

A research study of employer attributes in a disruptive business environment in Macao

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Abstract

Purpose–Subject to a disruptive business environment, this research tries to define employer attributes from current employees’ perception using a concern and attitude framework.

Design/methodology/approach–Employees from two lead catering groups in Macao have been studied via open-ended questionnaires. Content analysis has been applied to analyze qualitative data obtained. Interview is conducted to ensure the validity of data.

Findings–Subject to a disruptive business environment in Macao, the most concerned employer attributes are the salary, job security, and teamwork among employees in restaurants. In contrast, organizational culture and value, CSR activities, and other attributes are the least essential employer attributes. Respondents held mixed feelings toward promotion opportunities. 16 of 20 of participants were positive toward their employer because they would likely recommend job opportunities to friends or relatives. Positive and negative employer attributes are found as well. Interviews proved the findings, which shows the consistency of response.

Originality/value–This research extends the application of employer branding in a turbulent business environment, in response to Lieven and Slaughter's research call. The present study introduces the concern and attitude framework, a tool used to assess employees' perceptions of employer attributes, and categorizes these attributes accordingly based on participants' responses. By acknowledging that employees' assessments of employer attributes are based on actual needs, and that perceptions of the employer brand may change over time, this research argues that management practitioners must understand employees' actual thoughts and make corresponding policy and strategic changes subject to disruptive business environments.

Keywords: Employer Attributes, Employer of Choice, Macao Food and Beverage Industry, Employer Brand

1. Introduction

Branding is used to describe tangible product attributes in the eyes of consumers that help them differentiate the product from alternatives. It is gradually being applied to different fields to study places, people, and companies (Peter, 1999) so that branding serves not only tangible products but also intangible services (Rosethorn, 2009). While existing brand-related research has focused on consumers, a few studies have turned their attention to other stakeholders, such as suppliers, investors, and employees (Rampl, 2014).

An employer brand describes organizational attributes from an employer's perspective, which benefits talent recruitment and retention (Ronda et al., 2018; Theurer et al., 2018), and improves competitiveness in the labor market (Theurer et al., 2018). The employer brand can be seen as the image of a particular organization as an employer. In contrast, employer branding is a process that involves a series of activities to create an attractive organization in the eyes of current employees and job seekers (Wilson, 2008). As a long-term strategy, employer branding activities maintain the employer's awareness and perception among current employees, prospective employees, job seekers, and other stakeholders (Sullivan, 2004). Scholars have identified the links between employer brand and employer attractiveness through empirical studies (Bejtkovský, 2018; Eger et al., 2019; Kalińska-Kula & Staniec, 2021; Tanwar & Kumar, 2019). Lievens and Slaughter (2016) argued that employer attractiveness was a perspective to examine employer brands from a holistic dimension.

Existing employer brand theory predicts job seekers' behaviors in a comparatively stable environment. However, it pays less attention to a turbulent business environment characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity, and there is little understanding of the impact of disruptive events on the company's employer image (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). Changes in the business sector, regional economy, and the labor market in which firms operate in are closely related to organization performance. In contrast, disruptions, which are employment-related (e.g., downsizing, bankruptcy), affect employer branding. Thus, this gap calls for the empirical study to examine the employer brand building in a disrupted business environment.

The hospitality industry plays an important role in Macao's economy, whereas the heavy reliance on the hospitality industry rendered economic vulnerability during the pandemic (Wan et al., 2022). The loss of employees, voluntary or non-voluntary, inflicted the Macao hospitality industry, which leads to lower job satisfaction (McCartney et al., 2022),

decreased employee morale, and inconsistent service quality (Sin et al., 2022). This research project explores the application of Employer Brand theory in the turbulent business environment of Macao during the Covid pandemic. Given the volatility of the labor market, including layoffs and salary cuts, this study aims to identify perceptions toward employer attributes of current employees, their attitudes toward these attributes, and whether they still view their employer as an employer of choice. With these research questions in mind, this project uncovers the mechanism of employer brand theory in a disruptive business environment.

This research project surveyed employees from two leading catering companies in Macao (pseudonyms A and B). The employer attribute framework (Ronda et al., 2018) was utilized to examine respondents' perceived attitudes toward employer brands. Perceived employer attributes are critical to potential employees in determining their employer of choice (Aboul-Ela, 2016; Bellou et al., 2015; Saini & Jawahar, 2019; Tanwar & Kumar, 2019), thus establishing the link between employer attributes and the employer of choice. Open-ended questionnaires were designed to collect qualitative data from current employees, and practitioners and experts were interviewed, utilizing questions from Rampl (2014).

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Employer Brand

In most cases, a brand is associated with positive or negative emotions. A positive employer brand evokes the feeling of an employer who is satisfied with their employees by providing a good working environment, while a negative employer brand represents a set of unsatisfactory feelings among employees (Carpentier et al., 2019; Theurer et al., 2018). In employer brand research, employer brand typically refers to the positive emotions and attractiveness that can help organizations recruit and retain talent (Meyer & Xin, 2018; Theurer et al., 2018).

The origin of employer brand is believed to be the intersection of studies of human resource management and marketing, which considers that employer branding has been introduced from the marketing discipline to human resource management studies (Stokes et al., 2016; Theurer et al., 2018). Ambler and Barrow (1996) argue that it is practical to apply marketing and brand management theories to the employer brand. Employer brand has been proposed to study the organization's attractiveness to current employees or job seekers, while the two main purposes of employer branding studies focus on attracting prospective employees (external employer branding) and retaining incumbent employees (internal employer branding) (Dassler et al., 2022).

Lievens and Slaughter (2016) argue that from an external employer brand perspective,

the employer brand can be mapped to an organization's employer image. In contrast, the internal employer brand is synonymous with identity management. They insist that scholars should adhere to the existence of these constructs without coining new ones. From an external employer brand (employer image) perspective, the employer brand could be categorized into an elementalism perspective, which focuses on an instrumental and symbolic attribute, and a holistic perspective, which focuses on the attractiveness of the organization. Instrumental attributes describe the tangible offerings of organizations, such as compensation, benefits, and advancement opportunities, while symbolic attributes can be understood as organizational values and other intangible attributes. In contrast, from a holistic perspective, the employer brand generally refers to the attractiveness of the employer as a whole to job seekers.

2.2 Employer attributes

Theurer et al. (2018, p. 159) defined an employer brand as a “bundle of employment attributes targeted at potential and current employees that are attractive and sufficiently unique to distinguish an employer from its labor market competitors.” This definition exactly points out the essence of the employer brand from an attribute perspective. Ronda et al. (2018) reviewed 85 selected articles and classified employer attributes and benefits. They defined employer attributes as “objective traits and job characteristics which organizations manage, whereas benefits are variables observed to the consequences of these traits for employees were considered benefits.” According to Ronda et al. (2018), the distinction between employer attributes and benefits should be noted since benefits result from employer attributes. They proposed the means-end chain model to study employer brand choice, where a hierarchical relationship was identified, showing the existence of multiple paths of relationships or chains of employer attributes, benefits, and perceived value.

Ronda et al. (2018) concluded four dimensions of employer attributes, including organizational attributes (organizational characteristics, personality, nature of the employee-employer relationship, and organizational culture and values), job attributes (base pay and total compensation, career characteristics, security of contract, job variety, task demands, employee education, and training opportunities, flexibility and working hours, travel and international exposure, and teamwork activities), workplace attributes (work environment and location), and corporate social responsibility attributes (social responsibility and ethical practices, the quality of products and services, diversity and belonging, direction and purpose). The four-category framework is comprehensive and inclusive and can cover employer attributes from different perspectives. At the same time, the means-end chain model logically explains the hierarchical system of employer attributes, employee benefits, and

perceived employer value in organizational management. Therefore, researchers applied this framework to evaluate employer attributes from employees' perception perspective.

2.3 Employer of Choice

External marketing of the employer brand aims to attract the best possible employees and establish the company as an employer of choice (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Tanwar and Kumar (2019) assert that an employer carefully creates an environment where applicants are eager to work because they perceive it as a great place to work, and then this employer becomes an employer of choice (EOC). EOC simply means that an employer has built a brand that makes job seekers want to be part of the organization. Therefore, from a holistic perspective, the construct of an EOC is used to examine the desired employment experiences and related umbrella constructs that examine the employment relationship (Bellou et al., 2015).

When employees view an employer as an EOC, they may recommend this employer to friends who are seeking job opportunities. This type of referral reflects the trust that former or current employees have in an organization, as their lived experiences and perceived benefits are directly related to their psychological contracts with an employer (Kumari & Saini, 2018). For example, internal referrals or other job-related advice are closely linked to an employee's EOC status. Thus, an EOC not only limits an employee's job choices but also contributes to their perceptions when evaluating the overall attractiveness of the job. Their endorsement of an employer is seen as a signal of being a good employer.

2.4 Theoretical framework

Combined with Ronda et al. (2018), we proposed a research framework of employer attributes to the employer of choices.

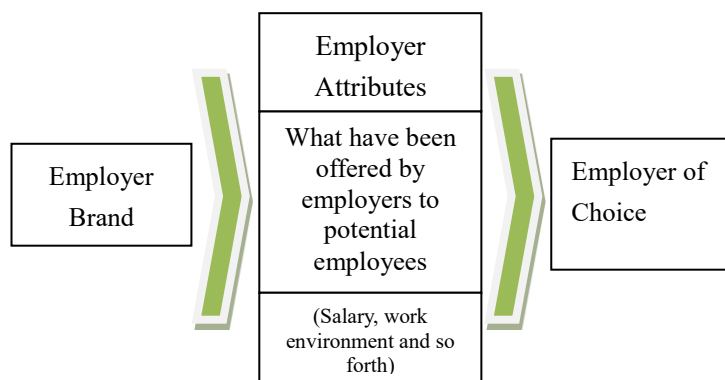


Figure 1. The framework of research logic

Figure 1 illustrates the research framework logic. The left side represents employer brand theory, while the middle box shows the cluster of employer attributes that we will examine across two catering employee groups. The employer attributes were derived from a review of existing research related to employer brand theory, and an employer brand can attract or retain talent (Theurer et al., 2018). We will infer the EOC by testing employer attributes (the middle box of attributes) through employer brand theory. The means-ends model also revealed that "attributes may contribute to different benefits. This, in turn, may provide different forms of value depending on the goals and characteristics of individuals, and if employer attributes do not enable them to achieve their goals, the value will not be created and the company will not ultimately be chosen" (Ronda et al., 2018, p. 185).

Adopting this framework, this research project agrees that the terms "employer attributes", "employee benefits", and "perceived value" are closely related to an employer of choice proposition (Rampl, 2014). However, to better observe the relationship between employer brand and EOC in food service organizations, this project excluded the constructs of employer benefit and employer perceived value of the means-end chain because these two constructs are not easily observed in empirical studies. As a matter of fact, employees perceive the employer attributes (e.g., salary) and convert them into perceived benefits (high income and high social recognition), and this process can be observable. In this study, we will study employer attributes which are tangible towards employees and easy for research.

3. Method

Multiple data collection methods were used in this research project to gain a deeper understanding of the perceived employer brand of employees at both catering companies. Firstly, we collected secondary data from the official websites of the two companies. Official websites of two firms well documented history, background, business diversification, branding and culture, and the value of the two companies, but there was little information about human resources and organizational structure. We then discussed with the managers of both companies to check the availability and feasibility of a case study of the two companies, and the answer was affirmative, which boosted our confidence. We then collected secondary data on human resources from both organizations, which included the profile of the two organizations, such as hierarchical management, operational management system, number, type, and distribution of restaurants, employee size, the ratio of male to female employees, the ratio of local to non-local employees, distribution of employee age, distribution of employees between departments, and the total number of employees.

Secondly, the open-end questions were designed based on the study from Ronda et al.

(2018). We converted the questions from Ronda et al. (2018) research into open-ended questionnaires and distributed them among current employees at two lead companies. We did the data collection at the beginning of the March 2022 when Macao had imposed the strict restrictions of Covid 19. In a turbulent business environment, we found it extremely difficult to collect primary data from employees. We attempted to find more participants from both companies, but most respondents in both companies were not interested in a research project and refused to provide information about their current employment. Fortunately, with the help of insiders, we were able to gather 20 current employees (10 in each company) who completed the open-ended survey. Participants came from different levels and departments, so the samples were reasonably representative. The open-ended questionnaires were distributed electronically, allowing respondents to respond questionnaires at their convenience.

Thirdly, we interviewed three professionals in the middle of March 2022. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis, and the interviewees were informed and allowed to record and use the data. First, a director (Interviewee X) from the HR department of Company A received our interview. Again, we interviewed an experienced professor (Interviewee Y) from the City University of Macao, who has more than 20 years of experience in business consulting in Macao. He is very familiar with the operations of Macao's small and medium-sized enterprises. At last, we interviewed a director (Interviewee Z) in another medium-sized company with the diversified businesses. Z held an important position in a local company with diversified businesses, including the catering industry. It is important to note that interviewee Z had not worked in both A and B, so he held a neutral stance toward participants' responses.

4. Findings analysis and discussion

4.1 Overview of human resources structure of food and beverage groups

Both companies have adopted a three-department management structure, including the department of service, production, and logistics, which is a typical restaurant management structure in Macao. The organization governance of two companies is similar, as shown in Figure 2. Both companies have management headquarters and operational restaurants to serve customers. Managers can be assigned to head office departments such as marketing and accounting, or they may be assigned to various restaurants acting as line managers or restaurant managers. Compared to restaurant managers, managers in headquarters have more power and benefits, while restaurant managers are busier and face more challenges in managing the business on a day-to-day basis.

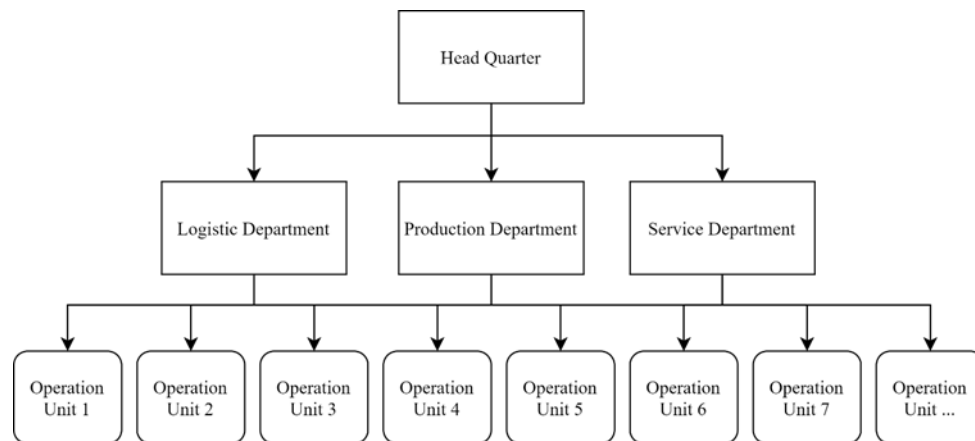


Figure 2. The management structure at two catering firms

Based on archived documents and official websites of the two companies, an overview of the human resources of the two companies was obtained (see Table 1). Table 1 illustrates the descriptive analysis of human resources and companies' basic information. The total number of employees in Company A is 850, while Company B has 800 employees. The service and production departments are the primary departments responsible for providing services and food to customers, while the logistics department manages raw materials, warehousing, procurement, and other operational activities. We found that both catering companies primarily allocate their staff to the service and production departments, with a total of 400 and 300 employees respectively (see Table 1). The ratio of local to non-local employees in Company A is 12:39, while in Company B, this ratio is 13:39. Therefore, the ratios in the two companies are very close, which indicates the concentration of non-local workers in Macao. Additionally, the ratio of male workers to female workers in both companies is 9:11, indicating that both companies employ male and female workers equally. Regarding educational attainment, employees with a high school education or less constitute most of the total workforce, accounting for 70% in both companies. The age distribution of employees in Groups A and B is also similar, with employees between the ages of 18 and 40 comprising 80% of the total workforce. Years with the current organization represent employees' work experience. More than 80% of the employees have been with their current organization for more than five years (see Table 1).

Table 1. Descriptive analysis of two companies and human resources

| | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|------|---------------------------|-------------------------------------|--|--------------------------------------|
| Employees Distribution | Firm | Total number of Employees | Number of Employees in Service Dep. | Number of Employees in Production Dep. | Number of Employees in Logistic Dep. |
| | A | 850 | 400 | 370 | 80 |
| | B | 800 | 450 | 300 | 50 |
| Company Information | Firm | Number of Restaurants | Local Employees | Non-local Employees | The ratio of Males and Females |
| | A | 20 | 200 | 650 | 9:11 |
| | B | 9 | 200 | 600 | 9:11 |
| Employee Age | Firm | Below 24 | 25-30 | 31-40 | Above 40 |
| | A | 25% | 25% | 30% | 20% |
| | B | 23% | 27% | 28% | 22% |
| Employees' Education Attainment Level | Firm | Primary school or below | Middle School or equivalent | High School or equivalent | College above |
| | A | 10% | 23% | 49% | 18% |
| | B | 7% | 26% | 47% | 20% |
| Work Years at Current Employers | Firm | Within 2 years | 3 to 5 years | 6 to 10 years | Above 10 years |
| | A | 30% | 50% | 15% | 5% |
| | B | 37% | 55% | 5% | 3% |

4.2 Summary of participants' profile

The open-ended questionnaires were distributed from mid-February to early March 2022. In mid-March 2022, we collected 30 open-ended questionnaires, but 10 of them were not qualified. For instance, when asked if good promotion opportunities would influence their decision to join their current employer, one respondent answered "yes" without giving a reason. Therefore, we excluded such answers, and finally, we collected 20 valid open-ended questionnaires.

Table 2 presents the general profile of the respondents. Seven respondents are non-local employees, and the ratio of female to male is 1:1. The mean age of the participants is 36.1 years, and the average working years with the current employer is 4.6. Five participants are from the management level, and 14 participants have a high school diploma. The available sample profile is similar to the human resource picture in both companies (see

section 4.1), except for the ratio of local and non-local employees.

Samples collected have similar characteristics, which means that to some extent, they can represent the responses of the total population in both companies, resulting in high internal validity. In other words, these representative samples are similar to the total population, except for their quantity. In this research project, respondent codes are used to represent respondents for better analysis and confidentiality. For example, A1 indicates that a participant is from Company A.

Table 2. Summary of respondents' general profile

| Code | Source | Gender | Age | Education Attainment | Work years at the company | Job Position | Department |
|------|--------|--------|-----|----------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| A01 | L | M | 37 | High school | 7 | Chef | Production |
| A02 | NL | M | 27 | College | 5 | Accountant | Service |
| A03 | L | F | 35 | High school | 4 | Warehouse employee | Logistic |
| A04 | NL | M | 28 | High school | 5 | Waiter | Service |
| A05 | NL | F | 24 | High school | 3.5 | Waitress | Service |
| A06 | L | F | 55 | Primary school | 10 | Cleaner | Service |
| A07 | L | M | 45 | High school | 8 | Deputy Executive Chef | Production |
| A08 | L | M | 26 | College | 3 | Purchaser | Logistic |
| A09 | L | F | 45 | High school | 2.5 | Cashier | Service |
| A10 | NL | F | 35 | High school | 6 | Department head | Service |
| B01 | L | F | 40 | High school | 5 | Department Manager | Service |
| B02 | NL | F | 25 | College | 3 | Waitress | Service |
| B03 | L | M | 45 | Middle school | 5 | Warehouse employee | Logistic |
| B04 | L | F | 25 | College | 3 | Marketing employee | Service |
| B05 | L | M | 50 | High school | 5 | Chef Manager | Production |
| B06 | NL | F | 35 | High school | 3 | Cashier | Service |
| B07 | L | M | 30 | College | 2.5 | IT Engineer | Service |
| B08 | NL | M | 35 | High school | 3 | Department head | Service |
| B09 | L | M | 45 | High school | 5 | Chef | Production |
| B10 | L | F | 35 | High school | 4 | Water bar employee | Service |

Note: L indicates the local employee; NL indicates the non-local employee; M indicates the Male; F indicates the Female; Code indicates the respondent number

4.3 Employer attributes in the eye of current employees

Firstly, we have summarized the perceptions of current employees regarding employer attributes into five categories. We have grouped their responses into the most important attribute category, the least important attribute category, the mixed feeling attribute category, the positive attribute category, and the negative attribute category (please refer to Figure 3).

Salary, job security, and teamwork activities are the most important employer attributes based on responses. Respondents have the same thoughts about salary, and they believe that salary is the most important, and most respondents consider their salary to be average in the Macao food industry. However, compared to the gaming industry, the salary in restaurants is not attractive, according to A10. B07 from the logistics department believes that his salary is above average and somewhat attractive.

All participants were concerned about teamwork activities, but three respondents believed that teamwork in the organization was undermined (please refer to Table 3). For instance, A02 complained about the heavy workload that requires more teamwork, while B01 contended about the conflicts in the workplace between the production department and the service department on the front line due to the workforce shortage. These are indications of the lack of teamwork in the organization. With regards to job security, respondents are worried about their jobs. Fifteen respondents were actively reminded of the downsizing and turbulent work environment and expressed concerns about losing their jobs, believing that this is a vital employer attribute of an organization, providing a secure job.

Table 3 Participants' concern and attitude toward employer attributes

| Employer Attribute | Concern | | | Attitude | | | | |
|-------------------------|---------|----|----|----------|----|----|----|----|
| | C | NC | NG | P | N | A | I | NS |
| Security of employment | 15 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 5 |
| Salary | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 15 | 0 | 5 |
| Teamwork | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 17 | 0 |
| culture and values | 6 | 13 | 1 | 8 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| CSR | 3 | 17 | 0 | 4 | 14 | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| Flexibility | 2 | 18 | 0 | 4 | 16 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| International tour | 2 | 18 | 0 | 2 | 17 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Work environment | 1 | 18 | 1 | 7 | 4 | 8 | 0 | 1 |
| Promotion opportunities | 12 | 8 | 0 | 2 | 9 | 0 | 6 | 3 |
| Emotion | 19 | 1 | 0 | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Respect | 17 | 3 | 0 | 17 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Workplace location | 19 | 0 | 1 | 19 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Quality | 0 | 17 | 3 | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Diversity & Equality | 1 | 18 | 1 | 19 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Labor contract | 0 | 20 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 18 | 0 | 0 |

| | | | | | | | | |
|------------------------|----|----|---|----|----|---|---|---|
| Task demands | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 20 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Employee relationship | 20 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 13 | 1 | 4 | 1 |
| Work Variety | 7 | 11 | 2 | 6 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| Training and Education | 15 | 5 | 0 | 3 | 16 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Endorsement | 0 | 0 | 0 | 16 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Note: C indicates Concerned; NC indicates Not Concerned; NG indicates Not Given; P indicates Positive; N indicates Negative; A indicates Average; I indicates Important; NS indicates Neutral Stance

Employer attributes, including culture and values, corporate social responsibility, flexibility and work hours, international exposure, and work environment, are the least important category of attributes. More than half of respondents contend these attributes are not important. The culture and values of the two organizations are less important to respondents. *“We are general employees, and we don’t know these things. A09.”* The organization-initiated CSR activities are less important. Respondents felt that *“organizational activities are not directly related to individuals. B01.”* or *“I prefer to manage my free time rather than participate in organizational CSR activities. B07.”*

Flexibility and international exposure are job benefits for employees. Respondents, A01, A02, A04, A05, A07, A08, A09, A10, and B03, B05, B07, B08, B09, and B10, stated that they understand that flexibility is impossible in the hospitality industry due to customer needs because the work depends on the actual needs of customers. They expect flexibility in the workplace and time, but they understand that flexibility is not a necessity. In terms of international exposure, general employees believe that they are excluded from international travel and exchange opportunities, such as respondents A01, A03, A05, A06, A08, A09, A10, B01, B03, B06, B08, B09, and B10. In addition, the work environment is usually on industry average or above average, so 18 respondents are not concerned about the working environment because *“on average, I am accustomed to the working environment in the restaurant. (A01).”*

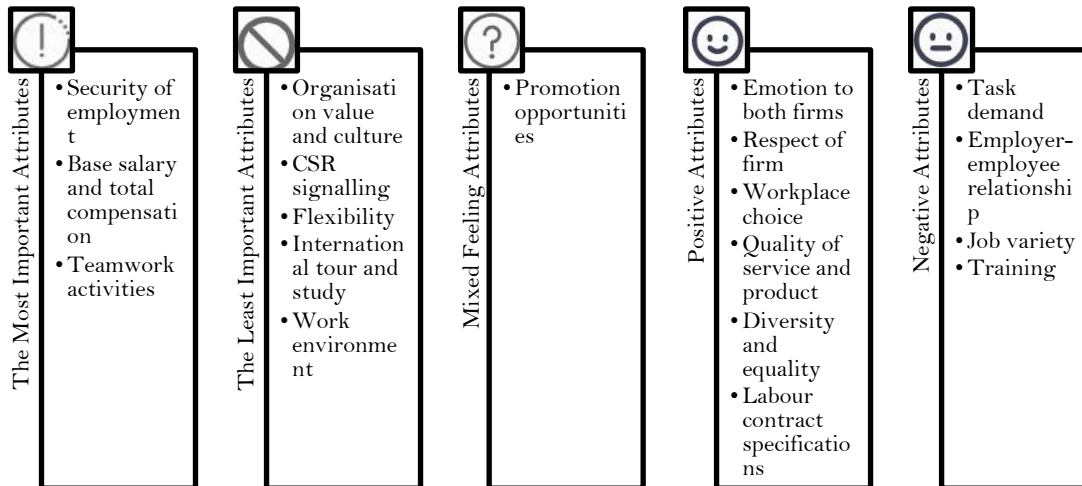


Figure 3 Categories of employer attributes

In the category of mixed feeling attributes, the opportunity for advancement is split evenly between concern and no concern. More than half of the respondents are concerned about advancement opportunities. Six respondents from Company A and Company B respectively attached importance to promotion opportunities. However, general employees believe that there are no good promotion opportunities (according to A01, A04, A05, B01, B08, and B10), while others expressed interest in associated benefits and salary increases along with promotion opportunities.

The category of positive attributes included emotion, respect, the choice of the workplace, the quality of service and product, diversity and equality, and employment contract specification. Respondents have positive attitudes towards these attributes offered by two companies. Respondent A03 emphasized, “*Company A has a long history and many people know it. I had subscribed the company before I joined.*” Consistent with A03, “*the company has been built a long time ago and is a well-known brand in Macao City*”, and A05 added, “*the company has a long history in Macao and has been gradually opening some residential branches, so it has a good reputation among communities.*” Reputation was mentioned repeatedly. Employees tend to highlight Company A reputation as an important factor attracting them to join or stay. In comparison, respondents mentioned the growth, reputation, positive brand, and the sense of prestige of working at B. Overall, both companies were perceived as “reputable employers.” Although a few respondents had a negative attitude towards their employer, their voices were considered from a comparative perspective. For example, B01 felt that “*my employer is less respectful than other casino groups.*” This is understandable because of the size of the company and the industry character. In comparison,

“I don’t have much feeling attached to the company. After all, I’m a general employee, and I don’t have much to say. A02.”

The category of negative attributes includes task demand, employer-employee relationship, job variety, and training. Task demand and job variety jointly influenced respondents’ attitudes toward their actual jobs. All respondents (20) had negative attitudes toward task demand, claiming that job pressure is increasing, and the high-level job strain was attributed to the shortage of labor. A04 and A05 claimed that labor shortage was the cause of demanding tasks, while A05 and A10 were concerned about high customer demands and the standard of food and service quality. Job variety also contributed to task demand pressure, because employees *“have to take care of different tasks from former colleagues”* according to B03, or *“job variety is not easily adaptable, especially for varying tasks”* according to A09. On the other hand, some respondents had positive views on job variety and claimed that can adapt to job variety, per A05, A06, and A10.

Training is essential for career development; however, problems with training were found in both companies. In general, respondents in both companies had negative feelings about training interventions. In Company A, eight respondents were dissatisfied with the company’s training arrangements; one did not care about training; and only one expressed positive feelings about training. Similarly, in Company B, eight respondents were dissatisfied with the company’s training policies, while two respondents were positive about training policies. Most respondents are not against training, but are not satisfied with training management. B01 stated, *“I would like to have less training or not use employee free time for training”*. Respondents reported that *“training is arranged after my working hours, but I want to take some rest”* or *“I do not want to spend my free time on training. (B1).”* Traditionally, line managers or restaurant managers usually use the rest period (14:00 to 17:00) on some working days to train general employees, as this is a tradition in the restaurant industry. As a result, employees are tired of training because they are fed up with intensive training or are tied to the business.

In both organizations, respondents reported a need to improve the employer-employee relationship. Keywords such as mutual understanding, harmony, extra care, and communication can help reduce stress and avoid workplace conflicts. For example, both B06 and B07 responded, *“employers, management, should show more care and empathy to employees; fewer punitive measures.”* In Company A, employees expect understandings from the employer, while harmony and mutual understanding are mentioned three times respectively.

4.5 Interviews

To ensure the validity of the data sources, this project conducted interviews to check respondents' responses. Interviews showed general consistency with answers from open-ended questionnaires, and interviewees were mostly agreed with respondents' responses, despite conflicts regarding training interventions and advancement opportunities. Experts agree that respondents are genuinely expressing their views on employer attributes and EOC. However, they disagree with feedback on training and advancement opportunities because they believe both are essential employer attributes related to employee skill development and career management. Nevertheless, they understand why respondents' feedback is generally negative.

Summarizing transcripts from the interviews, we found that internal and external business environments affect employees' perceptions of employer brand attributes and the employer of choice (see Table 4). From an external environment perspective, the economic downturn, Macao's economic characteristics, the rising unemployment rate, the pending casino license, and the currency exchange rate volatility are primary factors recognized by both respondents and interviewees. These factors are affecting respondents' perceptions toward employer attributes. For example, economy downturn threatens the sense of job security while pending gambling licenses and volatility of currency rate add more uncertainty toward this situation. In comparison, from the internal environment point of view, increasing job tasks, decreasing income, and job and industry characteristics are combined to determine the attitudes of respondents. Unvoluntary or voluntary labor force loss leaves more workload for survivors whereas the nature of food service industry affects employees' perceptions toward many attributes, such as training and interventions, promotion opportunities, and international exposure. Thus, compared with interviews and an open-ended questionnaire, the consistency is achieved, and the reasoning is clear. In other words, the concern and attitude framework can successfully predict employees' perceptions on employer attributes.

Table 4 Two-dimension factors on employer attributes and choice

| External business environment | Internal business environment |
|---|--|
| Economy downturn (the increase unemployment rate and the loss of job opportunities) | Increased labor demand due to loss of employees (layoffs or voluntary leave) |
| Macao's economy is unique. The economy is less diversified, heavily relying on tourism and the casino industry. No need for high-end talents. | Business and SME characteristics including work units (small scale, restaurant-based); limited promotion opportunities; busy work environment (peak hours); work demands from the business side. |
| Disruptive business environment (the pending adjustment of casino licenses, until the end of November 2022) | Reduced income (fewer tips or overtime or salary reduction, depending on the situation) |
| Currency rate volatility (increase and decrease currency rate affects the income of migrating employees) | Difficulties in manding employee-employer (manager) relationship due to reduction of benefits |

5 Conclusion and business implications

5.1 Conclusion

Employer attributes derived from the employer brand have an impact on the employer of choice, helping an employer present itself as an EOC (Srivastava & Bhatnagar, 2010). However, these attributes are not equally effective for employees' decision-making in varying scenarios. Employees perceive an employer based on their external and internal environment and business characteristics. We categorized these employer attributes based on two dimensions - employee concern and attitude by analyzing participants' responses. We found that while employees complained about employer attributes such as training, task demand, job variety, and manager-employee relationship, they were positive about other employer attributes such as emotions, respect for the company, job location, the quality of service and product, diversity and equality, and employment contract specification.

Our findings showed that employer attributes influence employees' perceived employer brand and determine their willingness to choose and stay with an employer. The salary issue is the most mentioned employer attribute. The economic downturn in Macao is believed to affect companies' operations and management in Macao due to the spread of Covid-19 and the Macao government's stringent countermeasures (Liu et al., 2021; McCartney et al., 2022; Wan et al., 2022). In terms of this violate environment, the main concerns of the participants are income and job security. Their priority in choosing a job or staying with an employer is

placed on the salary and stability offered, as they argued "salary is important, and I need to support my family. (B04)."

We found that job insecurity and a variety of job tasks are critical to employees, and employees are less likely to assume challenging jobs due to the impact of Covid-19 (Bajrami et al., 2021). Job insecurity was positively associated with the fear of the effects of Covid-19, which caused emotional exhaustion (Chen & Eyoun, 2021). Theoretically, Ronda et al. (2018) argued that employees might highlight employability and training over security in a time of labor market uncertainty, but they also predicted that the conditions of the labor market would influence employees' perceptions of the employer.

Our findings found that training interventions and promotion opportunities are less concerned. We argue that differences lie in the business nature of SMEs and industries; therefore, more employer branding studies are needed in SMEs (Amarakoon & Colley, 2022). We acknowledged that the lack of research on SMEs is due to the long-standing assumption that SMEs can and should replicate the practices of large corporations (Harney & Alkhalaf, 2021). This study focused on SMEs and the context of the Macao labor market, which will help to unveil the nature of employer brands in SMEs and the special job market.

In addition, interviewees are concerned with teamwork because employees need support from their colleagues in an intensive, labor-intensive business environment such as a restaurant (Bufquin et al., 2021). Employees prefer a team where they can find good colleagues to support them, so the coordination is crucial. In the current scenario, employees need to take care of the job tasks because they need to offset workforce loss. Hence, survivors probably struggled to maintain their current job tasks (e.g., replacing former colleagues' jobs) and endure the miserable atmosphere of the business environment, so excessive workload could result in lower job satisfaction among current employees (McCartney et al., 2022).

Finally, we found that employees are concerned about the employer-employee relationship. A good relationship will support their work, including mutual support, understanding, leniency (less punishment), and harmony. We found that feedback on employee relationships is negative for various reasons. We believe that internal communication seems insufficient based on the complaints we investigated. Similarly, a study by Sinkkonen (2021) showed that during a business crisis, internal communication between employees and management was scarce. However, the study also found that internal communication, especially during a crisis, strongly influences the perceived employer brand image (p. 29).

Regarding the employer of choice, our research project showed that both restaurant groups are attractive to current employees, despite some respondents were not positive due to industry characteristics and salary levels. This research indirectly assesses employees' real

thoughts about the EOC because the referrer benefits from the referral due to a close social tie (Pieper et al., 2017), and their endorsement has manifests their confidence in the employers (Kumari & Saini, 2018).

5.2 Management, theoretical implications, and research limitations

Theoretically, previous studies have focused on employers in relatively stable business environments, but the present study places the study in a disruptive business environment. We contend that it is necessary to understand the employer attraction at different time. Since Macao has experienced a business downturn in the past three years (2020-2022), it is desirable to study employer brand theory in this disruptive business environment, which corresponds to Lieven and Slaughter's call for research.

In addition, we propose a two-dimensional (concern and attitude) framework to inspect employee responses towards employer attributes. This framework can be further used in future research to understand employees' real thoughts toward employer brand building. Previous employer brand studies have focused on symbolic and instrumental frameworks (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016), but in this research, we offer a different angle in understanding employees' responses to employer attributes, because organizations should understand both employees' concern and attitudes towards employer brand and provide reasonable and practical employer brand strategies.

The management implications of this research verify priorities of managing different employer attributes during a disruptive business environment. The findings could guide practitioners in undertaking human resource management policies or office administrations based on actual employee needs. Findings illustrate that the management should recognize employees' needs from time to time. In a disruptive external business environment, salary, job security, workload, and employee-employer relationships are the most critical employer attributes, so management should take this into account and try their best to retain current talent and comfort survivors, thereby improving morale in the organizations.

Although the twenty respondents selected are representative of both catering groups, it is necessary to recruit more participants to understand employees' views on employer attributes. Considering that the total number of employees in both companies is 1850, a sample size of 200 (10%) would be better to understand the actual thoughts of employees and eliminate bias in sample selection. In addition, this qualitative research addressed the importance of employer attributes on EOC. In future research, a quantitative study is needed to determine the extent to which these attributes influence each other in a turbulent environment and understand the valence of employer attributes from current employees' perceptions.

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