth, Bobko, Van Iddekinge, & Thatcher, 2016). Increasingly, prospective applicants seem to turn to such sites to gather and post information about organizations. One source indicates that about 80% of job seekers research companies online through sources such as these, as part of their job search (Smith, 2015). Dabirian et al. (2017, p. 199) eloquently detail this important development:

With the development of XML, a new, more interactive web emerged. Known as Web 2.0 (O’Reilly, 2007), people could easily post their own content ... People began to value the opinions of strangers and rely on peer-review sites for all sorts of consumption decisions, including books (e.g., Amazon), restaurants (e.g., Yelp!), hotels (e.g., TripAdvisor), and movies (e.g., IMDB) ... On LinkedIn (2003), Facebook (2004), YouTube (2005), and Twitter (2006), people started sharing their work experiences and created electronic word of mouth related to firms, their brands, their offerings, and their roles as employers (Ventura, 2013). All of this often-public chatter had a tremendous impact on employer brands and the ability of firms to attract and retain good employees.

Overall, there is strong empirical support for the positive effect of favorable word-of-mouth on employer image and attraction (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Jaidi, Van Hooft, & Arends, 2011; Kanar, Collins, & Bell, 2010; Van Hoyer, 2012; Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2007a, 2009). Moreover, word-of-mouth seems to be more influential than company-controlled sources such as advertising, and more influential than impersonal sources such as media publicity (Collins & Stevens, 2002; Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2009). There is also some evidence that when word-of-mouth and company-controlled sources provide the same message (i.e., cross-source similarity), they can reinforce each other (Collins & Stevens, 2002). However, when a different message is provided (e.g., more negative), people tend to put more faith into and act upon the independent source (Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2007b). The main explanation postulated and tested for these effects is the credibility of word-of-mouth as an independent and personal source of employment information. Compared to company-controlled sources, word-of-mouth is perceived as providing more credible information because its purpose is not to explicitly promote the organization (Fisher, Ilgen, & Hoyer, 1979). In addition, job seekers tend to perceive information obtained through direct personal communication as more credible than indirect impersonal information (Cable & Turban, 2001; Gardner et al., 2011). Along these lines, credibility has been found to (partially) mediate the effects of positive word-of-mouth on organizational attraction (Stockman, Van Hoyer, & Carpentier, 2017; Van Hoyer, 2012; Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2007b). This suggests that credibility is an important driver of the effects of personal third party employment branding, in line with our theoretical framework.

With respect to negative word-of-mouth, there are only a few studies and the results are mixed. On the one hand, some experimental studies found that negative word-of-mouth had a negative effect on organizational attraction, and was even stronger than the relative effect of positive word-of-mouth (Kanar et al., 2010; Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2007b). On the other hand, a few field studies have also looked at negative word-of-mouth and found no significant effects, whereas

positive word-of-mouth did exhibit effects (Jaidi et al., 2011; Van Hoye & Lievens, 2009). In line with our theoretical framework, this suggests that the effects of negative third party employment branding may vary depending on the specific characteristics of the provided signal. Notably, the experimental studies all involved word-of-mouth about a fictitious company, of which participants had no prior knowledge, whereas the field studies included well-known, reputable companies of which participants were likely to have positive prior beliefs (Van Hoye, 2014). This taps into the consistency dimension; specifically the coherence subdimension. The presence of prior positive employer knowledge is likely to substantially reduce the impact of negative third party employment branding, which is then seen as an inconsistent signal. Moreover, based on our consensus dimension, this would be especially so when the prior positive knowledge is based on information from many sources (which is likely to be the case for a reputable company) and the negative information comes from just one source.

While the internet and social media have made third party employment branding by personal sources much more frequent and accessible (Dabirian et al., 2017; Dineen & Allen, 2013), we do not yet know how this compares to more “traditional” face-to-face communication. First, the increased amount of information and easy accessibility may contribute positively to signal comparability. Almost all large companies are reviewed by employees and applicants on social media and employer review sites, making it easier for people to compare this personal third party employment branding information between various possible future employers. Second, whereas face-to-face word-of-mouth is often provided by people who know each other well, such as friends and family, internet reviews are typically provided by strangers. Research shows that tie strength significantly affects the impact of word-of-mouth, with stronger ties exerting more influence (Van Hoye & Lievens, 2007b; Van Hoye, Weijters, Lievens, & Stockman, 2016). Information from known sources is more likely to be trusted, implying that internet-based third party employment branding might be perceived as less credible. Relatedly, many people provide online employer reviews anonymously, which may have both a positive and negative effect on credibility. On the one hand, and especially in the case of negative information, people might perceive that this anonymity enables the source to speak freely and voice his or her true opinion, without fear of repercussion. On the other hand, and particularly for positive information, people might not believe the source is acting independently from the organization. For example, as we detail in our future research section, they might think that recruiters are writing reviews themselves or that the organization incentivizes people to write positive reviews.

#### *Personal – Attached Sources*

Personal third party employment branding can come from many different sources, some of which are formally attached to the organization, such as current employees. In line with its independent nature, we do not consider as third party branding any information provided by people who formally act on behalf of the organization in recruitment or employment branding activities (e.g., recruiters, company

representatives at a job fair). However, other employees represent an important and influential source of word-of-mouth information (Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2009); for instance when they spontaneously talk about their employer with their friends, recommend a job opening on their personal social media profile, or write an anonymous review about their work experiences on an employer review site such as Glassdoor or Indeed. Employees can also engage in third party employment branding during candidate site visits as they informally meet with the candidate (e.g., Theurer et al., 2018).

Prior research has not often distinguished between various sources when examining employment-related word-of-mouth. However, some research suggests that current employees represent the source of word-of-mouth upon which potential applicants rely most heavily (Van Hoyer & Lievens, 2009). On the one hand, job seekers are more likely to request word-of-mouth information from sources with higher firm-specific knowledge such as job incumbents because they perceive them as able to provide relevant and correct information (Fisher et al., 1979). On the other hand, sources with higher degrees of expertise are more likely to generate unsolicited word-of-mouth because they have higher levels of involvement with the organization (Gilly, Graham, Wolfenbarger, & Yale, 1998). In addition, Van Hoyer et al. (2016) found that word-of-mouth from current employees had a greater impact on organizational attraction than word-of-mouth from a detached source. It seems that greater firm-specific knowledge of attached third party employment branding sources might increase their credibility and thus impact, compared to detached sources.

#### *Personal-attached Source Prototype*

As an example of third party employment branding from a personal attached source, consider an IT manager attending a professional conference on technological innovations in the field and informally sharing her experiences working at her company with other IT professionals. She might talk about how her company invests in IT innovations and how supportive they are when she proposes new ideas. Suppose that some of the people she talks with are interested in a job change (now or in the future). The information provided by the IT manager is likely to influence their perceptions of the company as an employer. In line with our theoretical framework, we propose that the strength of this influence will depend on the various signaling (sub)dimensions that apply. First, working in the field, most of the IT professionals probably have heard about the firm before and have prior beliefs about its employer characteristics. If what the IT manager is telling them is coherent with this prior knowledge, it is likely to be perceived more credibly. Second, during this multiple day conference, they might talk to the IT manager more than once. If she is very positive about her company every time (or year after year), the signal exhibits greater recurrence and thus credibility.

Third, imagine some of her colleagues from the company are accompanying the IT manager at the conference. If they all share similar experiences with others, this within-source similarity indicates higher consensus, increasing the likelihood that receivers will actually attribute this positive message to the company. If, on

the contrary, her colleagues argue that the company claims to be innovative, but does not give sufficient attention to the actual implementation, the people listening will be more inclined to attribute the message to the IT manager. They might think, for instance, that she has a one-sided view of the situation or that she is trying to maintain the good reputation of the company. Fourth, suppose that the organizing committee also offers an award for the most innovative company, which the organization for which the IT manager works wins. This cross-source similarity would also indicate higher consensus and thus credibility.

Fifth, the IT manager represents an attached source with high source firm-specific knowledge and is thus more believable than someone who does not know the company that well. Sixth, if other conference participants have had negative experiences trying to convey new ideas in their companies, yet value being able to do so, this manager's message will be more personally relevant. If they were to hear a positive message about another lesser-valued aspect of the organization, it would probably have less impact.

Finally, we should consider the uniqueness of the provided signal. If all conference attendees are very positive about their own employer, receivers will fail to consider the signal unique and it will therefore be less influential. This also relates to the comparability of the signal. Given that many companies are represented at the conference and there is ample opportunity to talk to other attendees, people will be able to compare what is said by employees from multiple relevant companies.

#### *Personal – Detached Sources*

In addition to current employees, personal sources who are less attached or no longer attached to the company can also provide third party employment branding. For example, a former employee might be dissatisfied about his experiences with his previous employer and discourage his friend from applying there. Compared to their perception of personal attached sources, receivers might perceive former employees as having less to gain or lose by talking about their prior employer, which might lend them more credibility. Compared to other detached sources without prior work experience at the company, former employees possess personally relevant firm-specific knowledge, also contributing to their impact. However, the consistency and consensus dimensions are important to consider here. When the negative information is inconsistent with the receiver's prior knowledge or when other former employees are mostly positive (low consensus), the negative message might be attributed more to the former employee in question than to the organization. People might think that he wants to get back at the company for not extending his contract or that he might have been a bad fit with the company.

A second important personal detached source of third party employment branding comprises non-hired applicants, either because the company did not select them or because they turned down a job offer. This population of non-hired applicants is typically much larger than the population of current or former employees. Therefore, companies should definitely consider it in their branding

efforts. For large, attractive companies, the number of applicants who were interested in working there but were subsequently rejected from the selection process can run into the thousands each year. Moreover, it is important to consider the stage at which rejection occurs. For example, rejection via a boilerplate rejection letter may incite a different form of third party employment branding than rejection after a site visit in which a job seeker began forming relationships with employees. Both examples may differ even more from a situation in which an applicant never hears back from a company at all. Research on applicant reactions has consistently found that applicants who hold a more positive view of the organization's selection procedures and decisions (e.g., in terms of justice) are more willing to recommend the organization as an employer to others (for a meta-analytic review, see Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004).

Therefore, a transparent, consistent, and job-related selection system in which companies treat applicants fairly is likely to increase positive word-of-mouth generated by applicants. Moreover, the selection system should be in line with the company's employer value proposition (i.e., desired image as an employer), so that the message provided by applicants exhibits consensus with other third party employment branding sources. For instance, an organization claiming to be highly innovative should use creative and technologically advanced selection methods, whereas an organization emphasizing teamwork might allow applicants to meet current employees during the selection process.

A third potential source of personal-detached third party employment branding comprises customers of the organization. For instance, a restaurant or a store might advertise a vacancy in its window. If customers see this, especially when they are satisfied with their experience, they might tell their friends or family about this job opening. Moreover, having experienced the service offered and engaging with the current employees, they may have a view of what it would be like to work there (e.g., hasty vs. relaxed, friendly vs. impersonal) that they may share with others. As another example, imagine an employee telling someone they meet about their place of employment. If this new acquaintance in turn tells the employee she thinks the company sells subpar products and cannot imagine ever wanting to work there, this is likely to affect the employee's image and ongoing attraction to the organization as an employer.

Finally, boundary spanners such as consultants or long-term suppliers have become more commonplace as organizations have become less insular and more supply chain driven. These tend to be personal-detached sources, although in some cases they may be so involved in a company over an extended period of time that they are considered attached. For example, a consultant may become highly enmeshed in the inner-workings of a company's employment offerings, and be highly aware of and sensitive to the company's culture. In such a situation, they are uniquely positioned to provide third party employment related accounts.

#### *Personal-detached Source Prototype*

To link personal-detached third party employment branding to the signaling (sub)dimensions in our theoretical framework more concretely, consider the



following example. Imagine a nurse who has been working at a particular hospital for about two years (immediately after graduation) and who is curious about how others view his employer. He visits the Glassdoor website and finds a review submitted by another nurse who recently applied to the hospital, received a job offer, but turned it down because she had a negative impression and received a job offer from a more attractive hospital. She describes how the hospital building was extremely outdated, the selection procedure was bureaucratic and unprofessional, and the offered benefits were lower than the industry average. Given that she has already worked as a nurse for 20 years in several hospitals, enabling her to compare, she does not recommend that others apply to this hospital. This negative review is likely to affect how the nurse working at the hospital thinks and feels about his employer, depending on the specific characteristics of this signal.

First, in terms of consistency, the message will have more impact when it coheres with the employee's own experiences and beliefs, or at least does not contradict them. When the employee is very happy with his own employer and thinks the benefits he receives are very generous, he will perceive the message as less credible. Second, the nurse working at the hospital will consider consensus information. Glassdoor offers many reviews for each employer, provided by different people. When he sees that they are all rather negative (high within-source similarity), he is more likely to believe the information is true and might adjust his perceptions about his employer. He might even consider looking for other job opportunities. Moreover, if other sources support the message (cross-source similarity); for instance, a low position in a recent national salary survey; he will perceive it as more credible.

Finally, the employee will evaluate the distinctiveness of the received signal. The nurse who applied has some experience with the organization during the selection process, but did not actually work there herself. This lower firm-specific knowledge might lead the employee to discard the review and trust his own work experiences instead, especially when they are positive. If the review writer also specifically mentions her passion for pediatric care, which the employee also highly values, the message will probably be perceived as personally relevant, and even more so given that it concerns the employee's own employer. In addition, the employee is likely to look at what people are saying about other hospitals as employers, which is very easy to do on Glassdoor. This enables him to compare how others regard his own hospital versus other possible employers. When the message is considered particularly unique and not merely a caricature of other messages, it is likely more impactful.

#### *Impersonal Third Party Employment Branding*

In impersonal third party employment branding, the source of generated communication is from external formal representatives or entities as opposed to individuals. Rindova et al. (2005, p. 1037) characterize them as "institutional intermediaries that specialize in disseminating information about organizations or in evaluating them." Moreover, they are viewed as having special access or expertise in evaluating organizations (Rao, 1998). A few examples of impersonal third party branding types include

employer competitions, certifications, rankings, media coverage, and external advertisements. While the communication is outside of direct company control, impersonal branding types also range from attached to detached. To determine the degree of attachment, we consider the exchange of information and connection between the source of branding and the branded organization.

#### *Impersonal – Attached Sources*

First, impersonal-attached sources are representatives or entities that organizations solicit, or that are otherwise somehow tied to the organization. For example, organizations purposefully solicit many employment branding competitions and ranking lists, such as BPTW, and these competitions often involve surveys of employees who are of course attached to those organizations. Thus, although third party entities manage the certifications and lists (e.g., Best Companies Group in the case of BPTW), these tend to be more attached in that the organization actively seeks inclusion and possesses the opportunity to influence the ranking results (and by extension, the branding message). For example, the organization might collect the data or encourage and potentially affect their employees' participation in data collection.<sup>7</sup>

Unlike some of the other third party employment branding sources, these certifications and competitions provide receivers with a direct indication of an organization's position relative to other organizations, which has strong and direct implications for comparability. That is, receivers can easily and directly compare and contrast organizations on these lists. Bitektine (2011) points out that rank-ordered lists, which are made readily available by "institutionalized suppliers" such as *Fortune* and *Business Week*, have become a proxy for status. Specifically, these institutions supply judgments that receivers effortlessly adopt. As these are communicated among the general public, a hierarchy of organizations develops. Bitektine (2011) further states that the more these rankings are disseminated and adopted, the less social judgment diversity will manifest. That is, as the same few institutions provide certifications/lists and as people share those lists or refer to them repeatedly, society will have less difference in opinion regarding the rank-order of organizations. This recurrence of rankings on the same lists from the same third party institutions may elicit consistency perceptions, which in turn may increase perceived credibility. Regarding job seeker applications, Saini et al. (2014) found that seekers are more likely to apply to firms that have consistently appeared on best employer lists. Similar rankings across multiple lists signifies within-source consensus, also increasing credibility. To illustrate, the following section provides a prototypical example characterizing how a prospective employee (i.e., job candidate) might evaluate the signaling (sub)dimensions from an impersonal-attached source.

#### *Impersonal-attached Source Prototype*

Imagine a manufacturing organization certified as a Fortune 100 Best Company to Work For. For this specific competition, the company enters on its own accord

and pays an entry fee. To participate, the company must also complete an application (sometimes organizations hire teams to do the application work or have their own HR team do the work). This application includes surveying employees and completing a culture brief (e.g., describe the benefits offered, organizational demographics, and communication practices; [www.greatplacetowork.com](http://www.greatplacetowork.com)). Although the Great Place to Work organization ultimately determines and selects the companies that are the Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For, each company has some degree of control in that it (1) chooses to enter the competition and (2) monitors the completion of the application and solicits data collection. In fact, the 100 Best Companies to Work For in America more heavily weighs the employee survey responses (2/3 of an organization's score), while the remaining 1/3 of an organization's score is based on the Great Place to Work Institute's evaluation of the company (Love & Singh, 2011). Thus, this certification allows the company a greater degree of control and is a relatively more attached branding source.

As a job candidate and prospective employee, the credibility and comparability of this certification will vary in accordance with the candidate's perception of relevant signaling subdimensions. First, consider a job candidate who attends a job fair and through this experience obtains a positive impression of the manufacturing organization. After the job fair, the candidate discovers that the organization has been certified as a Fortune 100 Best Company to Work. This certification coheres with the candidate's positive experience and reaffirms his positive impression of the organization. Had he left the job fair with a negative impression, the certification would prove inconsistent and likely lead him to reevaluate or feel skeptical of its credibility. Additionally, consider that the candidate discovers this is the organization's third year to appear on the list and receive recognition as a Fortune 100 Best Company to Work. This repetitive success and recurrence of the certification signal would further enhance his positive impression of the organization.

Second, suppose the candidate finds that in addition to three consecutive Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For certifications, the organization is also certified as one of the Best Workplaces for Millennials and Best Workplaces in Chicago. Having these different recognitions, all within the realm of Great Places to Work, indicates within-source similarity and thus consensus. Additionally, another indication of consensus that the candidate examines is the degree of cross-source similarity. For example, assume the candidate is friends with an employee who retired from the organization. This friend often reflects positively on his employment and expresses his gratitude toward the organization, suggesting it was a great employer and positive place to work. The alignment of the friend's experience with the Best Company certification makes the job candidate confident of the cross-source similarity and provides him with an even stronger perception of consensus and credibility (as well as comparability, given that best company rankings essentially provide a comparative standard across companies).

Third, in terms of distinctiveness, assume that the candidate is generally aware of the certification process for the Fortune 100 Best Companies competition. On the one hand, he acknowledges that the survey data is from current employees and

recognizes their input as a firm-specific knowledge source, thus eliciting greater credibility. On the other hand, however, he questions the validity of employee input. For example, employees might have felt pressured to provide positive input. Additionally, the degree to which the surveys are representative of all employees is uncertain.

When considering personal relevance, generally, the more targeted a certification, the more polarizing it becomes. That is, with increased specificity or audience targeting (e.g., interests, industries, geographical regions, or demographics), the certification might be more personally relevant to the targeted group but less so for all other groups. While more targeted, this can actually limit the total number of applications an organization receives (Love & Singh, 2011). In the current example, the Fortune 100 Best Companies certification is a more general certification and thus has limited personal relevance when compared to more targeted certifications, such as Best Places for Millennials or a regional list like Best Workplaces in Chicago. While the Fortune 100 list might apply to a larger range of applicants (i.e., greater breadth), it will not have the depth of personal relevance a millennial job seeker would feel toward the Best Places for Millennials certification. Returning to our example job candidate, imagine that he is seeking a job in Chicago. While the Fortune 100 Best Companies certification is an impressive accomplishment, it is likely less personally relevant to him, especially compared to the Best Workplaces in Chicago certification. Lastly, in considering signal uniqueness, the job candidate will examine how rare the certification is for the organization when compared to other organizations in the same industry. In this case, the job candidate judges it quite unique for a manufacturing organization to achieve status as a best place to work; compared to if he was seeking jobs in a technology or healthcare industry where these awards may be more commonplace and even expected. That is, because he notices that the organization he is considering is the only one that appears on the list, he perceives it as rare and more important.

Overall, certifications enable high comparability via rank-ordering organizations and supplying a common comparison standard. While the above prototype describes the experience of a job candidate, receivers of BPTW or other certification type branding signals also include current employees. Unlike job candidates, current employees have the ability to compare their personal employment experience to the results of certifications and rank-ordered lists. That is, employees can directly assess the coherence of their job experience with the signaled message, which can either affirm or reduce credibility. On the one hand, employees who find the ranking results are not reflective of their personal experience may believe the ranking is a "sham." For example, an employee with considerable childcare challenges who disagrees with her employer's recent recognition as a Best Workplace for Parents might assume her employer and the third party colluded, concluding the certification is a "sham" and the ranking illegitimate. This "sham effect" might actually lead to a counter-intuitive response or a reverse effect of the branding signal. For instance, because the employee believes the recognition to be a "sham," he or she may perceive a negative employment signal, which may actually engender dissatisfaction (as opposed to satisfaction) with the employer.

*Impersonal – Detached Sources*

While impersonal-attached sources have meaningful ties to the organization, impersonal-detached sources are third party representatives or entities that are not tied to the organization in any meaningful way. Common examples of impersonal-detached sources include the media and external advertisements. First, regarding media coverage, several outlets can communicate employment-related signals (Rindova et al., 2006; Van Hoye & Lievens, 2005). These include but are not limited to print and digital media (e.g., books, magazines, newspapers), audio media (e.g., radio, podcasts), and video media (e.g., television, movies). For example, *Businessweek* and *Harvard Business Review* are popular magazines dedicated to publishing articles about organizations and often describe specific employment practices. An example of audio media is National Public Radio (NPR), which often covers organizational news. We expand on this particular source in our prototype below. Samples of video media include television shows like *Undercover Boss* and *Dirty Jobs*, which depict (or claim to) employee circumstances and experiences in specific jobs.<sup>8</sup>

In general, the media is more likely to be scrutinized and held accountable if it disseminates false information. Typically, it is viewed as detached and objective or “neutral.” For these reasons, it is perhaps considered the “purest” or least biased of all branding sources. Thus, observers often imbue it with higher credibility. Specifically, a receiver will be more likely to trust and therefore more heavily weigh media outlet messages. This is because the media tends to have little to no incentive or accountability to the organization of interest, compared to other third party branding types (e.g., a WOM message from an employee who receives a paycheck from the organization). However, an important caveat to this is the perception of the media. That is, current societal media status perceptions can greatly influence its credibility. By extension, an individual’s existing opinions or impression of a media source can greatly influence the credibility he/she attributes to the message.

Some organizations capitalize on the media’s influence by strategically utilizing it for crisis and impression management. In these instances, the relationship may be somewhat attached because the organization is intentionally controlling and providing information to the media. However, whether the receiver perceives the source as attached or detached depends on whether he or she is privy to the fact that the organization is strategically using the media. For example, suppose a large organization decides to centralize its employees and relocate its offices from one city to its headquarters in another city. It is likely this move will take an economic toll as well as disrupt the community of the city from which they plan to depart. To mitigate a negative impression, the organization might intentionally release statements or “leak” information to the media preparing the community for the move. When it comes time to formally announce the decision to relocate, they might also work with local reporters and media to provide information about the move and emphasize actions that positively depict the organization. This example focuses on how organizations can use the media to proactively reduce potentially damaging messages, but organizations might also do this reactively to manage crises.

Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger, and Shapiro (2012) discuss how organizations can use “infomediaries” (third parties such as media, financial analysts, regulators, and consumer entities) to lessen the negative effects after an industry or organizational wrongdoing. They discuss and categorize two types of actions that organizations take. First are technical actions by which the organization disseminates messages to the media that describe the organization’s inner workings to “fix” the wrongdoing. These messages focus on the wrongdoing but emphasize what the organization is trying to do to address and mitigate the cause of the wrongdoing. The second are ceremonial actions, by which the organization tries to deflect or refocus the media’s discussion on positive aspects of the firm and away from the issue at hand. Zavyalova et al. (2012) conclude that technical actions are better for assuaging the focal firm’s wrongdoings whereas ceremonial actions actually exacerbate and worsen the negative effects of the wrongdoing. However, in response to industry wrongdoing (rather than firm wrongdoing), a firm’s ceremonial messages can attenuate the negative effects for that firm.

Second, external advertisements can also be an impersonal-detached third party branding source. Specifically, these refer to advertisements that focal organizations do not solicit, pay for, or control. For instance, imagine that an organization produces a recruiting brochure comparing employment benefits to that of a competitor. Here, the producing organization’s first-hand employment branding is also acting as a source of third party employment branding for the competing organization. That is, information from another entity indirectly communicates about the competing organization’s employment experiences. In the United States, such comparative advertising (i.e., when companies present their organization, products or services as superior by comparing to a competitor explicitly or implicitly) is permitted as long as the claims can be backed up (Investopedia, n.d.).

As a prospective employee, comparative information can influence the receiver’s impression of that competing organization (in addition to the producing organization). In such an instance, the receiver is less likely to assume the source is “objective” and may question the motive of the entity producing the advertisement. To portray linkages with signaling dimensions and mechanisms, the next section provides a prototypical example that typifies the signaling subdimensions for an impersonal-detached source.

#### *Impersonal-detached Source Prototype*

Imagine NPR does a feature show on twenty-first century jobs. During the show, the radio broadcasters discuss the role of a data scientist. They describe the responsibilities and proceed to compare the differences of being a data scientist across a few organizations. As a listener (e.g., a prospective or current employee), the descriptions and comparisons provided during the radio show influence the perception of employment and culture at the organizations discussed. This influence and overall message effect depend on how the listener processes the signaling source subdimensions. Specifically, consider a data scientist employed at one of the companies mentioned in the feature. She listens to an NPR broadcaster



describe how data scientists at the company she currently works for are required to interface with executives, and that her employer intentionally allows data scientists freedom to experiment on the job. When she compares the NPR description to her own experience at that same organization, she concludes that the NPR description coheres with her experience. That is, she does indeed regularly interface with executives and has the liberty to allocate experimental time. As she evaluates the message as consistent, she also views it as more credible.<sup>9</sup>

In terms of consensus, suppose there are multiple NPR broadcasters, and all share their comments and descriptions of the data scientist role. If each broadcaster describes the role of the data scientist at her employer positively and use similar language (i.e., interfaces with executives and encourages experimentation), the focal data scientist will perceive greater within-source similarity and higher consensus. In contrast, if there is disagreement among the broadcasters when describing the role, this lack of consensus might make her question the message's credibility and default to her own experience or prior knowledge. Furthermore, suppose the data scientist inquires to her colleagues (also current data scientists at her organization), asking them to describe their experiences in the role. Should they also agree with the statements made in the NPR radio show, this cross-source similarity will reaffirm the credibility of the message and her perception of her employer's reputation. Likewise, if she read an article in the *New York Times* expressing similar sentiments as the NPR radio show, she would perceive a greater degree of cross-source similarity and consensus.

To appraise the distinctiveness of NPR's message, she judges the source firm-specific knowledge, personal relevance, and uniqueness of the signal. Firm-specific knowledge can be difficult to assess, particularly when it is unclear how a third party obtained information. This is especially the case with media outlets, which often cannot or do not reveal nor describe their information sources. Here, if NPR does not explicitly explain the foundation for their content, the data scientist might revert to her existing impression of NPR as a media outlet and make her own assumptions about the degree of source firm-specific knowledge. However, suppose NPR explains that their descriptions and information are from a study conducted by academic researchers who anonymously interviewed current data scientists. Recognizing them as current employees who have first-hand knowledge of working for the organizations, but will not face repercussions if they talk negatively about their own organization, gives her confidence in the firm-specific knowledge.

Regarding personal relevance, remember that NPR described the role of data scientists at several organizations, one of which was the current data scientist's employer. Because she is (1) in the role of a data scientist and (2) NPR specifically mentions and describes her organization, this broadcast is highly personally relevant to her. That is, the show will resonate much more strongly with her compared to a listener that is not a data scientist. Likewise, the message will resonate more strongly for her than for other data scientists whose employers were not one of the organizations described. Finally, the fact that this was a feature broadcast and NPR described her organization among a select few makes it unique.



Thus far, this prototypical example assesses the subdimensions by primarily focusing on the employee and her own organization. However, it is also important to emphasize that the broadcast not only discussed the role of a data scientist at her organization, but also described the role and its differences across many organizations. In addition to evaluating consistency, consensus, and distinctiveness of NPR's description of her job at her organization, this also gives her the opportunity to consider these same dimensions (and subdimensions) when evaluating employment as a data scientist at other organizations. Does the description of other organizations also cohere with her prior knowledge of and interaction with those organizations mentioned? Do other sources depict employment similarly to the way NPR depicts employment at those organizations? If she deems NPR's message as credible in their representation of other organizations, she can easily compare her experience at her organization against those of other data scientists at the other organizations. For example, if the NPR broadcasters describe the data scientist role more positively at her organization than at other organizations, she will likely think more positively of her current employer. However, if the role sounds more appealing at other organizations than at her own, this comparative information might create discontent with her employer or motivate her to consider a transition to the other organization.

### **THIRD PARTY EMPLOYMENT BRANDING OUTCOMES**

We turn now to discussing potential outcomes of third party employment branding. Broadly, employment branding process goals include differentiation of the employer in the employment marketplace, as well as maintaining current employee commitment to the organization through a sense of oneness with the brand. Rather than trying to explain all possible outcomes that could occur for each branding dimension and subdimension, we broadly categorize outcome types and provide examples of potential effects within these categories. Many potential future research opportunities are associated with these outcomes, and we provide an overview of these opportunities in Table 1.

#### *Affective, Cognitive, and Behavioral Outcomes among Prospective and Current Employees*

Third party employment branding likely affects a myriad of individual outcomes, many of which we have touched on in prior sections. Overarching affective outcomes might range from pride to commitment to negative affect among current employees, or attraction among prospective employees. Although it is most relevant to consider favorable outcomes when considering positive third party employment branding, such as reduced turnover and larger more highly qualified applicant pools, mobility outcomes of third party employment branding are also pertinent, including possible turnover of good versus poor performing employees. For example, although reduced turnover is expected (Dineen & Allen, 2016), turnover intentions could also result from recognizing that branding accolades might translate to individual employee utility; that is, individual employees may

**Table 1.** Third Party Employment Branding Outcomes and Additional Future Research Directions.

Affective, cognitive, and behavioral outcomes among prospective and current employees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do various third party employment branding messages impact prospective employee attraction or current employee pride?</li> <li>• How does third party employment branding impact turnover of good and poor performing employees?</li> <li>• Can positive [negative] third party employment branding attract [repel] prospective customers?</li> <li>• Does third party employment branding buffer against undesirable aspects of jobs or companies (e.g., buffer against an unpopular organizational change process)?</li> <li>• Do actor decisions hinge on different sources of third party employment branding information? For example, do job seekers rely on different third party sources when deciding whether to apply for a job versus accept a job offer?</li> </ul>
Third party employment branding ripple effects	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can non-employment related third party messages beget employment related third party messages?</li> <li>• Can companies use positive third party employment branding to counter negative branding on other fronts (e.g., pertaining to product recalls)?</li> </ul>
The third party employment branding arms race	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are companies compelled to mimic competitors' attempts to proactively debunk negative third party employment branding?</li> <li>• How do companies continuously monitor and react to negative third party employment branding episodes?</li> <li>• How can companies train their employees to become third party ambassadors, and how can they correspondingly monitor employee stories to ensure conformity to official company branding?</li> <li>• Do companies engage in deceptive signaling, that is, inviting third party employment branding signals based on false information, or posing as third party agents to disseminate overly positive employment information about their companies?</li> <li>• Will employment brands maintain their distinctiveness over the long run as organizational branding efforts, and concomitant mimicry, proliferate?</li> </ul>
Company proactivity and reactivity in the wake of third party employment branding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do companies counter anticipated third party delivered bad news?</li> <li>• How might companies actually change their employment practices in the wake of third party employment branding information?</li> </ul>
Increased company idiosyncratic credits or accountability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does positive third party employment branding "raise the bar" for so-branded companies, holding them to a higher standard? Or, does it give them a "free pass," such that missteps that would otherwise be derided are overlooked?</li> <li>• Are negative third party employment branding episodes even more deleterious among companies in already-stigmatized industries, or among companies in positively branded industries?</li> </ul>
Additional future research directions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the importance of third party employment branding differ among job seeker types (e.g., to new entrants, job losers, employed job seekers, or gig workers), or to current employees (new hires vs. long-tenured vice presidents)?</li> <li>• What individual differences make people more or less prone to reacting to third party employment branding signals?</li> <li>• What types of companies benefit the most from particular third party employment branding sources?</li> </ul>

*Table 1. (Continued)*

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- What are the effects of consensus across third party branding categories (e.g., consensus across third party product and employment branding)?
  - What are the key temporal aspects of third party employment branding (e.g., how long does it take for third party employment branding effects from various sources to materialize)?
  - What are the key interactions between third party signaling subdimensions (e.g., non-coherent signals that exhibit consensus across sources)?
  - Do hiring managers exhibit a preference for hiring job candidates from positively branded companies, all else being equal?
  - Can third party employment branding information be customized in various ways to key constituents such as job seekers?
  - What impact will longer-term economic cycles have on third party employment branding outcomes, such as those related to third party employment branding arms races?
- 

believe that the third party signals, though directed at the organization as a whole, may be distilled to personal usefulness.

Beyond prospective or current employees, third party employment branding may also help attract and retain customers. For example, customers may be attracted to third party messages that recognize a company as treating its workers well. Next, positive third party employment branding may exhibit a buffering effect on other undesirable aspects of jobs or a company as a whole. For example, in a financial services firm undergoing a significant organizational change (move to an open office concept), recent research documents a positive relationship between enthusiasm toward BPTW accolades and attitude toward the change (Pratt & Dineen, 2018b).

It is also important to consider that the impact of third party employment branding on individual decision-making may differ depending on the stakes involved. For example, different third party employment branding forms may affect decisions to remain at an organization versus simply asking for a raise. Prospective employees may also rely on different sources for different decisions. For example, one job seeker may decide to interview with any firm he views as legitimate, but only accept a new job based on reputation or status. Thus, word of mouth could provide sufficient legitimacy (e.g., among MBA classmates), whereas more formal sources, such as BPTW certifications, may determine status and thus eventual site visits or job acceptances.

Among current employees, third party status judgments may determine whether one decides to stay (e.g., for pride reasons), whereas reputation judgments may not (e.g., because the employee already senses how the firm will behave in the future). Furthermore, current or prospective employees may use different third party signals depending on industry norms or the social environment. For example, when deciding which low end retailer to work for, prospective employees might use information that allows for legitimacy judgments, but when deciding between high end tech companies, they might seek status information.

Or, in an industry with loose or unknown norms and thus enhanced possibility of poor behavior in the future, prospective employees may rely on third party reputation-imbuing information to assuage these fears (e.g., Bitektine, 2011). Taking yet another perspective, Ertug et al. (2016) suggest that considering the specific audience in terms of your reputation (audience-specific reputation) provides a clearer view of reputational effects. In our context, it may be important to consider where the signal is coming from; for example, whether from former employees, the media, BPTW, or customers. For example, customers may be more concerned with employment practices broadly speaking (i.e., they want to patronize places that provide them and will positively brand these places), whereas former employee branding signals may speak to more specific employment practices such as work–life policies.

### *Third Party Employment Branding Ripple Effects*

As a second key outcome category, we believe it is critical to consider how one third party source or signal can beget others. For example, in March of 2018 the US media reported a story about a pet death on a United Airlines flight (Gajanan, 2018). Such service-related third party branding could potentially spawn additional third party messages that are employment related. In the case of United, one such media-reported series of employee reactions (i.e., a combination of a personal-attached and impersonal-detached sources) defended fellow employees, spoke about the difficulty of working with some passengers, and characterized the story as “fishy” (Lazare, 2018). Likewise, former employees or others with prior or current ties to such a company may vent or otherwise react to the story with stories of their own employment experiences that either complement or disagree with the original account. Thus, an important outcome of third party branding in another domain such as customer service or the environment might be subsequent third party employment branding.

Similarly, there is likely reciprocity in the relationship between organization and third party branding messages. That is, there may be important ways in which third parties react to company communication and information control, such that companies are no longer truly in control of their brand. Ravasi et al. (2018, pp. 586–587) state,

corporate control over interpretations can effectively no longer be assumed a priori. As new information and communication technologies empower many actors to participate in the construction of reputation, the authority over the evaluation of organizations has become more fragile and continuously contested itself.

These authors go on to state,

Audiences are not only passive receivers of the information disseminated by organizations, but also active producers of evaluative representations of organizations. These autonomously produced communicative acts may reinforce or interfere with the signals strategically sent by focal organizations. (Ravasi et al., 2018, p. 590)

Similarly, Brooks, Highhouse, Russell, and Mohr’s (2003) work suggests that mere familiarity can breed contempt or admiration for a company. Thus, for example,

once sources such as media rankings (e.g., Fortune list) recognize a company, there is likely to be more social media-based word-of-mouth third party branding going forward, whether positive or negative.

Branding ripple effects may also pertain to positive impacts on one part of a company from branding related to another. This coincides with Lange et al.'s (2011, p. 159) "generalized favorability" aspect of reputation. For example, firms might use employment branding to fend off negative third party branding on other fronts, like with product recalls, by highlighting their superior employment practices. Finally, Bangerter et al. (2012) suggest that positive signals of things like treating workers well may also signal company fitness, such that a company must have slack resources if they have the luxury to do this.

### *The Third Party Employment Branding Arms Race*

Related to the notion of branding ripple effects is Bangerter et al.'s (2012, p. 719) reference to signaling "arms races." Specifically, these authors detail how, in classic signaling theory formulations, parties may have differing interests, yet may find it in their best interest to cooperate with counterparts in terms of signal exchanges. Thus, for example, companies may ignore or fail to respond to third party information provided on Glassdoor, considering that this may help them achieve their goal of better fitting job applicants. Over time, however, competitors may adapt and change their approach to signaling, thus prompting a necessary response from a focal company. For example, if other companies are proactively debunking negative Glassdoor claims, the focal company may feel compelled to do the same.

Specific to our context, third party employment branding arms races can take several intriguing forms. First, as indicated above, organizations can choose to react or not react to third party employment branding information, particularly if it is negative. If third party information is positive, it would be natural for a company to reemphasize the information via internal means; for example, broadcasting a recent BPTW certification through its social media channels. However, organizations can also choose to either ignore, downplay, or reframe original third party employment branding information when it is negative. Specifically, arms races are more likely when companies feel the need to push back against credible negative third party signals (vs. e.g., one-off or random and isolated rants by individuals on Glassdoor). For example, organizations might have a dedicated person or team that actively responds to Glassdoor comments. Organizations might choose to acknowledge or provide "their side" of a negative media story. In general, there is a growing emphasis on organizations actively monitoring and responding to third party employment branding. This is consistent with Ravasi et al.'s (2018) strategic perspective on reputation management. George et al. (2016, p. 8) similarly claim that there are an increasing number of studies examining how organizations proactively manage and leverage external evaluations provided by their stakeholders, stating, "it has now become commonplace to include social media and sentiment tracking as part of the risk management strategies of firms" (see also, Etter et al., 2019).

Second, companies might engage in arms races simply by training their employees to be part of the message (e.g., Cascio & Graham, 2016). Companies can even frame this as “valuing employees” by making them part of the employment branding message. Specifically, by sharing that message with employees and taking the time to educate them about each facet of it, it enables employees to understand how to share the message appropriately via third party platforms. Correspondingly, companies can now actively monitor employee stories. That is, until recently, managers did not have access to many of these stories as they developed. Narratives were either naturally shared among peers behind closed doors or employees purposefully withheld them, fearing negative repercussions. In either case, comprehensive, collective, experience-based, and easy-to-access accounts of employee opinions did not exist, whereas now they do.

Third, taking this idea of organizational proactivity as a way to influence third party sources, a potential dark side of third party employment branding pertains to means by which organizations might “game the system.” Experts recognize that such gaming exists in other arenas. For example, Zemsky (2008, p. 7) details several instances of university ranking meddling and gaming in the context of universities being compelled to “play,” stating, “The rankings are merely intolerable; unilateral disarmament is suicide.” Connelly et al. (2011) call for research on deceptive signaling, which is highly relevant to this arms race idea.

Among the many ways this might occur, companies could encourage or even pressure employees to use their social media accounts to post positive accounts about the organization. They might pose as third parties, encourage bloggers to say certain things about them, or distribute BPTW certification surveys to employees who they know will provide “appropriate responses.” Arms races might also ensue as companies try to “game” Glassdoor type third parties (e.g., a “black market” for manufactured Glassdoor posts), or to “leak” stories to the media. The *Wall Street Journal* recently provided evidence to this effect (Winkler & Fuller, 2019). Specifically, based on an analysis of millions of anonymous Glassdoor reviews, more than 400 companies exhibited unusually large single-month spikes in disproportionately positive reviews. As a specific example, this article detailed how the CEO of Guaranteed Rate, in response to a slew of negative third party posts, had his team find and pressure employees who were likely to post positive reviews. This yielded hundreds of additional five-star ratings of the company in subsequent months. Some third party sources may be more flexible than others to this behavior. For example, word of mouth is relatively easy to adapt to, easy to fake, and not as costly, thus potentially inviting greater gaming and escalatory behaviors.

Potentially fueling this trend toward “brand engineering” and gaming, Dabirian et al. (2017) discuss the idea of creating employer attractiveness spectrums based on crowdsourced employment branding data, to generate previously unattainable insights into the scores all industry competitors receive from their employees. This not only shows which firms score highest and lowest, but also the relative positioning of all other companies on the spectrum. While such a tool does not yet exist for employer brand intelligence, it is highly probable that crowdsourced employment branding platforms like Glassdoor will soon offer value-added employer brand monitoring services

to firms. It is also conceivable that consulting firms will use processes similar to these to offer employer brand intelligence services. As one might imagine, access to this type of third party “scoring” data could incite a spiral of competitive activity; that is, in the current context, company attempts to monitor, control, and react to third party signals. These forms of “brand intelligence” are highly applicable to Ravasi et al.’s (2018) “communicative perspective” on reputation, whereby reputation is constantly changing and reevaluated, mostly via continuous social media exchanges between actors.

Overall, the persistence of third party sources as valuable providers of unique information will be intriguing over the long term. As we discussed when introducing the distinctiveness dimension, it is critical that third party messages retain a degree of uniqueness in the information marketplace. For example, Bangerter et al.’s (2012) theorizing suggests institutional pressures for organizations to use various third party sources; for example, to infiltrate Glassdoor, or to seek BPTW-type certifications. For example, Bitektine (2011) suggests that when firms lack status information, it yields status-low judgments from observers, rather than status-neutral judgments. This may explain firms’ zeal for pursuing these certifications. However, over time as more and more firms engage in these practices, signaling value will theoretically decrease. That is, institutional theory suggests that as time passes, organizations grow more similar (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), even in their pursuit of third party accolades. It is interesting to consider whether employer brands will maintain their distinctiveness over time, or whether mimetic forces will eventually eliminate their distinctiveness. That is, can firms maintain their unique employment brand image while responding to external forces for institutional similarity?

Anecdotally, the lead author is old enough to recall when answering machines were new and in vogue. People at first tried to differentiate their “request to leave a message” recordings by including humorous monologs, music, or other supposedly entertaining jingles. However, over time, this technique became saturated to the point that nearly everyone was doing this and it was no longer unique. In turn, the practice died out and today messages are highly normative (e.g., “we are not able to take your call right now. Please leave a message and we’ll get back to you as soon as possible”), and no longer a realistic source of differentiation. In a similar way, other third party platforms such as Glassdoor may cease to be useful differentiators if they become overly inundated with company-generated posts masked as third party posts. Or, certifications such as BPTW may become extinct, given there are so many of them now compared to several years ago (i.e., “every company is certified for something or ‘buys’ its certifications”). Overall, it appears to take more and more for organizations to truly stand out in the third party employment branding space. Perhaps regulatory oversight will be necessary at some point to adjudicate this landscape.

*Company Proactivity and Reactivity in the Wake of Third Party  
Employment Branding*

In terms of proactive branding, organizations may attempt to counter anticipated third party delivered bad news with otherwise good news. For example, Graffin,



Haleblian, and Kiley (2016) suggest that organizations sometimes engage in “impression offsetting” by which they proactively seek to offset impending bad news by releasing or seeking other unrelated good news or positive organizational developments. In our context, this could imply, for example, attempts to release positive community service news in the wake of anticipated third party employment branding messages about substandard employee leave policies.

Reactively, while organizations might engage in various “counter-tactics” whereby they use or engage third party platforms to wage employment branding arms races, they might also go beyond perception and actually change their employment practices. For example, Durand and Kremp (2016) found that middle-status organizations made aligned programing choices, compared to low- and high-status organizations. Their study pertained to symphony orchestra programing choices over a 90-year period, but could have implications for organizational reactions to third party employment branding, especially status-related branding like BPTW. If organizations in their study were middle-status, they made no major changes based on other-symphony programing. However, if they were low- or high-status organizations, there were larger potential changes in response to other symphonies. In our context, perhaps high-status organizations will feel more freedom to make changes to their employment offerings, whereas lower-status organizations may feel pressured to do so via the actions of other companies, and middle-range companies may conventionally maintain expected industry practices.

#### *Increased Company Idiosyncratic Credits or Accountability*

Based on the notion of “idiosyncratic credits” at the individual level (e.g., Hollander, 1958), another potential third party employment branding outcome category pertains to the bar that so-branded companies either attain or need to maintain. That is, another interesting angle on the receipt of positive third party branding is the notion of having to “keep it up,” which in a sense could be a negative effect of overly positive branding. At the same time, however, the public might give companies a “pass” or allow it “credit” in certain circumstances if something negative should happen, when they have hitherto received positive external branding.

In addition, reminiscent of halo errors, prior positive third party employment branding might offer a buffering effect, whereby public observers overlook subsequent negative events more than they typically would. For example, a woman recently died on a Southwest Airlines flight when a window failed. It was quite incredible how few negative comments resulted. In fact, Southwest actually received praise for the money they gave to all the passengers on the flight and the family of the woman who died. Their employees were seemingly loyal, refraining from commenting negatively in the aftermath. In general, it seemed like their reputation for being such a great employer gave them a pass in this otherwise difficult situation (CNN, 2018).

However, Lange et al. suggests both outcomes are possible. For example, with an already strong reputation, negative events might be accentuated. Lange et al.

(2011, p. 173) termed this the “burden of celebrity,” or higher scrutiny of well-known firms. Wang, Tong, Takeuchi, and George (2016) showed that evaluations should be considered in combination. For example, in our context, a negative word of mouth incident in concert with a favorable media or BPTW report is likely very different from word of mouth without these other accounts. Wang et al. (2016) showed that organizations respond by justifying their actions and behaviors when experts have evaluated them favorably but they receive negative word of mouth branding.

Similarly, Boivie et al.’s (2016) research suggests that multiple reputations should be considered. In our context, this suggests that one considers not only overall signals about the organization and its employment practices, but also signals about particular aspects such as specific managers, departments, or business units. For example, Elon Musk is the CEO of both Tesla, which has been cited for poor working conditions, and SpaceX, which was recently rated a best place to work. In the wake of bad press involving Musk, Tesla’s stock plummeted, whereas SpaceX was largely unaffected (Glassdoor, 2018; Salinas, 2018).

Moreover, Vergne’s (2012) work suggests that negative third party branding information could be particularly deleterious in industries that are already stigmatized, such as low-end retail (e.g., Walmart). One might, however, argue the opposite; that is, that negative branding is more expected in such industries, whereas it might “stand out more” in industries known for more positive employment branding (e.g., Netflix’s extremely tough employment practices in an otherwise “fun” industry; Grossman, 2010). This line of thinking would argue from a social expectations perspective that violations of expectancies garner greater attention. Thus, for example, a BPTW firm that experiences a negative third party employment branding episode might have worse repercussions. However, if an industry tends to garner negative third party branding overall for its employment practices (e.g., fast food), individual violations in that industry may not be as deleterious. This work also suggests that the “defense tactics” against negative third party employment branding that we discussed above might be more critical for companies in stigmatized industries.

#### *Additional Future Research Directions*

The prior sections suggest several fruitful avenues by which researchers can continue to pursue the effects of third party employment branding. In this section, we offer several additional specific research avenues. First, Boswell, Zimmerman and Swider (2012) propose three general classes of job seekers (new entrants, job losers, employed job seekers). Third party employment branding importance likely differs considerably for currently employed job seekers versus graduating students or gig workers. More generally, passive versus active job seekers, or experienced versus inexperienced job seekers will likely encounter, trust, and use third party employment branding information differently. For example, a less experienced job seeker is often more uncertain and may be more prone to relying on third party employment branding signals such as BPTW certifications. Among current employees, new hires likely process and react to third party employment branding signals quite differently than long-tenured vice presidents.

Cast another way, researchers might parse third party employment branding types into the categories identified in Fig. 2, striving to examine which types of job seekers or current employees are more or less attentive to and affected by the branding types, in terms of key outcomes (such as attraction or turnover). Furthermore, current employees may perceive a reputation for certain organizational aspects (e.g., Lange et al.'s "known for something" characterization), whereas job seekers will make generalized favorability judgments. Further, each stakeholder group likely has different needs associated with branding. For employees, it could be a need for pride or identity rather than a need for information. For job seekers, it could be a need for information about likely employment quality.

More generally, researchers should uncover individual differences that make individuals more prone to reacting to third party employment branding signals. For example, conscientious job seekers might seek out such information as part of a more careful, comprehensive job search, yet may actually be more discerning in which signals they actually use to make decisions. Other individual differences could include age (e.g., in terms of potential differences in social media word of mouth information use), performer status (good performers may attend to different information than poorer performers), or employee type (gig vs. traditional full time). Also related to the notion of "branding fit," but from an organizational perspective, scholars should examine what types of firms most benefit from the four overarching branding types in Fig. 2.

Second, although Fig. 1 identifies consensus across third party employment branding sources, scholars should extend this idea to consider cross-overs from third party employment branding to other types of third party branding. Product and employment branding consensus, or environmental and employment branding consensus would be fruitful areas of inquiry with which to begin. For example, Patagonia exhibits prototypical environmental and employment branding consensus (i.e., third parties detail how this company treats both the environment and its employees well; e.g., <http://reviews.greatplacetowork.com/patagonia>). Yet, Netflix exhibits a strong product brand (e.g., Dreemer, 2016), but is acclaimed by third parties for its "cut-throat" culture (Grossman, 2010; McCord, 2014). Also related to consensus are situations where one unit of a larger company may receive enhanced status via third party certifications or other sources, while other units may not. Jensen and Wang (2018) recently studied this lack of consensus, finding that it can hurt previously higher-status firms and can potentially help lower-status firms.

Related to the above, scholars should examine what might be termed *tangential employment branding*. The idea here is that there are occurrences when organizations or third parties post or publish information that is not necessarily related directly to employment branding but contributes to an overall employment image (e.g., the Patagonia environmental initiatives mentioned above). In other words, people encounter other forms of communication that can affect employer image because they perceive it as a form of employment branding. For example, a company with innovativeness in their employer brand is likely to benefit non-linearly from a newly publicized innovation.

Another way in which tangential employment branding might occur is via unintentional messages that actors send or symbolize. Through these messages or symbols, observers may infer certain organizational characteristics, even when the messages are not written or oral, nor directly employment related. For example, a group of employees working on a Habitat for Humanity project together outside work hours may signal an organization's corporate social responsibility stance, but such a signal could be unappealing to a potential employee seeking a clear work-life boundary. A neatly (vs. sloppily) dressed employee at a local restaurant wearing company clothing may signal the degree to which the work environment is organized or disorganized, or whether it is more or less difficult to secure a job at such a company.

Third, researchers should consider temporal branding effects in more detail; for example, how long does it take for third party employment branding effects to materialize? This contributes to the notion of consistency, in terms of how many repeat third party branding episodes it takes for effects to materialize. Gardner et al. (2011) illustrate the need for temporal considerations in branding research, whereas George et al. (2016) specifically discuss the need to address the length of time it takes for third party effects to emerge and to persist. Dineen and Allen (2016) took an initial look at this with respect to BPTW certifications, finding that effects on turnover were strongest after an initial certification, and then waned over subsequent certifications. However, future work might extend this initial effort to consider, for example, how social media posts change in the days and months following a BPTW announcement, media story, or former employee social media rant that goes viral.

Related to the above, a fourth suggestion is to examine more complex interactions between signaling subdimensions. For example, over time, non-coherent signals (e.g., third party accounts of firm family friendliness when initial indications ran counter to that) might become more credible to a receiver if they are coupled with consensus in the form of cross-source or within-source similarity (e.g., multiple former employees or multiple sources all corroborating firm family friendliness).

Fifth, researchers should examine potential spillover effects of positive (or negative) third party employment branding on current employees of celebrated (or denigrated) organizations. For example, it would be intriguing to know whether hiring managers tend to hire employees from more positively branded companies, as opposed to less branded companies. Sixth, in an exchange over business school rankings, Glick (2008) intriguingly suggested that these rankings are potentially customizable to individual preferences. Specifically, one person might assign higher weights to academic rigor, while another weights faculty publications or placement rate higher, and concomitant overall rankings reflect these individual weights. Similarly, it is worth considering whether this is possible for third party employment branding information. Specifically, big data might allow certification bodies to tailor certification lists to individual preferences, such that a specific job seeker could receive a list of companies interviewing at his/her school, rank ordered from "best" to "worst" places to work according to the job seeker's pre-specified formula. In the meantime, as this ability (inevitably) develops, efforts to better educate rankings users about what rankings comprise would be welcome.

Finally, specific to the United States, we recognize one of the longest economic growth periods in history (circa 2009 to the writing of this chapter in 2018). It will be interesting to track all of the newly developed third party employment branding sources and methods when the economy and unemployment changes. For example, could the third party “arms race” illustrated above simply be a by-product of long-term good employment numbers? That is, if there were plentiful applicants for jobs, Glassdoor may not matter as much, as people would need jobs regardless of how third parties were branding those jobs. Currently, job seekers seem to have a relative advantage in the signaling ecosystem (Bangerter et al., 2012) and can thus be more discerning across third party descriptions of opportunities. Companies, on the other hand, face greater pressure to adapt.

## CONCLUSION

With the explosion in third party employment branding capabilities, uses, and potential outcomes, it is important to take stock of this intriguing landscape and try to provide some structure to it. In this chapter, we have introduced a conceptual model detailing key signaling mechanisms that underpin the different ways in which third party employment branding might manifest, and have identified a taxonomy of branding sources. We hope our prototypical illustrations and future research directions will enhance scholarly efforts to continue studying this critical and evolving phenomenon.

## NOTES

1. Note that we consider a broader scope of third party employment branding. Therefore, this proposed definition expands Dineen and Allen’s (2016) definition, which for example does not comprise word-of-mouth.

2. Note that to maintain chapter focus we do not cover all possible mechanisms related to signaling. For example, as we ground our approach in an attributions perspective, we do not cover aspects such as signal strength or media richness. Moreover, we recognize other potential boundary conditions might exist, such as recipient familiarity with the signal source, formality of the setting in which the signal is transmitted, or timing of the signal. For example, with the proliferation of social media and sheer amount of information available about companies in recent years, receivers are challenged to process all the information they encounter, making these additional boundaries potentially more relevant. Finally, we acknowledge that there might be overlap between the proposed dimensions. For example, when multiple signaling (sub)dimensions are aligned, the result might be a stronger signal that can be viewed in an additive/multiplicative fashion. Yet, we do not formally address this.

3. A sixth, *communicative perspective*, suggests that reputation forms through “ongoing communicative interactions between organizations and actors in their environments” (Ravasi et al., 2018, p. 581). As this focuses on organizational sponsored communication, it is less relevant to this chapter.

4. Although we use the terms source and message interchangeably at various points, we recognize that source and message credibility may differ, such as when one believes a source is generally credible but an isolated message from that source is not.

5. We also recognize but do not review or incorporate Weiner’s (1985) attribution theory model. This model comprises locus of control, stability, and controllability as explanations for internal or external causes of success or failure. Because successes and failures are not as relevant to our approach, we instead draw on Kelley’s (1967, 1973) work.

6. It is important to recognize groups of receivers who may experience personal relevance differently. For example, organizational outsiders (e.g., job seekers or potential customers) may attend to the first aspect discussed above; that is, how important or salient the signal content is to them. On the other hand, organizational insiders may attend to the felt responsibility or instrumentality aspects, in terms of what the signal may mean for them, in terms of their organizational identity or perhaps as a means of leveraging their organization's success for other personal benefits or opportunities.

7. Although we generally consider BPTW-type competitions to be impersonal-attached, there are other competitions that draw solely on public perceptions and/or use more objective data. These have little to no organizational ties, and thus are more detached. For example, the Fortune 500 list derives strictly from organizational revenue. Additionally, Worst Companies to Work For (e.g., Suneson & Stebbins, 2018) is a ranking list that organizations of course do not actively seek.

8. The media examples are not exhaustive, but common outlets that report on organizational practices. Furthermore, even if employment practices are not explicitly described, publications can affect organizational stigma and the perception of its practices. For example, when organizations receive negative media coverage for misconduct (e.g., Volkswagen misrepresenting emission levels, ExxonMobil misleading the public about climate change, Wells Fargo creating accounts without customer consent), they are not only viewed more negatively but also the executives associated with the organizations can pay job market penalties (e.g., Groysberg et al., 2016), even if not employed by the organizations while the scandals or misconduct occurred.

9. Recurrence (the second consistency subdimension) generally tends to be lower among the impersonal and detached third party branding types. This is because most media outlets, such as this NPR feature, tend to publish one-time stories with little repeat or follow-up coverage.

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