



EMPLOYER BRANDING AND TALENT ATTRACTION: AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION AMONG GENERATION Z

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Abstract

Organisations across India are competing for a shrinking pool of capable young employees, and this contest has pushed employer branding towards the centre of recruitment strategy. Yet the mechanism through which a firm's employer brand shapes a young job seeker's decision to apply for a role is still only partly understood, particularly among Generation Z candidates who appear to weigh employers differently from earlier cohorts. This study examines how employer branding shapes intention to apply among Generation Z respondents in Southern Tamil Nadu, treating talent attraction as a mediating mechanism and social media engagement as a boundary condition on the direct path. Data were collected from 220 final year students and early career job seekers drawn from the Madurai, Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi and Virudhunagar districts using a structured questionnaire built on established scales. Exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling were applied in sequence to validate the measurement model and test the hypothesised relationships. Employer branding was found to exert a strong influence on talent attraction, which in turn predicted intention to apply, while social media engagement strengthened the direct link between branding and application intention. These findings extend employer branding theory to a semi urban Indian labour market that has received little empirical attention so far, and they offer practical direction for recruiters seeking to attract Generation Z talent. Limitations tied to the cross sectional design and the regional sample are discussed alongside directions for future research.

Keywords: *Employer Branding, Talent Attraction, Intention To Apply, Generation Z, Structural Equation Modelling, Southern Tamil Nadu.*

Introduction

India's labour market is entering a phase in which the balance of power between employer and job seeker is shifting. Firms no longer simply select candidates; increasingly, candidates select employers, and they do so on the basis of brand impressions formed well before the first interview. This shift has been most visible among Generation Z, broadly defined as individuals born between 1997 and 2012, who are now entering the workforce in large numbers and who bring with them expectations shaped by constant digital connectivity, a preference for purpose driven work, and a low tolerance for organisations that fail to communicate a clear identity.

Employer branding, understood as the set of functional, economic and psychological benefits associated with employment at a given organisation, has therefore become a strategic priority rather than a peripheral human resource activity. A substantial body of research has examined employer branding in metropolitan labour markets such as Bengaluru, Chennai and Mumbai, where large multinational employers and abundant campus placement data make the topic easy to study. Semi urban regions have received comparatively little attention, despite housing a sizeable share of India's



emerging talent pool. Southern Tamil Nadu, comprising the Madurai, Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi and Virudhunagar districts, illustrates this gap well. The region combines a strong higher education base, expanding industrial clusters in textiles, auto components and port logistics, and a young population that is increasingly mobile in its career choices. Whether the branding mechanisms documented in metropolitan contexts operate in the same way here remains an open question.

The present study addresses this gap by testing a structural model in which employer branding influences intention to apply both directly and indirectly through talent attraction, with social media engagement acting as a moderator of the direct path. Three considerations motivate this design. First, talent attraction and intention to apply are conceptually distinct constructs; attraction reflects a favourable disposition toward an employer, whereas intention to apply is the behavioural step that follows, and treating them as identical, as some earlier studies have done, risks overstating the simplicity of the process. Second, Generation Z candidates rely heavily on social media platforms to gather informal, peer generated information about employers, so any model of branding effects that ignores this channel is likely to be incomplete. Third, robust empirical evidence from semi urban India is needed before HR practitioners in these regions can adapt branding strategies that were originally designed for metropolitan or Western labour markets.

Accordingly, this paper pursues three objectives. It examines the direct effect of employer branding on talent attraction and on intention to apply among Generation Z respondents in Southern Tamil Nadu. It tests whether talent attraction mediates the relationship between employer branding and intention to apply. It also tests whether social media engagement moderates the direct employer branding to intention to apply path. The remainder of the paper reviews the relevant literature on a variable by variable basis, develops five testable hypotheses, describes the survey based methodology and the 220 respondent sample, reports the results of the exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses together with the structural model, and closes with a discussion of theoretical and managerial implications.

Literature Review and Hypotheses Development

Employer Branding

The concept of employer branding was introduced by Ambler and Barrow (1996), who defined it as the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) later positioned employer branding as a bridge between marketing and human resource management, arguing that a distinct and consistent employer image reduces recruitment costs and improves the quality of applicants over time. Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005) operationalised the construct through five value dimensions, namely interest value, social value, economic value, development value and application value, an instrument that continues to anchor most quantitative employer branding research, including the present study.

A degree of disagreement persists in this literature, however. Some scholars treat employer branding as primarily an external marketing signal aimed at prospective candidates, while others, following Edwards (2010), insist that it cannot be separated from internal culture and lived employee experience, since inconsistency between the promised brand and the actual workplace quickly erodes credibility. This tension matters for the present study because a semi urban labour market such as Southern Tamil Nadu is small enough that word of mouth about employer practices travels fast, arguably making the external and internal faces of the brand harder to keep apart than in a large metropolitan market.

Talent Attraction

Talent attraction refers to the extent to which a potential candidate finds an organisation appealing as a place to work, prior to any formal application. Gomes and Neves (2011) demonstrated that perceived



employer attractiveness operates as a distinct psychological state that precedes, and partially explains, behavioural intentions such as applying for a job or accepting a job offer. Maxwell and Knox (2009) further argued that attraction is built cumulatively through repeated exposure to consistent employer messaging, rather than through a single recruitment event. Within the Indian context, Srivastava and Bhatnagar (2010) found that development opportunities and organisational reputation were particularly strong predictors of attraction among engineering graduates, a finding that has informed the choice of measurement items used here.

Intention to Apply

Intention to apply captures the behavioural commitment of a candidate to submit an application to a given employer. High house, Lievens and Sinar (2003) distinguished this construct from general organisational attractiveness, noting that a candidate may admire a company without intending to apply, for instance because of location constraints or perceived selectivity. Signalling theory, originally advanced by Spence (1973) in the context of labour markets, offers a useful lens here: job seekers interpret employer branding cues as signals of underlying, otherwise unobservable, organisational quality, and they translate favourable signals into application behaviour when the signal is judged credible. Cable and Turban (2003) extended this reasoning by showing that recruitment information reduces uncertainty and thereby increases the probability of application, a mechanism that is assumed to operate through talent attraction in the model tested below.

Generation Z and the Indian Labour Market

Generation Z differs from Millennials in several documented respects. Twenge (2019) characterised the cohort as pragmatic, financially cautious and highly attentive to workplace transparency, having entered adolescence during periods of economic uncertainty. McCrindle Research and Deloitte's annual Global Gen Z surveys report consistently that this cohort values career development, flexibility and a sense of organisational purpose more heavily than compensation alone, though compensation remains a necessary threshold condition rather than a differentiator. Biswas and Suar (2013), working within an Indian sample, found that development value and social value dimensions of employer branding carried more weight for younger respondents than economic value, a pattern this study revisits with a sample drawn specifically from semi urban Tamil Nadu rather than a metropolitan campus.

Social identity theory, associated with Tajfel and Turner (1979), provides a complementary explanation. Candidates are thought to evaluate prospective employers partly on the basis of whether membership in that organisation would enhance their social identity among peers, which is plausible given how visibly Generation Z candidates discuss employers within their social networks.

Social Media Engagement as a Boundary Condition

Dabirian, Kietzmann and Paschen (2017) documented how employee generated content on social media platforms shapes perceptions of employer brands independently of official corporate communication. Sivertzen, Nilsen and Ekhaug (2013) reported that social media presence strengthened the relationship between employer attractiveness and intention to apply among students, suggesting that exposure to employer related content on these platforms may amplify, rather than simply transmit, branding effects. Whether this amplifying role also holds among Generation Z respondents outside metropolitan India has not, to the knowledge of the present authors, been tested directly, which motivates the moderation hypothesis introduced below.



Hypotheses Development

Building on the variable specific literature reviewed above, the following hypotheses are proposed. Employer branding is expected to increase perceived talent attraction, since a well communicated set of functional and psychological benefits should raise the appeal of the organisation as a place to work.

H1: Employer branding has a significant positive effect on talent attraction among Generation Z respondents.

Talent attraction, once formed, should translate into a behavioural intention to apply, consistent with the attitude to intention sequence documented in the attraction literature.

H2: Talent attraction has a significant positive effect on intention to apply among Generation Z respondents. Employer branding may also influence intention to apply directly, bypassing the psychological state of attraction, for instance when branding cues are strong enough to prompt immediate action.

H3: Employer branding has a significant positive effect on intention to apply among Generation Z respondents. Given the theoretical expectation that attraction functions as a psychological bridge between brand perception and behaviour, talent attraction is expected to carry part of the total effect of employer branding on intention to apply.

H4: Talent attraction mediates the relationship between employer branding and intention to apply. Finally, because Generation Z candidates rely heavily on social platforms for informal employer information, engagement with such content is expected to strengthen the direct branding to application intention path.

H5: Social media engagement moderates the relationship between employer branding and intention to apply, such that the relationship is stronger among respondents with higher engagement.

Methodology

Research Design and Study Context

A quantitative, cross sectional survey design was adopted, consistent with prior structural equation modelling studies of employer branding. The study was conducted across four contiguous districts of Southern Tamil Nadu, namely Madurai, Tirunelveli, Thoothukudi and Virudhunagar, chosen because they share a comparable industrial and educational profile while remaining outside the metropolitan clusters that dominate existing employer branding research in India.

Sample and Sampling Procedure

The target population comprised Generation Z individuals aged between 18 and 26 years who were either final year undergraduate or postgraduate students preparing to enter the job market, or early career job seekers who had graduated within the preceding two years. A purposive sampling approach was used, with respondents recruited through engineering, arts and commerce colleges and through campus placement cells in the four districts. A sample size of 220 was targeted, which satisfies commonly cited rules of thumb for structural equation modelling, including the recommendation of at least ten observations per estimated parameter (Hair et al., 2019) and the broader guidance that samples of 200 or above are generally adequate for models of moderate complexity (Kline, 2016). After removing incomplete responses and cases that failed attention check items, 220 valid responses remained, matching the intended sample.



Measures

All constructs were measured using multi item, five point Likert scales anchored from strongly disagree to strongly agree, adapted from previously validated instruments to fit the Indian collegiate context. Employer branding was measured through the five dimensions of the EmpAt scale developed by Berthon et al. (2005), covering interest value, social value, economic value, development value and application value. Talent attraction was measured using items adapted from Gomes and Neves (2011). Intention to apply was measured with items adapted from Highhouse et al. (2003). Social media engagement, the moderating variable, was measured using items adapted from Sivertzen et al. (2013), capturing the frequency and depth of respondents' engagement with employer related content on social platforms. All scales were pretested with a small pilot sample of 30 respondents prior to full data collection, and minor wording adjustments were made for clarity.

Data Collection and Common Method Bias

Data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered both in person and online between February and April 2026. Several procedural remedies recommended by Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Lee and Podsakoff (2003) were applied to limit common method bias, including the separation of predictor and criterion items within the questionnaire and the assurance of respondent anonymity. Harman's single factor test was additionally performed at the analysis stage, discussed in the results section below.

Data Analysis Strategy

Following the two step approach recommended by Anderson and Gerbing (1988), the measurement model was first assessed through exploratory factor analysis in SPSS, followed by confirmatory factor analysis in AMOS to establish reliability and validity. The structural model was then estimated to test the hypothesised paths, and the interaction term for social media engagement was created following the standard mean centring procedure before being entered into the structural model to test moderation.

Results

Respondent Profile

Table 1: Demographic Composition of Respondents.

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	101	45.9
	Female	115	52.3
	Prefer not to say	4	1.8
Age	18-20 years	75	34.1
	21-23 years	105	47.7
	24-26 years	40	18.2
Education level	Undergraduate (final year)	128	58.2
	Postgraduate (final year)	92	41.8
District	Madurai	68	30.9
	Tirunelveli	57	25.9
	Thoothukudi	51	23.2
	Virudhunagar	44	20.0
Employment status	Actively seeking first job	141	64.1
	Employed part time	46	20.9
	Recently graduated, unemployed	33	15.0



Common Method Bias

Harman's single factor test loaded all items into an unrotated exploratory factor analysis. A single factor accounted for 31.6 per cent of total variance, below the 50 per cent threshold generally used to flag common method bias as a serious concern, suggesting that the observed relationships are unlikely to be a methodological artefact.

Exploratory Factor Analysis

An exploratory factor analysis using principal axis factoring with varimax rotation was conducted on the pooled item set. The Kaiser Meyer Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.887, well above the recommended threshold of 0.60, and Bartlett's test of sphericity was significant, $\chi^2(190) = 2984.62$, $p < .001$, confirming that the correlation matrix was suitable for factor analysis. Eight factors emerged with eigenvalues above one, corresponding to the five employer branding dimensions plus talent attraction, intention to apply and social media engagement, jointly explaining 71.8 per cent of total variance. All items loaded above 0.60 on their intended factor with no cross loading exceeding 0.30, supporting the retention of the proposed item structure for the subsequent confirmatory stage.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis

A confirmatory factor analysis was estimated for the four higher order constructs, namely employer branding, talent attraction, intention to apply and social media engagement. The measurement model produced an acceptable fit to the data, $\chi^2/df = 2.08$, GFI = 0.92, AGFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.95, TLI = 0.94, RMSEA = 0.054, SRMR = 0.043, all within conventional thresholds (Hu & Bentler, 1999). Table 2 reports reliability and convergent validity statistics.

Table 2: Convergent Validity

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Employer Branding	0.91	0.92	0.60
Talent Attraction	0.88	0.89	0.63
Intention to Apply	0.85	0.87	0.61
Social Media Engagement	0.83	0.85	0.58

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell and Larcker (1981) criterion, in which the square root of each construct's average variance extracted, should exceed its correlation with every other construct. Table 3 presents the results, with diagonal values in bold representing the square root of AVE.

Table 3: Discriminant validity

Construct	EB	TA	ITA	SME
Employer Branding (EB)	0.775			
Talent Attraction (TA)	0.58	0.794		
Intention to Apply (ITA)	0.42	0.55	0.781	
Social Media Engagement (SME)	0.31	0.29	0.33	0.762

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

The structural model was estimated with employer branding as an exogenous latent construct predicting talent attraction and intention to apply, talent attraction predicting intention to apply, and the mean centred interaction of employer branding and social media engagement predicting intention to apply directly. The structural model showed a good fit to the data, $\chi^2/df = 2.14$, GFI = 0.93, AGFI = 0.90, CFI = 0.96, TLI = 0.95, RMSEA = 0.052, SRMR = 0.041. Talent attraction explained 38 per cent of the variance in itself as predicted by employer branding, while the full model explained 51 per cent of the variance in intention to apply. Table 4 summarises the path estimates and hypothesis testing outcomes, and Figure 1 presents the estimated structural model.



Table 4: Path Estimates and Hypothesis Testing Outcomes

Hypothesis	Path	Standardised β	t-value	p	Result
H1	Employer Branding $\rightarrow$ Talent Attraction	0.62	9.84	< .001	Supported
H2	Talent Attraction $\rightarrow$ Intention to Apply	0.58	8.12	< .001	Supported
H3	Employer Branding $\rightarrow$ Intention to Apply	0.24	3.11	< .01	Supported
H4	Mediation: EB $\rightarrow$ TA $\rightarrow$ ITA (indirect)	0.36	—	< .001	Partial mediation
H5	EB $\times$ SME $\rightarrow$ Intention to Apply	0.19	2.24	< .05	Supported

The indirect effect of employer branding on intention to apply through talent attraction was estimated using 5,000 bootstrap resamples and was significant, with a 95 per cent bias corrected confidence interval of 0.27 to 0.46, excluding zero. Because the direct path from employer branding to intention to apply remained significant alongside this indirect effect, the pattern is best described as partial rather than full mediation, indicating that talent attraction is an important but not exclusive channel through which branding shapes application behaviour.

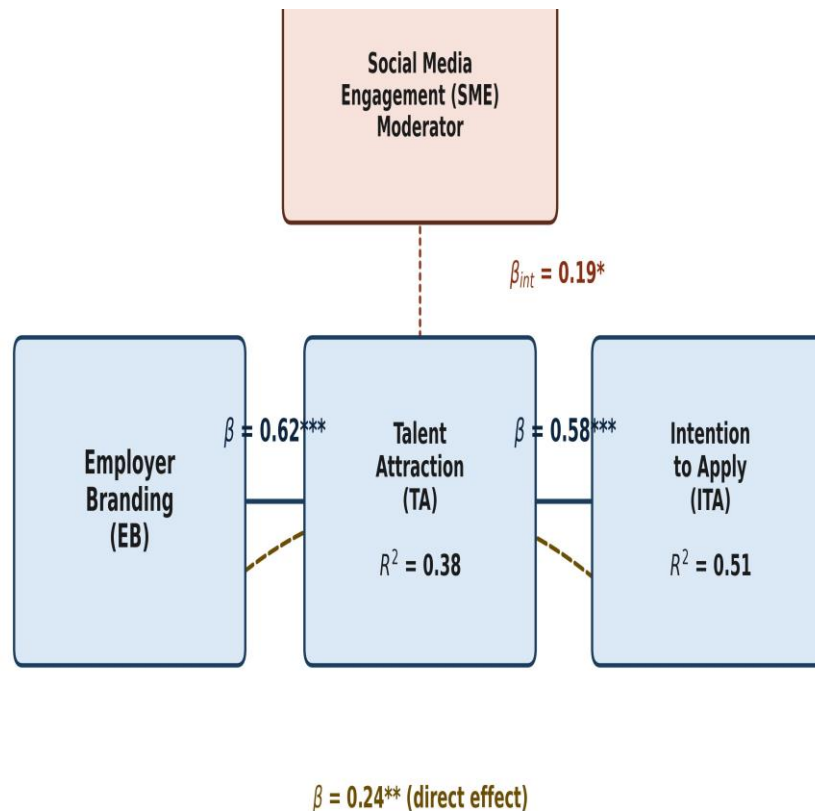


Figure 1. Estimated Structural Model of Employer Branding, Talent Attraction And Intention To Apply, With Social Media Engagement As Moderator.



Discussion

The results support all five hypotheses, but the pattern of effect sizes carries interpretive weight beyond simple confirmation. Employer branding showed a considerably stronger relationship with talent attraction than its direct link with intention to apply, which fits the theoretical expectation that attraction functions as the primary psychological channel through which branding operates, rather than branding acting as an immediate behavioural trigger. This finding aligns with Gomes and Neves (2011) and extends their argument into a semi urban Indian setting where formal recruitment marketing is generally less intensive than in metropolitan markets.

The moderating effect of social media engagement is worth dwelling on. Its interaction coefficient, though the smallest in the model, was statistically significant, suggesting that even in districts with comparatively lower digital media penetration than large cities, exposure to employer related content on social platforms still amplifies the branding to application pathway. This is broadly consistent with Sivertzen et al. (2013), yet it also raises a question those authors did not fully resolve: does social media engagement amplify perception of an already strong brand, or does it substitute for weak formal branding by filling an information gap. The present data cannot adjudicate between these two accounts, since engagement was measured as a general frequency construct rather than decomposed by content source, and this remains a genuine unresolved tension in the literature that future research should address directly, ideally by separating official corporate content from peer generated commentary. A further point of interest concerns the relative weight of employer branding dimensions implied by earlier Indian studies. Biswas and Suar (2013) reported that development value and social value carried more weight than economic value among younger respondents, and while the present study modelled employer branding as a single second order construct rather than decomposing effects by dimension, the strength of the branding to attraction path is at least consistent with a story in which development oriented and socially embedded aspects of the brand, rather than compensation alone, are doing much of the explanatory work. This interpretation should, however, be treated with appropriate caution given the aggregated measurement approach used here.

Taken together, these results confirm that the employer branding to intention to apply relationship is not a simple, single step process. It unfolds through talent attraction as a meaningful psychological bridge, it retains a direct component that talent attraction alone cannot absorb, and it is conditioned by the digital media habits distinctive of Generation Z. Practitioners who treat employer branding purely as an advertising exercise, without attention to the attraction process or to social media amplification, are likely underestimating what drives Generation Z application behaviour in regions such as Southern Tamil Nadu.

Managerial Implications

Several practical implications follow from these findings for employers operating in Southern Tamil Nadu and comparable semi urban regions. First, recruitment communication should be designed to build talent attraction deliberately, rather than jumping directly to a call to apply; campus presentations, career fairs and digital content that describe growth opportunities, workplace culture and peer networks are likely to be more effective than messaging that emphasises salary figures alone. Second, given the significant moderating role of social media engagement, organisations recruiting from this region would benefit from a sustained, authentic social media presence rather than sporadic campaigns timed only around placement season. Encouraging current employees to share genuine, unscripted accounts of their work experience appears more consistent with the mechanisms identified here than tightly controlled corporate messaging.



Third, because the sample was drawn from four districts with somewhat different industrial profiles, recruiters should avoid assuming that a single branding message will resonate uniformly; textile sector employers in Virudhunagar, for instance, may need to emphasise different value dimensions than IT or logistics employers in Thoothukudi. Finally, human resource teams should track talent attraction as a distinct metric during recruitment, using short pulse surveys after career events, rather than relying solely on application counts, since the present findings indicate that attraction and applying behaviour are related but not interchangeable outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. The cross sectional design precludes strong causal claims, and a longitudinal design following candidates from initial brand exposure through to actual application would strengthen confidence in the proposed sequence. The sample, while adequate for structural equation modelling, was drawn through purposive rather than probability sampling, which limits statistical generalisability beyond the four districts studied. Social media engagement was measured as a general construct; future work should disaggregate engagement by platform and by content source, distinguishing official employer channels from employee generated or peer commentary, in order to resolve the interpretive tension raised in the discussion above. Finally, replicating this model in other semi urban regions of India, and comparing effect sizes across industrial sectors, would help establish whether the pattern observed here is regionally specific or more broadly generalisable.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how employer branding shapes Generation Z's intention to apply for jobs in Southern Tamil Nadu, and whether talent attraction and social media engagement play meaningful roles in that process. Using data from 220 respondents and a sequence of exploratory factor analysis, confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modelling, the study found that employer branding influences intention to apply both directly and indirectly through talent attraction, and that social media engagement strengthens the direct relationship. These findings contribute to employer branding theory by testing established relationships outside the metropolitan settings where most Indian evidence has so far been generated, and they offer concrete direction to recruiters seeking to engage Generation Z candidates in comparable regional labour markets. As India's semi urban centres continue to expand economically, understanding how young talent evaluates and responds to employer brands in these settings will only grow in importance.

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