

## Role of Corporate Communication in Boomerang

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The study tries to analyze the trends in alumni relations and the role of corporate communication in developing organizational identification and a positive boomerang behavior intention among former employees. The approach of the study has been from the point of view of making this process formal and emphasize on the impact of corporate communication in maintaining alumni relationships, and attracting the former talent for the organization. **Methodology**- An exploratory methodology was designed to capture the perceptions of current and former employees of nine multinational companies (MNCs) in India, on alumni communication practices prevailing in their organizations. Transcripts of semi-structured interviews were analyzed, coded thematically and the essence of experiences was jointly combined into one description. **Findings** – Study showed that corporate alumni website, personalized messages on discounts on products and services, emails, social networking platforms, alumni engagement events, leadership and value training workshops and corporate communication standards, particularly consistency, have a positive impact on organizational identification and finally inspire the former employees to rejoin the organization. **Practical implications** – A number of significant managerial implications are drawn from this study, for example using both corporate communication and training to influence former employees' attitudes and decision to participate in volunteering activities or rejoin the previous employer. Still, it should be noted that the effect of corporate communication on the behaviors of former employees depend on communication standards and HR interventions in maintaining relationships with alumni. **Originality/value** – The results provide valuable insights from the key former and current employees perspectives into the effectiveness of alumni communication process to facilitate the recruitment of high performing employees or their involvement in other mutually beneficially activities . Further rehiring alumni is one such innovative method which when done in the right manner can provide a quick solution to the talent crunch. **Paper type**: Research paper

**Keywords**: Corporate Communication, Boomerang, Personalized Messages, Alumni Website, Communication Standards, Training

### 1.Introduction

The current trends in the VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world have imposed fresh challenges on talent acquisition and management. Employability is of great significance to employers in order to ensure an adequate pool of employable individuals who are competent, flexible, understand organizational culture and possess the right skill sets (Emmerik et al., 2012). This has given rise to search of a new phenomenon popularly called 'boomerang' (Hart, 2009). "Boomerang" is a concept developed to identify, attract and rehire high performing employees who have joined some other organization and updated skill sets to suit the future job requirements (Sullivan, 2006; Hart, 2009). This era of identifying and nurturing boomerang employability, creates a unique competition for job seekers and new challenges for organizations to maintain relationships with former high-performers.

Iyer et al., (2000) have mentioned that corporate communication plays a vital role in building relationships with alumni and it develops mutually beneficial relationships among all stakeholders (Welch, 2015). Many organizations like Deloitte, Ernst and Young, IBM, Booz Allen, Kronos and KPMG have well designed alumni communication program and have been

successful in nurturing boomerang employability (Sullivan, 2006). Recently, organizations have recognized corporate communication as a strategic management function and exercise it to guide, motivate, influence and maintain conducive relationships with internal and external stakeholders, and to build corporate reputation (Argenti and Foreman, 2002; Mazzei 2010; Goodman, 2010). Boomerang employees or alumni have also been considered as one of the major stakeholders who can build corporate reputation (Sullivan, 2006; Sung and Yang, 2009). Despite a widespread discussion and acceptance on communicating with alumni and developing boomerang employability among practitioners, the concept among academia and industry, is still fuzzy with little evidence to understand how 'boomerangs' can be targeted and developed to get positive results (Sullivan, 2006; Sung and Yang, 2009). Therefore, it would be significant to understand how corporate communication (CC) dimensions can influence boomerang employability from current and former employees' perspectives. This study explores the extent to which practitioners in India use communication dimensions to identify and support boomerang behavior intention and motivate former employees to rejoin. Secondly, the study provides an approach to examining processes and behaviors by investigating them from the perspective of former employees rather than just focusing on current employees. Thirdly, the study introduces the organizational identification construct into the context of boomerang. The construct has proven useful in reconciling conflicting organizational behavioral research (Iyer et al., 1997; Tsui et al., 1992) and has the potential to provide insights into the attitudes and behaviors of former employees.

The study draws practitioner's attention to communication dimensions, which might facilitate former employees to rejoin and convince management to focus on specific communication dimensions, to deal with employee turnover and retention issues. The study also tries to fill the gap in communication literature by proposing a model using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) that links alumni corporate communication dimensions with organizational identity and intention to rejoin (boomerang). However, the literature review will herein be presented in advance of the results of the primary study in order to identify the specific CC dimensions studies by previous researchers that may influence organizational identification and boomerang.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Corporate Communication (CC): Theoretical perspective and implications

Corporate communication is an essential management function in contemporary organizations (Goodman, 2010). Organizations have recognized CC as a strategic management function to guide, motivate, inform and influence internal and external stakeholders for achieving competitive advantage (Argenti and Foreman 2002; Argenti, 2007; Goodman, 2001). Recently, researchers have identified the need to maintain strong relationship with former employees through proper management of alumni communication programs (Hart, 2009; Sullivan, 2006). Also, communicating with former employees is considered as critical and essential to building trust and meeting organizational objectives (Iyer et al., 2000; Hart, 2009). Communication spawns knowledge sharing, and builds trust. This is explained in the resource based and constructivist approaches (Mazzei, 2010) which elaborate that communication is a social process of interaction or interpretation that gives a sense and meaning to social reality, organizational actions, events, organizational roles and processes. Further, social interactions among employees and external communities lead to knowledge creation and trustworthy relationships (Kalla, 2005b).

Researchers have also associated organizational outcomes like employer branding, job satisfaction, commitment, loyalty, organizational identification and organization reputation with corporate communication in their studies (Sharma and Kamalanabhan, 2012; Punjaisri et al 2009; Papasolomou and Vrontis, 2006). However, there is hardly any study in corporate communication literature that has explained the relationship between corporate communication dimensions and an individual intention to re-join the previous organization- 'boomerang'.

#### 2.1.1 Dimensions of Corporate Communication

*Tukiainen (2001) has given an agenda model of communication and explained that corporate communication has four dimensions.* The first dimension describes how stakeholders of an organization use the communication system (channels, messages) to seek information. He explains here that channels of communication (as described by researchers like Mazzei, 2010; Robson and Tourish, 2005) and the quality of message content (Mazzei, 2010; Welch, 2015) are essential for the overall effectiveness of a communication process. The second dimension in his model describes the communicative way of conduct of employees (Quinn and Hargie, 2004) which is an essential factor in creating organization communication relationships. It includes whether the communication is regular, organized and equal. The third dimension of agenda model of CC describes the horizontal interaction between the colleagues and the informal way of action and the atmosphere based on human relations including face-to-face, verbal communication and unofficial communication network (Robson and Tourish, 2005). The fourth dimension of this model does the evaluation of the functionality of organizational communication

as a whole. In this, consistency of communication, right timing of information flow and quantity of information specify the experience of general functioning of information flow.

Moreover, Asif and Sargeant, (2000) believe that communication relationships between all the stakeholders of an organization is another important dimension of corporate communication. Researchers believe that relationships are the act of communication that build a mutual understanding between sender and receiver of information and develop a strong communication relationship based on trust and cooperation (Asif and Sargeant, 2000). The contemporary communication researchers have suggested that corporate communication should be more than a simple exchange of information, but rather a cooperative effort across the various groups (Teeni, 2001).

Furthermore, communication researchers have explained that corporate communication should follow 'communication standards' (Bishop, 2006). This suggests that corporate communicators, in their roles as representatives of organizations acting in the public sphere, have a responsibility for authenticity, that is, a duty to use communication standards as a mode of action in their practice. Bishop (2006) proposes the standards of authentic communication which specify that communication should be clear, relevant, timely, truthful and consistent.

Therefore, the alumni CC dimensions that are considered crucial for this study are messages, channels, feedback, communication standards and communication relationships.

## **2.2 Boomerang behavior intention as an outcome**

Boomerang is a concept developed to identify and rehire top performing employees (Hart, 2009; Sullivan, 2006). However, in this study we will try to understand the perceptions of former employees and their intention towards boomerang. As defined by Warshaw and Davis (1985), behavior intention (BI) is a degree to which a person has consciously planned to perform a behavior. Therefore, boomerang behavior intention may imply the degree to which the former employee has formulated conscious plan to rejoin the previous organization (Hart, 2009; Warshaw and Davis, 1985).

Sullivan, (2006) says boomerang recruitments have one of the highest ROIs in recruiting, when compared to many other sources of recruitment. He further explains that the time and efforts spent in recruitment and training of the boomerang is comparatively much lower when compared to the same for a new recruit. Boomerangs after having spent time outside the organization, understand not only the organization's expectations and competitive positioning, but may also have upgraded skills and acquired experiences of best practices and drivers for results, making their competencies unique to the organization.

The study conducted on employee engagement by [The Workforce Institute](#) and [WorkplaceTrends.com](#) (Cavalli, 2017) reveals a changing mindset about hiring former employees. This study conducted a national survey among 1,800 human resources (HR) managers, and employees, and found that despite having past organizational policies on forbidding former employees from hiring process, a large number of managers said they would definitely consider rehiring former employees. Moreover, the survey also identified a growing desire among job seekers to rejoin their previous organizations. Huhman. (2012) believes managers and organizations are in constant search for suitable talent to meet the growing needs in a dynamic and volatile business world. Boomerangs join the organization with a much higher commitment levels and a desire to succeed, and need minimal training to get back to work. Half (2016) explains that organizations are identifying the value of a ready talent pool and open to re-hiring its former employees who have been away for some years.

Researchers have established that consistent communication through various former and informer channels develops a sense of organizational identification and spawns a positive behavior among alumni (Newman and Petrosko, 2011; Sung and Yang, 2009). Alumni communication programs, which are part of alumni relations, include managing alumni website, social media, special events and written materials (Hart, 2009; Iyer et al., 2000). Written materials that organizations use to stay in touch with their constituents include annual reports, catalogs, newsletters, magazines, invitations and blogs (Hart, 2009; Levine, 2008). Jones and Volpe, 2010; Sung and Yang 2009 studies on alumni relations of education institutions explain that the effective communication between the institute and the alumni result in higher likelihood of a quality relationship, organizational identification and favorable opinion of their alma mater.

## **2.3 Organizational identification as a mediating variable**

Organizational identification refers to the perceptual connection that organizational stakeholders create with their organization. Social identity theory and, in particular, the proposition that individuals' perceived membership in the social group enabled by communication, provides the basis for perceived oneness (Tajfel and Turner, 1985; Dutton *et al.*, 1994). Social identity theory maintains that individuals classify themselves into various social groups, including religious affiliation,

gender, and organizational membership, in order to define themselves in the social environment and to enhance their self-esteem. The strength of organizational identification depends on the individual's perception of the attractiveness of being a member of the organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Dutton *et al.*, 1994). Through the organizational identification concept, institutional professionals can recruit and utilize alumni in a role to establish a connection for the long-term (Weerts *et al.* 2010). Iyer *et al.* (1997) have empirically established in their study on accounting firms that social interactions through communication builds alumni organizational identification which further results in positive behavior outcomes. In their study, alumni organizational identification is considered as a mediating variable between communication and positive behavior outcomes.

Researchers (Bergstrom *et al.*, 2002; De Chernatony, 2001) propose that corporate communication can engender stakeholders' identification, reflecting their sense of 'oneness' because it is about getting relevant information about an organization, participating in important discussions, communicating organizational values, benefits and connecting with people of similar interests and organizational associations. Steele (1988) claims that individuals generally desire to be identified with a group or a concept for a long time, therefore, organizational identification developed as an employee of a firm will likely remain a component of the ex-employee's self-concept. Furthermore, researchers (Dutton *et al.*, 1994) emphasize that alumni may use their identification with their former firm to reinforce their self-esteem. Communication researchers have established that organizational identification is one of the outcomes of corporate and internal communication practices (Smidts *et al.*, 2001; Sharma and Kamalanabhan, 2014).

The advantage of organizational identification for this study is based on social identity theory which forms the base of corporate communication, and it also provides an explanation for ex-employees' favorable behaviors towards their former firm (Iyer *et al.*, 1997).

However, due to the dearth of research on inter-linkages of alumni corporate communication and boomerang behavior intention, there is hardly any study that empirically depicts the influences of the corporate communication dimensions on boomerang behavior intention. Moreover, as explained in the previous section, the current study intends to see organizational identification as a mediating variable between alumni corporate communication and boomerang behavior intention.

### **3. Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research design, data collection and sample**

Given the highly contemporary and scarce research on communication and boomerang talent, qualitative study can provide much greater detail and richer data that may be collated into distinct constructs (Insch *et al.*, 1997, p 1). During the qualitative analysis the researcher sought to understand the ways in which the participants in the study made meaning of their experiences and behaviors (Schein, 1985). For our study, nine organizations were selected which had alumni relations and communication departments. The nine organizations had recently undertaken a lot of communication initiatives to identify and develop boomerang employees. The available research literature on the topic was combined with 41 semi-structured interviews comprising of 18 (05- senior; 08-middle; 05-junior level management) HR/alumni communication/CC professionals and 23 alumni (06-senior; 12 middle; 15- junior level management) of the selected nine organizations in India. This interview sample drew on senior (with more than 20 years of experience), middle management (between 10-20 years of experience) and junior (below 10 years of experience) HR/alumni communication/CC professionals, as well as alumni of the selected organizations. The mix of functions was designed to understand the perceptions of all managerial levels on alumni communication process and its effect on boomerang behaviors.

These organizations belonged to IT, manufacturing, health care and consulting sectors. The interviews were conducted telephonically during July to November 2017 and the duration of interviews was approximately 60 to 90 minutes respectively. Due to confidentiality concerns, the company and individual identities have been made anonymous.

Furthermore, as described in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), it should further be noted that the interviewees were specifically selected to get relevant data related to the context of the study. Each interview was subsequently transcribed and analyzed. The first step in the qualitative data analysis was to classify and code discrete categories of meaning in the data. The next stage in the analysis was to move from a descriptive to a conceptual level of analysis which is supported in grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) wherein relationships between variables appear as the researcher codes and interprets the responses of interviews.

## 4. Analysis

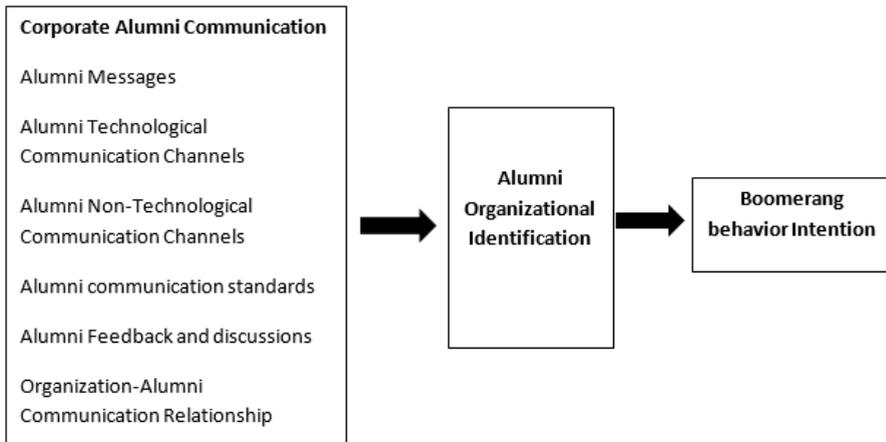
### 4.1 Interviews results: Key Themes

A qualitative content analysis of the interview responses was performed to understand the main themes of the study. Table I gives the research questions, codes for analysis and the main themes that repeatedly appeared out of the responses of interviewees:

**Table I:** Topics emerged from interview questions

Research Questions	Codes for analysis	Themes emerged from interviews
How important is corporate communication to maintain stakeholder relationships? Who is responsible for communicating with former employees?	Starting point	Corporate communication and HR maintain alumni relations
Does your organization believe in hiring former employees? Why?	Current status	Organizations are open to rehiring high performing former employees
Does your organization believe in sharing career information with alumni? Which messages are communicated regularly to former employees?	Alumni messages	Messages on organizational growth, new projects and career advancement programs are most effective
Which messages motivate the former employee to reconnect or rejoin? Which career or personal benefits are offered to former employees? Do you organize events to engage former employees?	Messages on alumni benefits	Training on skill development and leadership workshops build boomerang behavior intention Information about special discounts on products and services are highly appreciated
How your organization disseminate information and respond to former employees' queries?	Communication channels	Social media sites and alumni website are most effective channels for communicating with alumni
What is the quality of alumni communication? Does organization follow any guidelines in communicating with alumni?	Alumni communication standards	Alumni communication should be transparent, honest, relevant and consistent
Do you receive messages from senior management of your previous organization? What do you think about their involvement in alumni relations activities?	Organization-alumni communication relationship	Communicating with senior management is highly appreciated by former employees
How does organization collect views of former employees on organizational activities?	Alumni feedback and discussion	Former employees constantly share feedback on organizational changes, decisions and new product development
What is the impact of communication on former employees' behavior towards organization?	Impact Alumni organizational identification Boomerang behavior intention	Corporate alumni communication builds a positive attitude and a high sense of identification among former employees
Does communication develop a sense of identification in former employees?		Consistent corporate alumni communication motivates former employees to rejoin and develops boomerang behavior intention.
Does communicating with alumni result in developing boomerang behavior intention?		

Perhaps, there was a degree of overlap between the above-mentioned themes. The words and examples used by few people were different from the others. However, the themes identified in Table 1 highlighted distinct dimensions that supported analysis and action. This process removed unnecessary repetition, and helped to preserve respondent confidentiality. Moreover, Figure 1 was developed through a process of sorting that traversed the entire four months of research. The model illustrated in Figure 1 exhibits corporate alumni communication process as well as tools and process employed, mediating variable and the boomerang outcome perceived by the participants in the study. Moreover, Table II summarizes the definitions and meanings of variables considered in the model of corporate alumni communication and boomerang behavior intention as shown in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Conceptual Model of the study

**Table II:** Meanings and definitions of variables of the study

Variables	Meaning and definitions	Source (adapted from studies of)
Corporate alumni communication	The strategic communication between organization and its stakeholders (former employees) to develop a strong sense of identification and mutually beneficial relationships	Goodman, 2010; Van Reil, 1995; Hart, 2009
Alumni Messages	Messages pertaining to organization's goals and performance, alumni benefits like discounts on products and services, latest research and development, opinions of experts on contemporary topics	Hart, 2009; Newman and Petrosko, 2011; Sung and Yang, 2009; Sharma and Kamalanabhan, 2012
Alumni communication technological channels	Alumni communication channels reliant on technology like alumni website, social media sites like LinkedIn and Facebook, webinars, podcasts, online discussion forums, blogs etc.	Hart, 2009; Iyer et al., 2000
Alumni communication non-technological channels	Non-technological channels of alumni communication that are not supported by technology like face to face conversations, alumni events, meetings etc.	Levine, 2008; Sertoglu and Berkowitch, 2002
Organization-alumni communication relationships	The act of communication that builds a mutual understanding between sender and receiver of information and develop a strong communication relationship based on trust and cooperation between management and former employees	Iyer et al., 1997; Sharma and Kamalanabhan, 2012
Alumni Communication standards	Attributes of effective alumni communication messages like clarity, authenticity, truthful, consistent, relevant, distinctive and timely	Bishop, 2006; Sung and Yang, 2009
Alumni feedback	Two way communication between organization and its stakeholders to prepare and improve mutually beneficial plans	Bishop, 2006; Hart, 2009;
Alumni organizational identification	A perceived oneness of former employees with the organization and the experience of the organization's successes and failures as one's own.	Mael and Ashforth, 1992, p. 103; Iyer et al., 1997
Boomerang behavior intention	The degree to which the former employee has formulated conscious plan to rejoin the previous organization	Iyer et al., 2000; Hart, 2009; Warshaw and Davis, 1985

## 5. Results

### 5.1 Alumni Messages

The alumni relations and communication departments of different organizations comprise of people with communication and HR skills and experiences. All the nine organizations that were studied possessed alumni corporate communication people who planned and coordinated with HR teams to get specific information about the interests and backgrounds of alumni or any other information related to benefits like free workshops for alumni, discounts on products and services or other pertinent information related to organizations. The objective of alumni communication in these organizations was to build and maintain strong relationships with former employees by communicating the corporate messages effectively. Alumni communication teams of all the organizations mentioned that they carefully planned their alumni messages and tried to engage their alumni by offering various benefits and important information. One of the alumni communication managers of a management consulting firm said:

*We take special care in designing the messages for our alumni. These messages are specially targeted to engage former employees and inspire them to participate in various activities. We cover all the latest happenings of the company and share expert views on contemporary topics that are sprawling around the business world. Regularly, we hold meetings with other functional strategy teams, and prepare messages on discounts and other special offers for our alumni. We receive overwhelming response from our alumni when we invite them for special training workshops. We also give special offers or discounts on our services to our alumni. Every word of our alumni messages reflect that we not just value our current employees but we equally value our former employees.*

When former employees were asked about the effectiveness of alumni messages, all of them responded positively. Most of the employees appreciated the messages on career development, training workshops and special company offers. One of the former employees of an IT company mentioned:

*I regularly get information on alumni website, LinkedIn and emails on various benefits like career development tips and training sessions. I feel special when I get discounts on the products of my previous company or get an opportunity to attend a special leadership workshop. I feel I am still a part of my previous organization. Besides, I like to read the articles and blogs of experts which are regularly shared with me on various technical and soft skills concepts.*

While the majority of respondents indicated that the quality of alumni messages was generally effective, there were few individuals (at senior management positions) who felt that the messages needed improvement. These respondents felt that alumni messages should elaborate strategic information about the company like that on new corporate initiatives and on-going research and innovation in the development of new products and services.

Overall, the quality of alumni messages was perceived to be effective, yet it was felt that some more improvement in messages would enhance alumni participation and build positive behavior.

### 5.2 Technological and Non-technological Channels

The organizations of the study extensively use channels like alumni websites, portals, and social networking sites to connect with their former employees. After an employee finishes exit interview, he receives an email from the previous organization to register as an alumni. Thereafter, he gets an access to all the technology enabled alumni networks. These technological communication channels facilitate companies to disseminate content to alumni and also ensure the information is personalized and relevant. The alumni data base is segmented in order to tailor messages and ensure two way participation. Explaining the relevance of technology enabled channels, an alumni relations manager of a manufacturing company explains:

*One of the fastest ways to connect with alumni is internet. Technology like personal emails, alumni mobile app, our well designed alumni website and online discussion forums regularly include career options, organizational updates and articles on topics like negotiation skills, innovation led management, data analytics, consulting skills and so on. Our registered alumni often motivate other non-registered alumni to participate in such activities and share updates about our alumni activities on their personal social network. Also, these digital channels help us to assess the opinions, latest updates of our alumni and build our alumni data base. Our HR managers organize webinars and other virtual training programs through these channels and ensure alumni participation and knowledge sharing.*

Besides, it was interesting to observe that most of the senior (more than 18 years of experience) alumni, highly preferred the non-technological channels like informal get-togethers, training workshops, face to face interactions with senior management, alumni sports and other events. One of the former marketing heads of a consulting organization asserted:

*I really appreciate the way my previous organization involves me in various events. I had always represented my organization in cricket and now after so many years, I like to play for the same organization again on the same ground. I also get to interact with my peers and exchange a lot of information about latest services and consulting projects. Sometimes, we get interesting ideas related to our work, network and receive support of our peers in achieving our professional goals. Despite internet and other technology enabled channels, I feel these face to face interactions and events are far more useful and leave a positive impact on us.*

It was observed that alumni corporate communication channels particularly technological channels were extensively used by the organizations and engaged the alumni well. However, while technology based channels were more effective among the junior and middle management employees, most of the senior people appreciated the non-technological channels.

### 5.3 Communication Standards

A strong theme to emerge from the interviews was the growing need for setting up communication standards for the company and a demand for a more consistent alumni communication program. It was believed that all the alumni communication should be authentic, relevant, timely and consistent. A senior CC manager of an IT company who is also responsible for alumni relations said:

*We try to understand the needs of our alumni. We know that our communication should be relevant, honest, timely and consistent. Keeping the expectations of our stakeholders in mind, our CC team has defined certain communication standards for the organization and every member of the organization adheres to these norms. Alumni are very important stakeholders for our organization. Many return to us because they believe in our philosophy, find high amount of consistency and authenticity in our relations and communication.*

While most of the former employees and alumni were satisfied with the quality of alumni communication, few mentioned that the organizations should share more relevant and timely messages. These employees also believed that the organizations should be more consistent and authentic in communicating with alumni. Elaborating on this more, a former management consultant of a firm said:

*I receive mails or calls from my previous organizations related to employee referrals and other events. My previous organizations track my career movements and send messages to me on my work anniversary and promotions etc. However, I feel these messages are inconsistent. I would suggest that the alumni relations team should involve us in important discussions consistently and share important insights related to work through emails and personal messages. Sometimes, I feel my previous employer does not want to share details about latest products and services because of confidentiality reasons. After all, we are not part of the organization anymore.*

It was interesting to find that the effectiveness of alumni communication largely depend on the authenticity, relevance, timeliness and consistency of messages. Mostly all the former employees were satisfied with the quality and ethical aspects of alumni communication, yet there are few who felt that organizations should be more open, consistent and transparent in communicating with alumni.

### 5.4 Alumni Feedback

Most of the comments from interviewees indicated that organizations regularly collected feedback from the alumni on various organizations' decisions related to new product launch, market research and expansions etc. All the alumni networks are open to suggestion and feedbacks. One of the alumni relations managers of a consulting firm stated:

*We value the opinions of our alumni. As all our alumni are progressing in their careers, and they are well versed with our organizational objectives, we like to take their inputs on every decision related to change management or product development. I am glad to share with you that we always receive overwhelming response from our alumni.*

Former employees were highly satisfied with the feedback process adopted by organizations and felt they appreciated the inclusiveness of the alumni communication program. Most of the feelings gyrated around the fact that the two-way communication through regular feedback and action, facilitates collective thinking, improvement in processes and knowledge sharing. A software engineer of an IT firm said:

*I regularly give feedback to my previous organizations on their latest initiatives. I immediately receive an acknowledgement from my previous organization on my feedback. Sometime, I am asked to share more views on a concept I had shared earlier. The response I receive in the form of personal messages and emails from my previous organization motivates me to remain connected to alumni activities.*

Indeed, alumni feedback is considered as one of the most crucial aspects of alumni corporate communication and all the respondents of the study appeared to be satisfied with the feedback process adopted by the organizations.

### **5.5 Organization-alumni communication relationships**

Respondents of all the organizations expressed that building a strong relationship between senior managers, functional heads, peer groups and alumni are essential aspect of building conducive alumni relationships. Such a harmony should serve as a guiding principle for corporate actions and decision- making across current and former employees groups.

Most of the former employees felt that senior and top management of their previous organizations communicated regularly with them through webinars, discussion forums and social networking sites on corporate initiatives and contemporary management issues. A former employee of healthcare company expressed:

*The senior management of my previous organization consistently guided us on career development and leadership skills at major events such as award functions, corporate anniversary celebrations, alumni website and other alumni functions. This develops a strong sense of identification with our previous employer.*

Furthermore, all the respondents strongly felt that interpersonal communication between current and former employees at all the levels was conducive. On asking about the quality of various communication relationships that existed between the current and former employees, one of the former employee of a manufacturing organization expressed:

*We get timely and appropriate guidance from our former managers whenever we seek their advice, particularly at crucial and challenging moments. All the former colleagues are very supportive and share their views openly with us. Also, our former colleagues make the interactions and discussions friendly and interactive. I look forward to talking with my former colleagues and meeting them regularly at alumni events and get-togethers.*

Most of the alumni relationship managers felt that identification with organization was not a one-time process; it was an ongoing process that required adequate management attention. Thus, alumni communication is planned in such a way that current and former employees of the organizations share their experiences and perceptions. This sharing intensified the learning and bonding between alumni and current employees belonging as they supported each other by giving valuable guidance, referrals and support.

### **5.6 Alumni organizational Identification as a mediating variable**

Communication literature shows that communication can help to engender employees' organizational identification, reflecting their sense of "oneness" because it is about communicating the values, which are unique to a specific company making it differentiated from the others (Bergstrom et al., 2002; Cheney, 1983; De Chematony, 2001). In case of alumni, the goal is to maintain the long-term connection, extending years after the employee has left the organization, develop positive behavior intentions and attract the top performing employees to rejoin. The common theme emerged out of the interviews was that the alumni corporate communication influenced levels of former employees' identification with their previous organizations in a variety of different ways. The relationship and trust between the current and former employees and the way alumni participated in various activities and discussions reflected their association with the previous organization. Importantly, levels of personal satisfaction with alumni communication appeared to be related to individual's experiences with former organization.

Presenting views on the role of alumni communication, a junior officer of an IT firm said:

*Alumni communication practices of my previous organization help me to identify more with my previous employer. I feel associated with the values and practices of my previous organization. I like to interact with my old colleagues and want to contribute in best possible way.*

While the majority of alumni indicated that the quality of alumni communication was largely good and helped them to identify with the organizations, a few respondents still felt that significant scope of improvement remained.

One of alumni of a consulting firm opined:

*Alumni communication is a very effective way to reach out to former employees. Also, I respond to alumni messages because I had a smooth tenure and exit. Nevertheless, one of my colleagues has not registered with alumni network because he did not have a pleasant exit. Alumni relations teams should carefully identify and manage alumni, particularly those who have complaints or unpleasant memories about their tenure or exit.*

While most of the interviews did not appear to regard this attitude as resulting from the quality of alumni communication or the lack thereof, yet an additional role is clearly suggested. The alumni relations department should coordinate with HR teams to develop a strategy for former employees who did not have a smooth tenure or exit. It was highlighted in the interviews that all the employees should go through a smooth exit process barring few cases of misconduct or ethical breach.

### **5.7 Boomerang behavior intention: An outcome of CC and organizational identification**

Newman and Petrosko, (2011) and Iyer et al., (1997) have established that consistent communication with alumni develops a sense of organizational identification and results in a positive behavior intention. This study has particularly tried to understand the intention of former employees to rejoin. When asked about alumni intention to join the previous employers, most of the interviewees gave positive responses. One of the respondents said:

*I have a strong association and relationship with my previous employer. I attend all their alumni functions and events. I like the way they give me tips on career development and other skills. I would certainly like to rejoin my previous employer if I get the right role and opportunity.*

In order to get the organizations' perspectives, HR managers were specifically asked to share their views on hiring boomerangs. Most of them wanted to consider their former employees and felt boomerangs are aligned with organizational culture and they are highly committed to organization. These respondents also believed that alumni communication helped them to identify the right talent and also reduced the hiring cost. One of the HR managers of an IT firm explained:

*We closely observe the discussions and participation of our alumni and try to understand their current profiles and interests. Accordingly, we post job descriptions for a role on alumni website or social networking sites. We not just receive applications from our alumni but also from their referrals which help us to close a job position much before the deadline.*

It was believed that alumni corporate communication teams interact with former employees consistently and exchange messages on various achievements of the organization, career development tips, and top management discussions. These interactions develop a sense of identification and pride in alumni for their former organizations. It was observed in this study that a strong sense of alumni organizational identification led to a positive boomerang behavior intention. Therefore the ability to create and maintain alumni identification and facilitate boomerang behavior intention in view of the changing environment was perceived as an important aspect of alumni corporate communication, and the commonly expressed view was that it should form an important part of the organizations' future alumni communication.

## **6. Discussion**

This is the first study, to the best of our knowledge that examines the role of alumni corporate communication in building alumni identification resulting in positive boomerang behavior intention. The study is motivated by the increasing importance of alumni to different organizations. In contrast to prior research that focuses on current employees' engagement, this study focuses on factors that help organizations manage their alumni asset.

Our results suggest that corporate communication can influence identification and alumni's boomerang behavior intention. It seems clear that the organizations studied are particularly focused on the achievement of boomerang behavior by adopting an alumni corporate communication strategy. The significant results of the study indicates that organizations' efforts to improve their talent acquisition should include alumni communication. Secondly, as corporate communication literature explains the multiple strategic perspective (Welch and Jackson, 2007), it is interesting to note that the corporate communication dimensions play an important role in building relationships with alumni which would yield positive behavior outcomes (Iyer et al, 2000; Hart, 2009). Although many former employees of different organizations felt that alumni communication was effective, there was a general feeling that HR contribution towards building alumni identification and boomerang behavior needed improvement. Respondents felt that the exit programs should be carefully executed and HR managers had to put in additional efforts in rebuilding relationships with former employees who had unpleasant experiences during their tenure and exit. Indeed, the literature suggested that alumni could go a long way in building organization's reputation among various stakeholders with corporate communication and HR interventions (Sung and Yang, 2009;

Sharma and Kamalanabhan, 2014; Jones and Volpe, 2010). Therefore, organizations should incorporate structured and planned communication program to build mutually beneficial relationships with all the former employees.

The findings of the study showed that messages on alumni benefits particularly career and development information, training and workshops; company discounts on products and services are highly appreciated by the alumni. This is in support with the findings of previous researchers (Hart, 2009; Sertoglu and Berkowitch, 2002; Sharma and Kamalanabhan, 2012) who have advocated the use of such employee benefits messages in building relationships with current and former employees. The other revelation that emerged out of the study was related to the different preferences of communication channels by former employees. While the technological channels like emails, social networking sites etc. were more popular among the younger groups with less than 10-15 years of experience (Naragon, 2015), managers with more than 15 years of experience preferred non-technological channels like alumni sports events, get-togethers, award shows etc.

An important finding is that 'communication standards' which has been explored as a variable for the first time in relation with organizational identification and boomerang behavior intention has emerged as the most important determinant of organizational identification. This is consistent with the findings of researchers who believe that communication is not a language, but it involves trust and relationships (Asif and Sargeant, 2000; Bishop, 2006). Furthermore, alumni feedback, introduced in this research, has emerged as an important determinant of organizational identification and boomerang behavior intention. Alumni feedback and organizational communication relationships hold great importance as these can help organizations to understand the perceptions, current status and opinions on various issues of former employees; and promote transparency and trust between organization and its alumni. This has supported Brunetto and Wharton, (2004); Teeni, (2001) findings that establish the importance of two way communication and senior management feedback in maintaining relationships with stakeholders.

Another implication of the study is that human resources (HR), corporate communication and alumni relations functions should be integrated in order to disseminate information, build relationships with alumni and generate positive behavior outcomes. This helps the organizations to understand the degree to which communication messages have to be written catering to HR requirements of talent acquisition and can be utilized to influence former employee's attitude towards rejoining the previous employer. The model presented in this paper identifies alumni corporate communication dimensions that can help in creating a strong sense of organizational identification among the former employees. It is evident that the biggest hurdle in building conducive stakeholder relationships is the communication process (Argenti, 2007; Goodman, 2010). Our analysis of Indian organizations shows that if CC dimensions are well managed, it can ensure organizational identification and boomerang behavior intention. The success of this undertaking on the part of Indian organization can serve as a model for other companies in their efforts to build a strong alumni relations and attract former talent.

Theoretically, this model holds significance as it has introduced alumni organizational identification as an outcome of CC, which has been ignored by researchers in their proposed models of CC (Van Reil, 1995; Welch, 2015). However, few research studies (Hart, 2009; Iyer et al., 2000; Araoz, 2002; Sung and Yang, 2009) have linked the dimensions of communication (mainly channels and messages) with positive alumni behavior, yet, the overview of the role of various alumni corporate communication dimensions like messages, channels, feedback, communication standard and communication relationships (specific to alumni communication) in achieving alumni organizational identification and boomerang behavior intention has not been studied earlier. At the highest level, the framework proposed in this study would enable a cross-organizational comparison of relative degree and nature of alumni corporate communication practices across organizations to understand whether it has influenced alumni attitudes towards boomerang.

## **7. Research limitations and scope for future research**

In the attempt to understand two phenomena – "alumni corporate communication" and "boomerang behavior intention" – the scope of interviews may have been too broad and unable to investigate in great depth. Judgmental sampling was used to select the nine organizations of the study. Quota sampling was used to determine which respondents in each organization are to be interviewed (Leedy and Ormrod, 2001). This sampling methodology may impact on the validity and reliability of the study. There is a clear need for further empirical research. Such research could help quantify the nature of the relationships between the variables suggested and establish the extent to which the model might be generalized. Moreover, future studies can also attempt to take views of boomerangs who have joined the organization to understand the effectiveness of alumni corporate communication process in organizational identification and boomerang behavior intention.

It is obvious that there is a significant amount of work yet to be done to understand boomerang behavior intention from other organizational and individual perspectives. It is perceived that the framework and the ideas presented in this study will assist as a valuable starting point for several related discussions and future research.

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