

# BOARD POLICY OF HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS TOWARDS CREATING AND MAINTAINING THEIR EMPLOYER BRAND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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## Abstract

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The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic developed a new form of perceived organizational support called COVID-19-related organizational support (COVID-OS). This study investigates the role of COVID-OS in creating and maintaining an attractive employer brand. Although the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all types of organizations, both profit and nonprofit, the literature still lacks thorough research about the COVID-OS and employer brand in the context of nonprofit organizations (particularly the humanitarian ones). Based on in-depth qualitative data drawn from 38 semi-structured interviews with humanitarian employees in Jordan during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study revealed that the board of humanitarian organizations can create and maintain their employer brand through providing different forms of organizational support to their employees. These forms of support are health and mental support, support from the working social environment, support of the work-life balance, providing online training and development programs, fair recognition and compensation programs, and leadership support. This study provides significant theoretical implications to the literature regarding the link between organizational support and employer brand. It also offers valuable practical implications for policymakers of humanitarian organizations.

**Keywords:** Employer Brand, Perceived Organizational Support, COVID-19 Pandemic, Qualitative Research, Humanitarian Organizations, Jordan

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) global health pandemic is a key turning point in human history, creating a new era associated with significant changes in social and economic norms (Dirani et al., 2020). These changes require organizations to be ready for restructuring for more flexibility, with more focus on understanding their employees and their needs to ensure their commitment and engagement (Yawson, 2020). Enhancing employees' trust in their organizations during this pandemic is a key organizational resource (Gustafsson, Gillespie, Searle, Hope Hailey, & Dietz, 2020), and improving their abilities to flourish in the current dynamic and ambiguous times (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).

Workplaces continue to experience significant challenges and transformations resulting from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is expected that evolving terminologies, taxonomies, and practices are shaping the new normal (Yawson, 2020), such as the emergence of new career shifts (Hite & McDonald, 2020), new normal employability competencies (Buheji & Buheji, 2020), strategic flexibility analysis of human resources development (Yawson, 2020), and new leadership competencies (Dirani et al., 2020). Organizations have to rethink their activities and revisit their practices and strategies concerning managing their relationships with employees to be more flexible and adaptable in this new normal (Spurk & Staub, 2020). Our focus in this study is on the COVID-19-related organizational support (COVID-OS) that is a specific type of perceived organizational support (POS) provided by organizations to their workers during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ta'Amnha et al., 2021). In particular, this study investigates how the COVID-OS can be utilized to create and maintain the employer brand.

Employer branding is a strategic function in organizations built upon several disciplines, including human resource management (HRM) and marketing (Ta'Amnha, 2020). Employer brand includes "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment, and identified with the employing company" (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, p. 187). It is an intangible asset of organizations (Biswas & Suar, 2016) that contributes to their competitive advantage (Berthon, Ewing, & Hah, 2005). Employer brand stimulates employees to be highly attached emotionally to their jobs and organizations, which improves their commitments and dedication to their tasks and roles, thereby leading to positive organizational outcomes (Kaur, Malhotra, & Sharma, 2020). Attractive employer brand contributes to luring the external talents to join organizations even if offered less compensation compared to the ones with lower employer brand attractiveness (Bussan & Mouton, 2019; Kucherov & Zavyalova, 2012). Employer brand is an effective strategy that can benefit different types of organizations, whether they are profit (business) or nonprofit organizations.

Literature still lacks studies on COVID-OS and/or employer brand in the context of nonprofit organizations, especially humanitarian ones. Humanitarian organizations are a type of nonprofit organizations that works to minimize the suffering of human beings and enhance the well-being of

societies (Barnett & Weiss, 2008). Working in these organizations is characterized by numerous challenges (Loquercio, Hammersley, & Emmens, 2006). This is because many of their activities and operations are concentrated in less developed countries, particularly in Africa and Asia, which are associated with high levels of uncertainty, and political, security, and social instabilities (Heyse, 2016). Humanitarian work in such contexts can be very complex and highly risky, which affects the mental and psychological health of humanitarian employees. Humanitarian employees are often subjected to traumatic experiences, which can result in depression, anxiety, burnout, and vicarious trauma (Curling & Simmons, 2010). Consequently, it is very challenging to recruit and retain highly qualified employees to work under these challenging situations (Korff, 2012; Korff, Balbo, Mills, Heyse, & Wittek, 2015; Loquercio et al., 2006).

This difficult situation has been exacerbated by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has added additional burdens to humanitarian organizations and their personnel in serving people whose needs have been escalating since the pandemic appeared (Corburn et al., 2020). In addition, the ramifications of the new situation include growing work demands, high risk of infection, telecommuting, social distancing, and closing of schools and nurseries, all of which affect the mental and psychological health of employees (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Therefore, several sorts of COVID-OS should be offered to humanitarian employees to enable them to cope with these challenges, such as offering staff well-being programs that enhance their feeling of security and safety and subsequently their performance (Loquercio et al., 2006).

Taken together, the current study focuses on how humanitarian organizations can maintain an attractive employer brand in the eyes of their current and potential employees during the COVID-19 pandemic, since it was found that humanitarian workers who have positive attitudes towards their humanitarian organizations tend to accept built-in humanitarian work-related constraints, and even neglect other attractive offers they get from other employers (Korff et al., 2015). Therefore, organizations need to offer significant support to their employees to show positive attitudes that can be achieved by creating and enhancing a strong employer brand.

On the other hand, the current study adds a significant contribution to the HRM area concerning the humanitarian organizations that generally suffer from a lack of advanced human resource (HR) practices compared to corporate organizations (Mutambara & Mutambara, 2012). In addition, the current new normal requires revisiting current managerial practices and activities to reinvent new and more effective strategies to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020; Dirani et al., 2020). To the best of our knowledge, this is the only study that addresses the "employer brand" topic in the context of humanitarian organizations. In short, this study expands our knowledge about employer branding in humanitarian organizations and offers managerial implications for the board of these organizations on how they can create and maintain the developed employer brand during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The context of this study is the humanitarian organizations in Jordan that is a developing country in the Middle East. Over the last two decades, Jordan has been witnessing noticeable improvements in several dimensions such as healthcare, literacy, democracy, politics, economy, and human resources as a result of ongoing reforms and transformational efforts carried out by both public and private sectors. However, Jordan is still facing many challenges such as high rates of unemployment, lack of natural resources, political instability in the region, and inconsistency in financial aid. In addition, one of the major challenges that is facing Jordan currently is the huge numbers of refugees resulting from wars and conflicts in the Middle East region. These refugees place huge pressure on the country's infrastructure such as health, education, and transport, as well as on the limited natural resources (Hidalgo et al., 2015). Refugees are also competing significantly with the local people in the labor market (Francis, 2015). Therefore, the humanitarian organizations are very active in Jordan to support those refugees and the Jordanian government in dealing with this challenge and its ramifications.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section 2 reviews the previous literature. Section 3 presents the methodology used in this study. Section 4 presents the results concerning the main themes. Section 5 discusses these results. Finally, Section 6 presents the conclusion that comprises the theoretical and practical implications, limitations, and future research.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Theoretical underpinning

This study uses the conservation of resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989) as a theoretical framework to explain how employer brand can be sustained during the COVID-19 pandemic. The COR theory was developed to explain individuals' attitudes and actions when they face stressful situations. According to this theory, people experience stress when they lose resources or face the possibility of losing them. The strength of the COR theory stems from not only focusing on individuals and their reactions to stressful situations but also considering the surrounding environment that intervenes in the stress cycle (Hobfoll, 2001). On one hand, this environment may represent a threat to the individuals of losing their resources or gaining more resources, which is an underlying factor in stressful and challenging situations. On the other hand, the surrounding environment may represent an enabler for individuals to cope with stressful situations and make advancements.

This study focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on humanitarian organizations' ability to create and sustain their employer brand through offering organizational and job resources that are essential in dealing with the pandemic challenges. The more resources offered by organizations to their employees, the more attractive their workplaces become (Biswas & Suar, 2016). Therefore, when employees find that their employers care about their well-being and acknowledges their contributions (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986), they become

more satisfied and committed to their organizations (Kashyap & Verma, 2018), which is the main target of the employer brand strategies (Tanwar & Prasad, 2016). This is because people feel indebted to their organizations when they experience their support, as explained in the social exchange theory (SET) (Homans, 1958; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). Given that the support offered by organizations is easily and eagerly received by their employees, it naturally affects the latter's attitudes and behaviors (Eisenberger et al., 1986), including job satisfaction (Allen, Shore, & Griffeth, 2003), enjoying intrinsic career success (Kuijpers, Schyns, & Scheerens, 2006), and showing more organizational commitment and less job search intentions (Dawley, Andrews, & Bucklew, 2008). This is because when employees find that their organizations consider their needs and provide them with several sorts of job resources, they feel more obligated to pay back to their organizations. When behavior is perceived as meeting social obligations, the exchange process is created and the cycle continues (Tucker, Chmiel, Turner, Hershcovis, & Stride, 2008). Thus, organizational support for employees directly improves the employer brand (Biswas & Suar, 2016).

### 2.2. Employer brand

Employer brand has been receiving considerable attention since the concept first appeared (Ambler & Barrow, 1996), though it receives more interest from the practitioner community than academia (Heilmann, Saarenketo, & Liikkanen, 2013). Employer brand comprises a package of psychological, functional, and economic benefits provided by the employing company that distinguishes it from other firms (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). This definition reflects the obligations of employers to their employees, the honoring of which leads to desirable outcomes for organizations (Robertson & Khatibi, 2013). Therefore, employer brand is considered a development in the psychological contract theory, which explains and manages relationships between employers and employees on the basis of individual psychological responses (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Employer brand consists of a combination of two types of values offered to employees: instrumental, such as salary and career opportunities; and symbolic, such as prestige and social identity (Sarrica, Michelon, Bobbio, & Ligorio, 2014). Employer brand sends signals to employees to show that organizations acknowledge and value their employees (Kaur et al., 2020). It can be institutionalized in an organization by providing cultural-cognitive, normative-professional, and regulative pillars (Ta'Amnha, 2020).

Employer branding is a novel competitive strategy of HRM (Xia & Yang, 2010). It is similar to product and service branding, as all work to communicate certain experiences to customers. However, the experience delivered by the employer brand is primarily related to employment opportunities and symbolic values. In addition, these experiences or promises are sent to both internal employees and external prospective employees (Ewing, Pitt, De Bussy, & Berthon, 2002). This reflects an integrated approach in employer branding that combines both the external recruitment promises with the internal experience of current employees (Mosley, 2007; Heilmann et al., 2013).

Employer brand has a significant impact on employee attitudes and activities (Ta'Amnha, 2020), and these attitudes can lead to positive organizational performance (Rifai, Yousif, Bwaliez, Al-Fawaeer, & Ramadan, 2021). Employer brand leads to improved organizational commitment (Tanwar, 2016; Arasanmi & Krishna, 2019), increased job satisfaction (Buttenberg, 2013; Fasih et al., 2019; Kaur et al., 2020), enhanced organizational citizenship behavior (Buttenberg, 2013), higher effectiveness of recruitment efforts (Heilmann et al., 2013), less recruitment and compensation costs (Berthon et al., 2005; Bussin & Mouton, 2019), and reduced turnover intention (Lelono & Martdianty, 2013; Kashyap & Rangnekar, 2016; Kashyap & Verma, 2018). Furthermore, organizational productivity and performance have been found to be higher among organizations characterized by having developed employer branding strategies compared to those that lack or have partially developed strategies (Biswas & Suar, 2016; Tumasjan, Kunze, & Bruch, 2016; Aldousari, Robertson, Yajid, & Ahmed, 2017; Kashive & Khanna, 2017; Tumasjan et al., 2020).

While the majority of the research on employer brand was conducted in relatively stable corporate working environments, the current COVID-19 pandemic has caused HR professionals and scholars to investigate critical interventions that can be employed during the current unpredictable situation to propose and assess new possible results in respect of the success or failure of applying a new form of the employer brand.

### 2.3. Employer branding in the humanitarian sector

Humanitarian organizations are nonprofit organizations that work to minimize the suffering of human beings and enhance the well-being of societies (Barnett & Weiss, 2008). They are driven by a normative ethical orientation and not motivated by profit (Smillie & Minear, 2003). They often have to respond swiftly to emergent events and crises (Loquercio et al., 2006), which commonly occur in insecure and unstable places (Stoddard, Harmer, & DiDomenico, 2009). Due to the demanding nature of humanitarian operations, reducing the employee turnover rate in humanitarian organizations is a persistent and problematic issue of critical importance in the humanitarian sector (Korff, 2012). For instance, a large proportion of humanitarian employees are not satisfied in their organizations and show a high tendency to leave their organizations when they get better offers (Mukute & Marange, 2006; Mutambara & Mutambara, 2012). Therefore, organizations strive to increase employee retention and commitment (Loquercio et al., 2006). Employer branding is an effective strategy that can help these organizations to reduce turnover.

However, there is a dearth of research in the area of employer brand in the humanitarian sector. Most of our knowledge regarding employer brand stems from studies conducted in business or educational settings. Applying knowledge developed for the corporate private sector in nonprofit organizations has long been criticized (Lewis, 2003). This is because altruistic attitudes shape the fundamental philosophy and rationale of humanitarian organizations and their employees' activities (Hilhorst & Schmiemann, 2002). For

instance, Sarrica et al. (2014) found that symbolic aspects of employer brand such as social identity, honesty, and sincere traits of an organization affect job attractiveness in nonprofit organizations, and thus people promote such organizations as attractive places to work, but this effect was not found in instrumental values such as salary. These results are opposed to previous studies that found instrumental value improves the attractiveness of the corporate (for-profit) business organizations (Highhouse, Zickar, Thorsteinson, Stierwalt, & Slaughter, 1999; Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey, & Edwards, 2000). For all of the aforementioned arguments, this study sheds more light on the humanitarian organizations to understand the uniqueness of such organizations in relation to the employer branding activities (Korff, 2012).

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Qualitative approach

The study aims to understand how the board of humanitarian organizations in Jordan create and maintain their employer brand through providing different forms of organizational support to their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. A qualitative methodology was employed according to the humanistic inquiry philosophical standpoint (Hirschman, 1986). By means of the qualitative interview method, particularly through conducting semi-structured interviews, the researchers were able to collect a set of data from humanitarian organizations working in Jordan, which was then analyzed according to the thematic analysis guidelines. At the end of this study, new insights and understandings were reached and presented.

Even though positivism philosophical stance can be adopted in this research by using a survey to collect data (Bwaliez & Abushaikha, 2019; Sharabati, Al-Salhi, Bwaliez, & Nazzal, 2020; Ta'Amnha, Samawi, Bwaliez, & Magableh, 2021), the researchers decided to adopt humanistic inquiry (social constructionism) assumptions. This is because the researchers were interested in collecting the subjective meanings of the phenomena of interest relying on their self-consciousness and intentionality, and based on the interaction with social actors, taking into account their social, cultural, and historical aspects and conditions. Therefore, the attainable facts are products of the activities and interactions of people in the targeted population (Fombrun, 1982). The researchers believe that the meaning of organizational supports and employer brand during the COVID-19 pandemic is significantly different comparing with the normal conditions. In other words, the researchers believe that COVID-OS is a socially constructed phenomenon that implies various meanings across different contexts in a going process of creation.

### 3.2. Sample and data collection

Given the exploratory nature of this research that adopts the qualitative approach, we conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews to collect the data. The number of humanitarian organizations in Jordan is about 263 operating in several fields

such as health, education, and economic empowerment. Non-probability snowball sampling technique was adopted to select interviewees. This is because it is difficult to get access to the humanitarian organizations in Jordan without personal contact. The researchers invited several humanitarian organizations to participate in this study after explaining the aim of this study through the formal channel but no responses were acquired. Therefore, the researchers decided to use their personal contacts. This approach refers to what Ta'Amnha (2014) called the "wasta snowball sampling technique (WSST)", which has a major impact on the data collection process in the Arabic context like Jordan. The Arabic term *wasta* means using personal connections to achieve goals. According to Balakrishnan (2013), *wasta* is greatly needed to gain access to data from the Middle East and North Africa countries.

The data were collected from 38 employees of 12 humanitarian organizations working in Jordan during two waves over a period of about 4 months. In the first wave that was conducted in July 2020, the researchers interviewed five of their personal acquaintances working in humanitarian organizations in Jordan. These five interviews represented pilot interviews that were very useful for checking the interviews' questions and enhancing the interview protocol and procedures (Castillo-Montoya, 2016; Harding, 2018). In the second wave that was conducted from the beginning of August 2020 until the end of October 2020, the researchers interviewed 33 employees recommended by the five (5) pilot interviewees in the first wave. As a result, the interviewees were 19 male and 19 female employees. Their ages ranged from 23 to 55, with an average of 32. Their length of experience in humanitarian activities ranged from less than 1 year to 25 years, with an average of 14 years. Seventeen (17) participants were single and 21 were married. In terms of the highest level of education, three had high school diplomas, 29 had first degrees, and 6 had master's degrees.

Each interview length ranged between 30 to 75 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded, with participants' permission, and were conducted in English. The topics discussed in the interviews were derived from the literature on COVID-OS, employer brand, and HRM. The interviews were conducted to collect new ideas, experiences, and feelings of the participants. Therefore, the interviewer avoided pre-assumptions and leading questions. At the beginning of the interviews, the interviewer explained the purpose of the study and clarified the concepts of interest, mainly the employer brand and COVID-OS. Then, the interviewees were asked to discourse briefly on their employment history to create rapport. The questions about COVID-OS and employer brand were then asked and probed.

After conducting interviews, the recordings were transcribed verbatim, which helped achieve data immersion, then data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six phases described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Initial sub-themes were identified and then grouped into main themes, which were assigned thematic names after careful scrutiny. Finally, the researchers worked to make theoretical sense from the emerging themes and

the related data. To improve the trustworthiness and validity of study findings, the member-checking technique (Creswell, 1998) was carried out by asking four participants to review the research data and interpretation (Ivri, 2018) to make sure that the research interpretations are in line with their original inputs and understanding (Moroko & Uncles, 2008).

#### 4. KEY GOVERNANCE TRENDS

The overarching objective of this study is to investigate how humanitarian organizations can create and maintain their employer brand during the COVID-19 pandemic. The emerging themes resulted from analyzing the interview data and extracting its meanings are summarized in the following subsections.

##### 4.1. Health and mental support

###### 4.1.1. Awareness workshops and information

One of the main forms of COVID-OS provided by humanitarian organizations is represented in offering awareness workshops and circulating information concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and the best protection practices to be followed by workers to protect their health and save their lives. A medical social worker stated:

*"We frequently receive information about the pandemic and its symptoms as well as the health procedures to deal with."*

Furthermore, a volunteer coordinator pointed out:  
*"Several workshops have been organized by our organizations since the COVID-19 pandemic appeared. They were about this virus and how to protect ourselves and our families from getting infected, and how to deal with this unprecedented situation."*

###### 4.1.2. Protection tools

The humanitarian organizations showed COVID-OS to their employees by providing them with personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves and masks on a continuous basis. A project manager said:

*"We were provided with the personal protective tools such as gloves and masks to deal with and serve the beneficiaries safely."*

###### 4.1.3. COVID-19 check

The results showed that there is a consensus among humanitarian workers that their organizations offered them the chance to take the COVID-19 test regularly, when symptoms appeared and when they had had interaction with service users such as refugees. This could reduce their stress level related to the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a child support case officer:

*"We can take the PCR test whenever anyone feels not in good shape or when the symptoms of the COVID-19 appear among employees. We also take the test when we interact or deal with a huge number of refugees."*

#### 4.1.4. Well-being support programs

Well-being support programs appeared as one of the key activities that humanitarian organizations made available to their workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. The new situation required some employees to work from home while others had reduced interactions with colleagues. The results revealed that during the time of quarantine, employees were subjected to more psychological pressures, which motivated humanitarian organizations to offer supportive programs to their employees (e.g., mental health programs) to help them cope with the new challenges. A support services officer stated:

*"We received continuous tips in respect of keeping our mental functioning properly to deal with the COVID-19 consequences while we were in the quarantine."*

In addition, a social media coordinator declared:

*"We have a psychological counselor with whom people share their anxious, stressful, and negative thoughts, as well as personal and family problems. We are encouraged to refer to this service whenever we need help."*

Moreover, a community outreach specialist explained:

*"... a mindful booklet is available to us, and we got training previously about applying the activities in the booklet .... It is mandatory for each employee who took this course. It is recorded and the supplements are available to anyone in our organization .... We are frequently encouraged by the HR department to read it and apply its activities during these times."*

## 4.2. Support from the working social environment

### 4.2.1. Personal support from work colleagues

The results showed that a key social factor that enhances the brand of humanitarian organizations is supporting the infected employees and their families by their work colleagues. This increases employee commitment, strengthens organizational culture, and promotes a more familial atmosphere. A child-care worker stated:

*"A friend in need is a friend indeed. This is what I found when get infected by the virus. My colleagues kept following up on my situation frequently to support me and tried to check if I needed any help."*

Additionally, a team leader clarified:

*"It has become a norm in our organization that when anyone gets infected by the virus, we support him with all kinds of support to keep his morale high and show our commitment to each other."*

Supporting the infected employees by performing their jobs was also found to be a key factor in enhancing the social value of humanitarian organizations. A community organizer provided an example:

*"During the home quarantine, part of my work responsibilities was done with the help of my colleagues. This alleviated the difficulties I faced during quarantine."*

### 4.2.2. Online engagement activities and games

The COVID-19 pandemic caused more social distancing and reduced and changed interactions between employees. To keep their employees engaged during telecommuting and quarantine, some humanitarian organizations encouraged different types of online engagement activities. For example, a development officer stated:

*"To keep the employees highly engaged, we often play several games online such as the best photo or showing strange cooking recipes to keep our employees engaged and connected with their work and their organizations."*

Moreover, a grant coordinator explained:

*"We used to get together in a monthly gathering over dinners or twice a year gathering in farms and enjoying the whole day with our colleagues, and sometimes with their families, but this has been changed. These days we can't organize big events, but we still do some activities together at a personal level. At the official level, we do some online games together and meet online to discuss several issues or chat. We also organize online birthdays .... Sometimes we do crazy things such as asking our colleagues to share a photo of their meal, one of their strangest photos, or something taken in an adventure .... This makes our life more exciting during the pandemic."*

## 4.3. Support of the work-life balance

### 4.3.1. Flexible working schedules

Given the closure of schools and nurseries, some humanitarian organizations provided their employees with work-life balance programs, such as offering flexible working schedules to meet the increasing demand of their families. A procurement officer presented an explanation:

*"You know this pandemic adds more burden on the parents' shoulders to teach their kids and following up with their schools during the pandemic because the schools are closed currently. The organization offers us a flexible working schedule to meet this situation's needs; I am now working six hours a day only to give more time to my kids and home."*

### 4.3.2. Compressed working schedules

The results showed that some humanitarian organizations offered compressed working schedules to their employees to enable them to meet their personal responsibilities. The importance of the type of job design increased during the COVID-19 pandemic to allow for family responsibilities associated mainly with the closure of schools and nurseries. An accountant explained:

*"With the increased demand of my kids and their studies, I am only working four days for ten hours in the organization, and I took Mondays off to keep following up on my kids' studies."*

### 4.3.3. Telecommuting

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, humanitarian organizations made some changes in their job design by introducing telecommuting widely to keep

their work going during quarantine and maintain service for their beneficiaries. A monitoring assistant explained:

*"During the pandemic, we are increasingly using telecommuting to reduce the risk of getting infected by the COVID-19 .... Yes, for all of the employees; a substantial number of them work a large part of their job from home."*

#### 4.3.4. Technical support during the work from home

The results revealed that offering ongoing technical support to employees is very significant to enable employees to perform their jobs and meet their responsibilities while working from home. This support takes many forms, such as setting up meetings and installing telecommuting software. In addition, some organizations offered their employees laptops and other computer accessories to enable their employees to work and maintain their productivity.

A women project analyst said:

*"During the work from home, we received technical support 24/7."*

Moreover, the cases manager confirmed this by stating:

*"I got a laptop from my organization to do my job effectively, in addition to the technical support from the IT department."*

#### 4.4. Online training and development programs

##### 4.4.1. Online training courses and workshops

Online training courses and workshops boomed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Humanitarian organizations focused significantly on maintaining the process of skilling and reskilling their employees during the pandemic. In addition, orientation was carried out online in some organizations for some parts of their jobs. This is evidenced by a technical assistant who mentioned:

*"There are many online courses that we can join .... After the COVID-19 nothing is done as before .... Now, our organization offers online training. Even the new employees also get training and orientation online."*

##### 4.4.2. Online communities of practice

It was apparent that during the COVID-19 pandemic limited physical interactions between colleagues, but online informal conversations between workers contributed to generating and sharing knowledge that benefits the operation and performance of the humanitarian organizations. Some humanitarian organizations were aware of the benefits of such communities of practice and therefore tried to encourage their employees to sustain these activities online. A field associate explained:

*"We are sharing knowledge, practices, stories, and experiences during informal settings, over lunch, or in the morning, or during our socializing outside the work time. We learn a lot from each other, and sometimes I find this the shortest way of solving problems."*

#### 4.5. Fair recognition and compensation programs

The results showed that most of the humanitarian organizations did not reduce salaries or benefits for employees compared with other organizations in Jordan that reduced salaries hugely, sometimes to less than half. This shows the commitment and support of these organizations towards their employees, which was perceived with high appreciation, commitment, and motivation from employees. A risk and security officer said:

*"No changes in the salaries or benefits occurred due to coronavirus."*

Additionally, a social work officer stated:

*"The good thing in this story is that our management didn't stop offering us employee of the month recognition prizes."*

#### 4.6. Leadership support

##### 4.6.1. Clarifying the tasks and objectives

One of the key competencies or roles that leaders have to show during a crisis is the ability to communicate clearly and continuously with their followers. Humanitarian employees sometimes become stressed and lose their focus during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the results showed that leadership support in clarifying their tasks and goals was crucial during the pandemic to meet their job requirements. An accountant stated:

*"At the beginning, we were lost during working from home. Things were not clear to us. The manager of our unit worked closely with us to make each one of us know exactly his/her roles. He monitored our performance and continuously provided us with his constructive feedback."*

##### 4.6.2. Emotional support

The results revealed that emotional support is a major characteristic of effective leadership during tough times. Focusing more on enhancing relationships with employees contributes to minimizing the stress and anxiety associated with ambiguity and crises. A legal cases senior officer clarified:

*"... He [supervisor] helped me to get back on track .... I lost my direction at the beginning of this pandemic. He offered us his care, friendship, and encouragement. So, we had more control over our jobs, and this helped in reducing the stress and ambiguity we suffered from at the beginning."*

##### 4.6.3. Teamwork

The results showed that enhancing and promoting team works during the pandemic were very important activities since people need more support and validation from their colleagues and increased ties during crises. Leadership plays a key role in this regard since leaders have the experience and the influence to increase team spirit inside organizations. While talking about her boss at work, a nurse said:

*"She worked with us closely to increase our level of interactions and harmony .... This enhances our team spirit and cohesion .... We need support from*

*our colleagues and working together in supportive teams ... during this crisis in order to alleviate its pressures and enhance our ability to deal with it."*

#### 4.6.4. Supportive and open workplace

The results revealed that leaders had to show a high level of openness and encouragement to their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic to enable them to be involved more in organizational activities and decisions. In addition, the supportive and flexible leadership style motivates employees to be more self-directed and empowered, encourages them to undertake initiatives to support the mission of their organizations, and improves their abilities to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic. While talking about his project manager, a technical advisor said:

*"His participatory style makes a difference in our organization. I enjoyed being involved in making the decision and actions in our project. The project manager is so open-minded to any ideas and thoughts even if they are not on his agenda .... He offers us a room to select what works for us and enhance the work, especially during the fieldwork and dealing with refugees ... I sometimes feel that I am in charge of all the camp ... I manage the whole work [...] Yes, it is very challenging, but really I love this job and its challenges."*

## 5. DISCUSSION

The public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been causing significant and unprecedented changes in workplaces. To cope with this challenging situation, organizations need to adjust their practices and strategies. Our focus in the current study is on how the board of humanitarian organizations creates and maintains their employer brand taking into consideration the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study found that organizational support is a key dimension of employer brand during the COVID-19 pandemic. Offering significant organizational resources to the employees enhances the employer brand in the eyes of current employees and attracting new ones. This COVID-OS takes many forms, such as conducting awareness workshops and sharing information about the virus, providing protection tools, and offering easy access to the COVID-19 tests. In addition, well-being support programs appeared to be a significant strategy that has been emphasized since the pandemic began (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020). This is due to the high level of stress resulting from the fear of the virus itself (i.e., fear of infection), and the associated stressors of home quarantine, social distancing, and social isolation under public health policies of lockdown. Therefore, humanitarian organizations tend to offer online tips on how to deal with these pressures, and in some cases provide access to psychological counseling to enhance their employees' mindfulness and resilience (De Cieri, Shea, Cooper, & Oldenburg, 2019). These resources alleviate the stress people experience during these difficult times as the COR theory proposes (Hobfoll, 1989).

The COVID-19 pandemic impacts add to the traumatic experiences that humanitarian workers are ordinarily subjected to, which can result

in depression, anxiety, burnout, vicarious trauma, and in some cases posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (Curling & Simmons, 2010). Furthermore, engaging in virtual works was also associated with more stress (Caligiuri et al., 2020). These working conditions influence reenlistment decisions and reduce motivation among humanitarian workers (Korff et al., 2015). Thus, humanitarian organizations focus more on offering staff well-being programs to support their workers and reduce their turnover rate, because these programs assist organizational staff to enhance their performance and to feel more secure and safe (Loquercio et al., 2006). This consequently enhances the employer brand of these organizations.

Social support also appeared to be a key determinant of the employer brand. It can be experienced from several perspectives, such as collegiality support during the pandemic, which is a key factor that enhances the employer brand (Biswas & Suar, 2013). It was found that when colleagues and friends are willing to share tasks and responsibilities with absent colleagues, this creates and promotes a healthy work environment, which is also a major employer brand dimension (Tanwar & Prasad, 2017). In addition, online work engagement is one of the key attitudinal subjects of the social life of organizations (Carasco-Saul, Kim, & Kim, 2015; Saks, 2019). Work engagement is defined as a "positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor (energy and mental resilience), dedication (involvement and sense of significance), and absorption (concentrated and engrossed in one's work)" (Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, & Bakker, 2002, p. 74). Currently, creating and maintaining strong ties and harmony inside organizational social networks is a key challenge that needs new ways of thinking to be sustained and flourished. Employee engagement for instance will witness huge changes in its meaning and practices that therefore need new ways of engaging remote employees, which can mainly be achieved by new technologies and automation (Yawson, 2020). As shown in the results of this study, people used several online activities and gathering to enhance their interaction and commitment, such as online daily happy hours, online lunches, sharing strange recipes or photos, and memories. In addition, encouraging celebrating the achievement of colleagues by organizations and leadership using different online platforms enhances the level of engagement and enjoyment during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dirani et al., 2020).

Jordanian society is characterized by large and extended families and highly social forms of interaction. Therefore, one of the major concerns for Jordanian workers in this study was work-life balance. Offering work-life balance support is very important to shape and maintain the employer brand, such as flexible working schedules, telecommuting, and compressed working schedules. This enhances the commitment and motivation of workers with families, especially women humanitarian aid workers who have more parenthood and family responsibilities and huge difficulties in reconciliation between work and family, rendering them more likely to leave their jobs (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). In addition to the difficulties in separating work from personal life,



the closure of schools and nurseries increased parental pressures for employees and added more burdens to parents' shoulders blurring the lines between the work and family domains (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020).

It is also found that offering technical support and training on how the effectiveness of telecommuting can be enhanced is a very important factor for employer branding, particularly for humanitarian employees who had no experience of this type of job design previously. Employees usually find telecommuting minimizes their face-to-face interactions with managers, making it difficult to get access to work-related information, with a lack of feedback, inspirational work atmosphere, commendation, and notice for their performance and effort by supervisors. This affects the accuracy of performance evaluation, access to developmental opportunities, and employee motivation (Raišienė, Rapuano, Varkulevičiūtė, & Stachová, 2020).

The findings also showed that online training is prevailing nowadays, due to the difficulties in offering physical training in organizational premises or sending them to training centers. Training is one of the major dimensions in HRM in general (Al-Tahat & Bwaliez, 2015) and in employer branding in particular (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Tanwar & Prasad, 2017). The need for upskilling and reskilling has been increasing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and this momentum will continue in the coming years due to fundamental changes in the digitalized global economy (Yawson, 2020). Therefore, organizations have to keep offering training programs to their members to keep them up-to-date and motivated. Training receives more value during crises because it adds more cognitive and psychological resources to employees that enable them to cope with the depletion of resources during difficult times (Agarwal, 2020). Online training such as e-learning, distance learning, and self-learning has become an important trend in all industries (Ghosh, Rai, & Sinha, 2014). These developments enhance the quality and speed of the offered training to remote employees, enabling organizations to reskill their workers effectively, to meet the requirements of the new normal (Buheji & Buheji, 2020). This also assists employees to satisfy their need for competencies (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017), thus enhancing the retention of humanitarian workers (Mutambara & Mutambara, 2012). One of the key findings of this study is the community of practice way of gaining knowledge and dealing with work challenges. During online work, people share more knowledge and this enhances information-sharing with colleagues, which makes employees feel more satisfied with their intellectual environments. It was found that some companies encourage this type of informal learning, which leads to enhanced company performance and social capital (Lesser & Storck, 2001).

Moreover, the findings showed that compensation and benefits in most organizations where interviewees worked were not affected significantly due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because humanitarian organizations rely on donors and funds that have not declined; rather, the role and importance of humanitarian organizations have increased in these difficult conditions (Corburn et al., 2020). The findings found that maintaining

resources, including compensation and benefits, demonstrated the high commitment of organizations toward their employees, as the COR theory assumes (Hobfoll, 1989). The findings showed that compensation and benefits are highly important factors that affect the employer brand. This is consistent with other research conducted in the humanitarian organizations, which found that employee commitment stems mainly from continuous commitment, not affection commitment (Mutambara & Mutambara, 2012).

Finally, the findings revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic the important role of leaders in clarifying organizational objectives and strategies has significantly increased. During crises employees become more stressed due to the high rate of ambiguity, therefore they need more guidance and encouragement. Emotional support from leaders was found to be a key indicator of effective leadership during the current pandemic. It was also found that relations-oriented leadership is positively associated with mental health in the sense that it reduces burnout and stress among employees, and thus enhances their performance (Montano, Reeske, Franke, & Hüffmeier, 2017). Relation-oriented leadership behavior is crucial in maintaining service employees' work performance, especially in virtual environments during crises (Bartsch, Weber, Büttgen, & Huber, 2020). In addition, the study found that leadership, integrated with a virtual working environment, plays a key role in building cohesive and harmonious teams, which are required during crises (Liao, 2017). Leaders were also found to be a key factor in improving employees' abilities to make decisions by themselves, and be more self-directed and autonomous in their performance (Cheong, Spain, Yammarino, & Yun, 2016).

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study responded to the call for more scholarly cooperation from different disciplines to deal with the challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). This study revealed the importance of offering different forms of COVID-OS by humanitarian organizations to achieve a strong employer brand that can maintain and motivate their current employees and be attractive to qualified job seekers. This study revealed that the board of directors of humanitarian organizations should concentrate on key forms of support, namely health and mental support, support from the working social environment, support of the work-life balance, providing online training and development programs, fair recognition and compensation programs, as well as leadership support.

The health and mental support comprises offering awareness workshops and information about the COVID-19, protection tools, COVID-19 check, and well-being support programs. Support of working social environment includes providing personal support from work colleagues as well as online engagement activities and games. Support of work-life balance is represented by offering flexible and/or compressed working schedules, telecommuting, and technical support during work

from home. Providing online training and development programs is also a form of organizational support that can be conducted through e-training and e-workshops as well as online communities of practice. Humanitarian organizations should also ensure fair recognition and compensation programs. Finally, the leadership support comprises clarifying the tasks and objectives, providing emotional support, teamwork, as well as a supportive and open workplace.

This study offers several practical insights to the board of humanitarian organizations to create and maintain their employer brand through supporting their employees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Humanitarian organizations can support their employees by offering the needed protection resources, investing more in the well-being programs, and supporting the work-life balance to help their workers deal with the current stressful and demanding situation. Humanitarian organizations can gain significant benefits from encouraging informal gatherings among their employees to enhance their engagement, which can take online forms. They can also encourage informal ways of sharing information and expertise among their workers, which have significant consequences

for organizational performance. The advancement of technology can help humanitarian organizations to reach their goals through providing online training and development programs, effective telecommuting, and online support and counseling. Furthermore, humanitarian organizations should not neglect the role of providing fair recognition and compensation programs and leadership support during and crisis in general and the COVID-19 pandemic in particular. All of these COVID-OS practices enhance employee skills and reskilling that improves job satisfaction of employees and the employer brand of their humanitarian organizations.

Although this qualitative study leads to an in-depth understanding of the issues of COVID-OS and employer brand, it suffers from limited generalizability. Therefore, it is recommended for future researchers to employ quantitative methodologies to explore the emergent qualitative findings of this study with a larger number of participants. In addition, it is recommended to apply similar studies in other industries and countries to figure out different forms of COVID-OS and explore how these forms affect the employer brand.

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