

The Influence of Employer Branding on Organizational Attractiveness: The Mediating Roles of Organizational Image and Organizational Trust Among University Students in Taiwan

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Abstract

As competition for talented employees intensifies, understanding how prospective applicants develop attraction toward employers has become increasingly important. Drawing on Signaling Theory and employer branding literature, this study examines the influence of employer branding on organizational attractiveness and investigates the serial mediating roles of organizational trust and organizational image during the pre-employment phase. A quantitative cross-sectional survey was conducted among 417 business administration students enrolled at universities in Taiwan using an internet-based convenience sampling approach. Data were analyzed using SPSS 27 and Hayes' PROCESS Macro Model 6 with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and 95% confidence intervals. The results revealed a significant positive total effect of employer branding on organizational attractiveness ($\beta = .489, p < .001$). Employer branding also maintained a significant direct effect on organizational attractiveness ($\beta = .190, p = .001$), indicating partial mediation. Organizational trust (indirect effect = .100, 95% CI [.024, .180]) and organizational image (indirect effect = .121, 95% CI [.069, .177]) each significantly mediated the relationship. In addition, a significant serial mediation pathway was found through employer branding $\rightarrow$ organizational trust $\rightarrow$ organizational image $\rightarrow$ organizational attractiveness (indirect effect = .078, 95% CI [.044, .116]). These findings extend employer branding research by demonstrating that employer branding influences organizational attractiveness through a sequential psychological process in which employer branding first strengthens organizational trust, which subsequently enhances organizational image and ultimately increases organizational attractiveness. The study contributes to theory by integrating signaling and trust-based perspectives and provides practical guidance for organizations seeking to strengthen employer attractiveness in competitive labor markets.

Keywords: employer branding, organizational attractiveness, organizational trust, organizational image

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Introduction

Background of the Study

In a competitive economy, attracting talent is a strategic priority requiring distinct organizational differentiation (Thang & Trang, 2024). Employer branding addresses this by communicating an employer value proposition that delivers functional, economic, and psychological benefits (Ambler & Barrow, 1996, as cited in Eger et al., 2022; Theurer et al., 2023). However, the psychological mechanisms through which branding influences prospective applicants during the pre-employment stage remain under-examined.

Prospective applicants rely on employer branding signals to evaluate organizations; this study investigates how organizational trust (Holtz et al., 2020) and organizational image (Karanges et al., 2021) sequentially mediate this relationship to drive organizational attractiveness.

Problem Statement

This study addresses three gaps in employer branding research: the neglect of underlying psychological mechanisms, the lack of empirical evidence for a sequential trust-to-image signaling process, and a scarcity of Taiwanese context studies by testing a serial mediation model among Taiwanese business administration students.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study is to examine the direct and indirect effects of employer branding on organizational attractiveness among prospective applicants. Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Examine the mediating role of organizational trust.
2. Examine the direct effect of employer branding on organizational attractiveness.
3. Examine the mediating role of organizational image.
4. Examine the serial mediating effect of organizational trust and organizational image.
5. Derive theoretical and managerial implications for employer branding strategies.

Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. Does employer branding significantly influence organizational attractiveness?
2. Does organizational trust mediate the relationship between employer branding and organizational attractiveness?
3. Does organizational image mediate the relationship between employer branding and organizational attractiveness?
4. Do organizational trust and organizational image sequentially mediate the relationship between employer branding and organizational attractiveness?

Research Hypotheses

Based on the literature and theoretical framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Employer branding has a significant positive effect on organizational attractiveness.
- H2: Organizational trust mediates the relationship between employer branding and organizational attractiveness.

H3: Organizational image mediates the relationship between employer branding and organizational attractiveness.

H4: Organizational trust and organizational image sequentially mediate the relationship between employer branding and organizational attractiveness.

Significance of the Study

Theoretical Significance

This study contributes to the employer branding literature by integrating Signaling Theory with organizational trust and organizational image in a serial mediation model. It also extends existing research by providing empirical evidence from Taiwan, thereby broadening the predominantly Western focus of previous studies.

Practical Significance

The findings provide practical guidance for human resource managers and organizational leaders by identifying the mechanisms through which employer branding enhances organizational attractiveness. The results suggest that employer branding strategies emphasizing credibility and trust are more likely to strengthen organizational image and improve applicant attraction.

Scope and Delimitations

This study focuses on the pre-employment stage of the employee lifecycle and examines business administration students at Taiwanese universities as prospective applicants. A cross-sectional quantitative design is employed, limiting causal inference. In addition, employer branding is examined as a higher-order construct rather than through its individual dimensions.

Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

Introduction

This chapter develops the theoretical foundation of the study. It begins by reviewing the principal theoretical lenses that inform the relationships under investigation namely, Signaling Theory, Social Identity Theory and Person–Organization Fit theory.

Theoretical Foundations

Signaling Theory

Signaling Theory explains how employer branding reduces information asymmetry by communicating organizational values to prospective applicants (Thang & Trang, 2024). These signals shape applicants' perceptions of organizational trust, organizational image, and organizational attractiveness (Francis & Rangasamy, 2024).

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory suggests that applicants are attracted to organizations whose values and identity align with their own self-concept (Van den Scott, 2023). Employer branding therefore

influences attraction by creating both informational and symbolic connections with prospective applicants.

Person–Organization Fit

This proposes that applicants prefer organizations whose values and culture match their own (Vleugels, Cooman, & Lievens, 2023). Employer branding communicates these values, shaping applicants' perceptions of trust, organizational image, and attractiveness. Together, these theories provide the foundation for the proposed model.

Dimensions of Employer Branding

Employer branding is a multidimensional construct comprising economic, social, development, application, and interest values that influence an organization's attractiveness to prospective employees (Purusottama & Ardianto, 2019). Accordingly, this study conceptualizes employer branding as the overall employment value proposition perceived by prospective applicants.

Employer Branding in the Pre-employment Stage

During the pre-employment stage, applicants rely on employer branding to form perceptions of an organization, influencing their attraction and employment decisions (Theurer, Tumasjan, Welpe, & Lievens, 2023). Understanding this process is therefore both theoretically and practically important.

Organizational Trust

Concept and Definitions

Organizational trust refers to individuals' confidence in an organization's reliability, integrity, and ethical behavior (Holtz et al., 2020). In employment contexts, trust reduces uncertainty and promotes positive evaluations and behavioral intentions toward the organization (Brown et al., 2019).

Trust in Pre-employment Contexts

While most trust literature examines intra-organizational dynamics like supervisor-employee relationships (Yukl, Gardner, & McCauley, 2019), research increasingly focuses on pre-employment trust formation. Soeling et al. (2022) demonstrated that employer brand attractiveness shapes positive organizational perceptions before formal employment begins. This literature establishes that employer branding, by communicating credible and attractive attributes, plays a foundational role in developing early organizational trust.

Organizational Image

Organizational image is an externally constructed perception of an organization's values, credibility, and attractiveness (Junça Silva & Dias, 2023; Thang & Trang, 2024). Driven by branding, advertising, and corporate responsibility (Theurer et al., 2023), a favorable image increases applicant attraction and intention to apply (Junça Silva & Dias, 2023; Theurer et al., 2023). Crucially, image formation depends heavily on signaler credibility, suggesting that trust may causally precede image development.

Organizational Attractiveness

Organizational attractiveness is a prospective applicant's positive evaluation of an organization as a desirable place to work, formed through branding signals before direct employment experience (Theurer et al., 2023). It serves as the focal dependent construct in this study. Driven by instrumental attributes like compensation and symbolic attributes like prestige, employer branding communicates these features to shape attractiveness via intervening perceptions of trust and image (Eger et al., 2022).

Hypothesis Development

Employer Branding and Organizational Attractiveness

Recent evidence indicates that employer branding strategically enhances organizational attractiveness by communicating a compelling employer value proposition that improves perceptions of reputation and benefits (Santiago, 2023; Theurer et al., 2023). Grounded in Signaling Theory, informative branding signals reduce uncertainty and allow prospective applicants to form positive expectations about employment outcomes.

H1: Employer branding has a significant positive effect on organizational attractiveness among prospective applicants.

The Mediating Role of Organizational Trust

Signal credibility is essential; applicants must trust an organization's integrity, competence, and benevolence to feel attracted to it. Credible branding signals foster organizational trust, reducing pre-employment uncertainty and driving applicant attraction (Santiago, 2023; Theurer et al., 2023). This trust provides the cognitive and affective foundation that motivates applicants to pursue employment. Based on this evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Organizational trust mediates the relationship between employer branding and organizational attractiveness.

The Mediating Role of Organizational Image

Employer branding communicates values to build a favorable organizational image, which then increases applicant attraction by enhancing perceptions of prestige and capability (Soeling et al., 2022; Theurer et al., 2023). Consequently, organizational image mediates the relationship between employer branding and organizational attractiveness. Accordingly:

H3: Organizational image mediates the relationship between employer branding and organizational attractiveness.

The Serial Mediation of Trust and Image

Signal credibility dictates that organizational trust logically precedes and facilitates the formation of a favorable organizational image. Rather than acting in parallel, trust acts as a gatekeeper; employer branding first builds trust, which then develops a positive image, ultimately driving attractiveness.

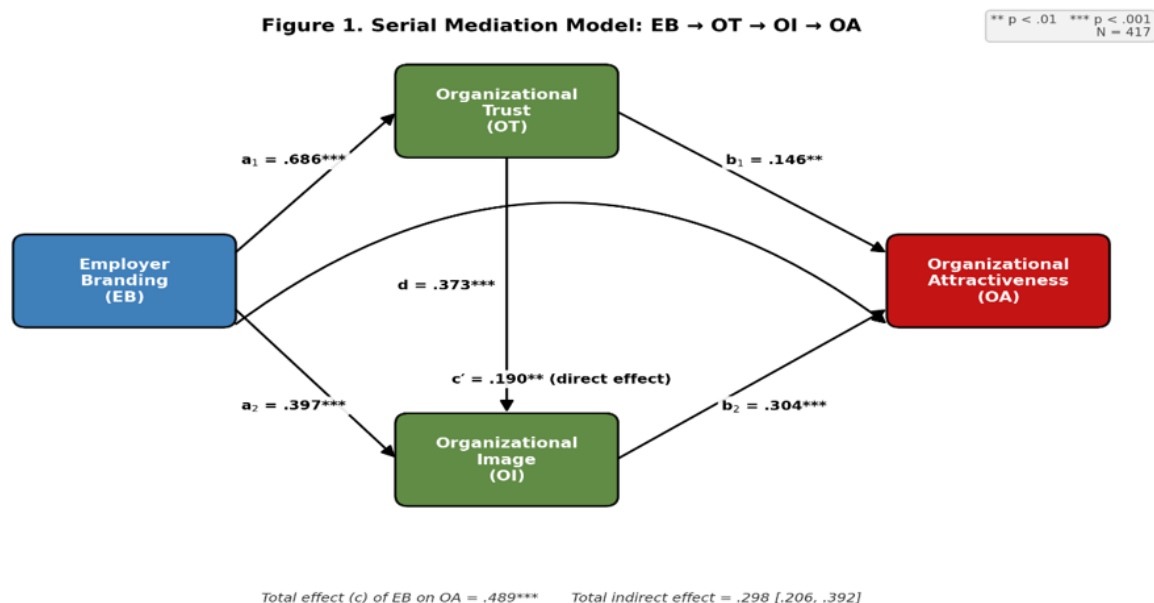
H4: Organizational trust and organizational image serially mediate the relationship between employer branding and organizational attractiveness.

Conceptual Framework

Based on Hayes' (2022) PROCESS Model 6, Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework where Employer Branding (EB) is the independent variable, Organizational Attractiveness (OA) is the dependent variable, and Organizational Trust (OT) and Organizational Image (OI) act as serial mediators. The model accounts for direct, parallel indirect, and serial indirect effects.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework and Serial Mediation Model: Employer Branding (EB) → Organizational Trust (OT) → Organizational Image (OI) → Organizational Attractiveness (OA). Standardised Path Coefficients From Hayes' (2022) PROCESS Model 6 Analysis (N = 417)



Note. ** p < .01, *** p < .001.

Research Methodology

Research Philosophy and Design

Grounded in a post-positivist philosophy, this quantitative, cross-sectional survey design uses deductive logic to test hypothesized relationships among employer branding, trust, image, and attractiveness (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Tanwar & Kumar, 2019).

Population and Sample

Target Population

The target population comprised Taiwanese business administration students. Business students are optimal for employer branding research because they are active job seekers,

heavily prioritize employment decisions, and possess demographic homogeneity that strengthens internal validity (Brown et al., 2019).

Sampling Strategy and Sample Size

Using internet-based convenience sampling, an online survey yielded 417 valid student responses. This sample size ensures adequate statistical power for bootstrapping and mediation analysis, exceeding the recommended ten-to-one observation-to-parameter ratio for multivariate analyses (Hair et al., 2019; Rijnhart et al., 2021).

Research Instrument

Questionnaire Structure

Data were collected via a self-administered online questionnaire featuring five sections: Section A captured demographics, while Sections B through E measured the focal constructs using five-point Likert-type scales (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Measurement Scales

Employer branding (Grigore et al., 2024), organizational trust (Holtz et al., 2020), organizational image, and organizational attractiveness (Dassler et al., 2022) were measured using established scales adapted and refined for the Taiwanese university context.

Operationalisation of Variables

Table 1 details the operationalization of the study's constructs. Employer Branding (EB) serves as the independent variable, Organizational Trust (OT) and Organizational Image (OI) as the serial mediators, and Organizational Attractiveness (denoted as BI) as the dependent variable.

Table 1
Operationalisation of Variables

Variable	Definition	Source of Scale	Items
Employer Branding (EB)	The package of functional, economic and psychological benefits associated with employment.	Grigore et al. (2024)	25
Organizational Trust (OT)	Willingness to be vulnerable to the organization based on positive expectations.	Holtz, Cremer, Hu, Kim & Giacalone, (2020).	7
Organizational Image (OI)	Overall external impression regarding the organization's reputation, competence and distinctiveness.	Dassler, Khapova, Lysova, & Korotov (2022)	5
Organizational Attractiveness (BI)	Overall desirability of the organization as an employer and intention to pursue employment.	Theurer et al., 2023	5

Pilot Study

A pilot study (N = 30) assessed face validity, clarity, and linguistic appropriateness while providing preliminary reliability estimates. All scales exceeded the recommended 0.70 Cronbach's alpha threshold, resulting in minor wording refinements to three items before final data collection (DeVellis & Thorpe, 2021).

Data Collection Procedure

Over a four-week period, standardized email invitations and bi-weekly reminders were sent to potential respondents. To ensure response quality, attention checks and minimum completion-time thresholds were applied. After excluding invalid entries, 417 responses were retained for statistical analysis.

Validity and Reliability

Content and Face Validity

Content validity was addressed through the use of established, theoretically grounded scales and through expert review by three academic referees prior to pilot testing. Face validity was assessed in the pilot study by soliciting respondent feedback on item clarity and relevance.

Construct Reliability

Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. All scales exceeded the conventional threshold of 0.70, indicating acceptable reliability. Composite reliability (CR) was also computed where appropriate.

Convergent and Discriminant Validity

Convergent validity was evaluated through average variance extracted (AVE) and item loadings. Discriminant validity was examined using the Fornell–Larcker criterion, according to which the square root of each construct's AVE should exceed its correlation with any other construct.

Common Method Bias

Because all measures were collected from a single source at a single point in time, procedural and statistical remedies were applied to address common method bias Karanges, Johnston, Beatson, Lings (2021).Procedurally, anonymity was assured, psychological separation between predictor and criterion items was introduced through screen layout, and item wording was carefully varied. Statistically, Harman's single-factor test was conducted; no single factor accounted for a majority of the variance, suggesting that common method bias was unlikely to be a material threat to the validity of inferences drawn from the data.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics and the PROCESS macro (Model 6; Hayes, 2022). Descriptive statistics, Cronbach's alpha, and Pearson's r correlations examined the data. The serial mediation model utilized 5,000 bootstrap resamples and 95% confidence intervals to determine the significance of direct, indirect, and total effects across all paths (EB → OT → OI → BI).

Ethical Considerations

Adhering to American Psychological Association (APA) and institutional ethical guidelines, participation was voluntary, anonymous, and respondents could withdraw at any stage without consequence. Data was stored securely on a password-protected research drive accessible only to the researcher, and will be retained for five years before secure disposal.

Data Analysis and Result

Data Screening and Preparation

Prior to analysis, the dataset was screened for missing values, careless responding, and outliers, leaving 417 valid cases. Skewness (2.0) and kurtosis (7.0) values fell within conventional thresholds, confirming univariate normality. Multicollinearity was not an issue, as all variance inflation factors (VIF) remained below 3.0.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The final sample 417, comprised a relatively gender-balanced mix of undergraduate and graduate Taiwanese business administration students, primarily in their final year. This profile aligns with the study's focus on prospective applicants entering the labor market.

Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Table 2 shows that mean scores reflect moderately favorable perceptions across all constructs, while Cronbach's alpha values exceeded 0.70, confirming strong reliability.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics and Reliability of Constructs

Construct	Mean	SD	Cronbach's α
Employer Branding (EB)	3.87	0.59	.91
Organizational Trust (OT)	3.95	0.61	.87
Organizational Image (OI)	3.92	0.57	.85
Organizational Attractiveness (BI)	3.94	0.58	.89

Note. N = 417. Items measured on a five-point Likert-type scale.

Correlation Analysis

Table 3 presents positive, statistically significant ($p < .001$) Pearson correlations supporting the hypothesized serial mediation model, showing that employer branding associates strongest with trust, followed by image and attractiveness.

Table 3*Pearson Correlation Matrix of Focal Constructs*

Construct	1	2	3	4
1. Employer Branding	1.00			
2. Organizational Trust	.661**	1.00		
3. Organizational Image	.651**	.643**	1.00	
4. Organizational Attractiveness	.490**	.471**	.518**	1.00

Note. N = 417. ** p < .01 (two-tailed). Correlations have been reconstructed from PROCESS model outputs.

Assumption Testing for Regression-Based Analyses

Regression assumptions were fully met: residual plots confirmed linearity and homoscedasticity; unique identifiers ensured independent observations; P-P plots verified residual normality; and low VIFs ruled out multicollinearity.

Hypothesis Testing Using Hayes' PROCESS Model 6

Hypotheses were tested using PROCESS Model 6 with 5,000 bootstrap resamples and 95% confidence intervals, evaluating the serial mediation path: Employer Branding (EB) → Organizational Trust (OT) → Organizational Image (OI) → Organizational Attractiveness (BI).

- **Path a1: Employer Branding → Organizational Trust**
Employer branding significantly predicted organizational trust ($\beta = .686$, $R^2 = .437$, $p < .001$), indicating that favorable brand perceptions directly increase applicant trust.
- **Paths a2 and d: Predictors of Organizational Image**
Employer branding ($\beta = .397$) and organizational trust ($\beta = .373$) significantly predicted organizational image ($R^2 = .515$, $p < .001$), confirming image is co-produced by branding and trust.
- **Paths c1, b1 and b2: Predictors of Organizational Attractiveness**
Branding ($\beta = .190$), trust ($\beta = .146$), and image ($\beta = .304$, strongest) significantly predicted attractiveness ($R^2 = .326$, $p < .001$), confirming partial mediation.

Total, Direct and Indirect Effects

The total effect of employer branding on attractiveness ($\beta = .489$, $p < .001$) dropped to a direct effect of .190 ($p = .001$) with mediators present. The significant total indirect effect was .298, explaining 61% of the total effect.

Table 4*Direct, Indirect and Total Effects of Employer Branding on Organizational Attractiveness*

Effect	Coefficient	BootSE	95% CI
Total effect (EB → OA)	.489	.043	[.405, .573]
Direct effect (EB → OA)	.190	.058	[.075, .305]
Total indirect effect	.298	.048	[.206, .392]
Ind1: EB → OT → OA	.100	.040	[.024, .180]
Ind2: EB → OI → OA	.121	.028	[.069, .177]
Ind3: EB → OT → OI → OA (serial)	.078	.018	[.044, .116]

Note. N = 417. Bootstrapping based on 5,000 samples; confidence intervals are 95% percentile bootstrap. OA denoted as BI in SPSS output.

Specific Indirect Effects

Three indirect paths were significant, supporting all hypotheses: via trust alone (Effect = .100, H2), image alone (Effect= .121, H3), and serially via trust then image (Effect = .078, H4).

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 5 summarises the outcome of each hypothesis test. All four hypotheses received empirical support.

Table 5*Summary of Hypothesis Testing Outcomes*

H	Hypothesis Statement	Evidence	Decision
H1	EB has a significant positive effect on organizational attractiveness.	$\beta = .489$, $p < .001$	Supported
H2	OT mediates the EB–OA relationship.	Ind = .100, CI [.024, .180]	Supported
H3	OI mediates the EB–OA relationship.	Ind = .121, CI [.069, .177]	Supported
H4	OT and OI serially mediate the EB–OA relationship (EB $\rightarrow$ OT $\rightarrow$ OI $\rightarrow$ OA).	Ind = .078, CI [.044, .116]	Supported

Summary of the Study and Key Findings

This study surveyed 417 Taiwanese business students using PROCESS Model 6, confirming that employer branding increases organizational attractiveness serially through the sequential mediators of organizational trust and organizational image.

Discussion of Findings***Employer Branding and Organizational Attractiveness (H1)***

Employer branding significantly increased organizational attractiveness (beta = .489, direct effect beta = .190, $p > .001$), supporting Signaling Theory and prior research (Tanwar & Kumar, 2019). The lingering direct effect suggests unexamined mechanisms like person–organization fit or emotional responses.

Organizational Trust as a Mediator (H2)

The results showed that organizational trust significantly mediates the relationship between employer branding and organizational attractiveness (indirect effect = .100, 95% CI [.024, .180]). Employer branding strongly predicted trust ($\beta = .686$), indicating its importance in shaping early-stage applicant perceptions.

This supports Signaling Theory, as credible employer branding enhances perceptions of integrity and reliability, which then increase organizational attractiveness. Trust therefore acts as a key psychological mechanism through which branding signals are translated into positive applicant attitudes.

Organizational Image as a Mediator (H3)

Organizational image also significantly mediated the relationship between employer branding and organizational attractiveness (indirect effect = .121, 95% CI [.069, .177]). Among the indirect effects, this pathway was the strongest.

Favorable image enhances desirability and attractiveness, aligning with Social Identity Theory's premise that individuals gravitate toward reputable organizational identities (Dassler et al., 2022; Reis et al., 2021).

Serial Mediation of Trust and Image (H4)

Significant serial mediation (.078) confirms trust precedes and builds organizational image, driving attractiveness (Brown et al., 2019).

Theoretical Contributions

This study contributes to employer branding literature in four ways. First, it extends prior research by testing a serial mediation model rather than simple direct or single-mediator relationships. Second, it integrates Signaling Theory with trust-based relational perspectives, offering a clearer explanation of how branding signals are processed. Third, it provides empirical evidence from Taiwan, broadening the geographical scope of employer branding research. Finally, it demonstrates partial mediation, suggesting that additional unexplored mechanisms may exist.

Managerial Implications

Build Credibility and Trust

Organizations should prioritise trust-building in employer branding strategies. Transparent communication, consistent messaging, and authentic representation of the employee experience strengthen credibility and improve applicant attraction.

Strengthen Organizational Image

Organizational image plays a key role in shaping attractiveness. Companies should invest in reputation-building activities such as corporate social responsibility, awards, and public visibility.

Align Internal and External Branding

Consistency between internal employee experiences and external employer branding is essential. Misalignment can reduce trust and weaken overall attractiveness.

Target Prospective Applicants

Employer branding should be tailored to early-career individuals through university engagement, internship programs, and targeted digital content.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The cross-sectional design limits causal inference. The sample was restricted to Taiwanese business students, which may affect generalisability. Self-reported data may introduce common method bias. Employer branding was treated as a holistic construct rather than by dimensions. Finally, the study captures perceptions at a single point in time, which may change over time.

Directions for Future Research

Future studies should use longitudinal or experimental designs to strengthen causal inference. Research should also replicate the model in different cultural and occupational contexts. Further work may examine sub-dimensions of employer branding and include additional mediators such as person–organization fit or psychological contract expectations. Mixed-method approaches may also provide deeper insight into applicant perceptions.

Conclusion

This study examined how employer branding influences organizational attractiveness through organizational trust and organizational image. Using data from 417 Taiwanese students, the results confirmed both direct and indirect effects, including a significant serial mediation pathway.

The findings demonstrate that employer branding works primarily through a trust-building process that enables the formation of positive organizational images, which in turn enhance attractiveness. This highlights trust as a central mechanism in employer branding effectiveness. Practically, organizations should prioritise credibility and consistency in their branding strategies to attract prospective applicants in competitive labour markets.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing software, was used in proofreading and refining the language used in the manuscript. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements for accuracy and clarity. The author further declares that, apart from Grammarly, no other AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content in writing the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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