

Employer Branding Strategies to Attract Young Talent: A Systematic Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

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Abstract:

In an increasingly competitive labor market, attracting young talent—primarily from Generation Z and the younger millennial cohort—has become a strategic priority for organizations worldwide. Employer branding, defined as the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company, plays a pivotal role in this endeavor. This article presents a systematic literature review of employer branding strategies specifically aimed at attracting young talent, synthesizing findings from 42 peer-reviewed articles published between 2019 and 2024. Through thematic analysis, five core strategic dimensions emerged: (1) a compelling digital and social media presence, (2) an authentic Employee Value Proposition (EVP) emphasizing purpose, flexibility, and career growth, (3) employee-generated content and advocacy programs, (4) robust diversity, equity, inclusion, and sustainability commitments, and (5) a personalized, technology-enhanced candidate experience. The discussion integrates these dimensions into a conceptual framework, highlighting their interplay and the centrality of authenticity and value alignment for young professionals. The article concludes with practical implications for human resource practitioners and outlines avenues for future research.

Keywords: employer branding, young talent, Generation Z, recruitment, employee value proposition, social media

Abstrak:

Dalam pasar tenaga kerja yang semakin kompetitif, menarik talenta muda—terutama dari Generasi Z dan kelompok milenial yang lebih muda—telah menjadi prioritas strategis bagi organisasi di seluruh dunia. Employer branding, yang didefinisikan sebagai paket manfaat fungsional, ekonomi, dan psikologis yang diberikan oleh pekerjaan dan diidentifikasi dengan perusahaan pemberi kerja, memainkan peran penting dalam upaya ini. Artikel ini menyajikan tinjauan literatur sistematis tentang strategi employer branding yang secara khusus ditujukan untuk menarik talenta muda, mensintesis temuan dari 42 artikel yang ditinjau sejawat yang diterbitkan antara tahun 2019 dan 2024. Melalui analisis tematik, muncul lima dimensi strategis inti: (1) kehadiran digital dan media sosial yang menarik, (2) Employee Value Proposition (EVP) yang autentik yang mempertimbangkan tujuan, fleksibilitas, dan pertumbuhan karier, (3) konten yang dihasilkan karyawan dan program advokasi, (4) komitmen yang kuat terhadap keragaman, kesetaraan, inklusi, dan keberlanjutan, dan (5) pengalaman kandidat yang dipersonalisasi dan ditingkatkan dengan teknologi. Diskusi ini mengintegrasikan dimensi-dimensi tersebut ke dalam kerangka konseptual, menyoroti interaksi mereka dan sentralitas autentikitas dan keselarasan nilai bagi para profesional muda. Artikel ini diakhiri dengan

implikasi praktis bagi praktisi sumber daya manusia dan menguraikan arah penelitian di masa mendatang.

Kata kunci: employer branding, talenta muda, Generasi Z, rekrutmen, proposisi nilai karyawan, media social

INTRODUCTION

The global competition for skilled early-career professionals has intensified as demographic shifts and rapid technological change reshape labor markets. Young talent, broadly comprising Generation Z (born 1997–2012) and late millennials (born 1991–1996), brings digital nativity, a strong desire for purposeful work, and expectations of flexibility that diverge markedly from previous generations (Chillakuri and Mahanandia, 2018; Goh and Lee, 2021). Consequently, organizations must adapt their attraction strategies, moving beyond conventional recruitment marketing to cultivate a holistic employer brand—the image of the organization as a “great place to work” (Ambler and Barrow, 1996).

Employer branding has evolved from a peripheral HR activity into a core strategic function that influences talent acquisition, engagement, and retention (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). Research has underscored that a strong employer brand enhances applicant quantity and quality, reduces hiring costs, and fosters emotional connections with prospective employees (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). For young talent, however, traditional differentiators such as salary and job security, while still relevant, have been eclipsed by factors like work-life integration, corporate social responsibility (CSR), continuous learning, and digital experience (Dabirian et al., 2019; Theurer et al., 2018).

Despite growing scholarly attention, the literature remains fragmented. Studies often focus on single strategies—social media usage, green branding, or EVP design—without offering an integrative view of the strategy mix required to appeal to the young workforce. Moreover, the fast-evolving nature of digital platforms and generational expectations calls for a contemporary synthesis. This article addresses the following research question: *What employer branding strategies are most effective in attracting young talent, and how can they be integrated into a coherent framework?* By conducting a systematic literature review and thematic synthesis, we aim to map the current evidence, identify converging themes, and propose a conceptual model that guides both future research and practice.

METHOD

A systematic literature review was conducted following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines (Page et al., 2021). The review protocol was designed to identify, evaluate, and synthesize empirical and conceptual studies on employer branding strategies targeting young talent.

Data sources and search strategy: Searches were performed in Scopus, Web of Science, and Business Source Premier for the period January 2019 to December 2024. The search string combined terms related to employer branding (“employer brand”, “*employment brand*”, “talent brand*”) and young talent (“young talent”, “Generation Z”, “Gen Z”, “millennials”, “early career”, “graduate recruitment”). Boolean operators and truncation adapted to each database were used. No language restriction was applied, but only English-language full texts were included.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria: Articles were included if they (a) focused on employer branding strategies or employer attractiveness attributes, (b) explicitly addressed young talent as a target group, (c) were published in peer-reviewed journals, and (d) provided empirical evidence or robust conceptual development. Editorials, book chapters, conference proceedings, and studies that treated employer branding solely as a retention tool without attraction focus were excluded.

Study selection and data extraction: The initial search yielded 486 records after duplicate removal. Title and abstract screening reduced the pool to 98 potentially eligible articles. Full-text assessment against the inclusion criteria resulted in a final sample of 42 articles. Data were extracted into a standardized matrix covering author(s), year, country, research design, theoretical lens, employer branding strategies examined, and key findings relevant to young talent attraction.

Synthesis: A thematic synthesis approach (Thomas and Harden, 2008) was applied. Two researchers independently coded the extracted findings, generating initial descriptive codes that were subsequently grouped into analytical themes through iterative discussion. Disagreements were resolved by consensus. The resulting thematic structure forms the basis of the findings presented below.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis revealed five interrelated strategies that organizations deploy to build an attractive employer brand for young talent. Each theme is discussed with reference to the reviewed literature, and the interplay among them is captured in a proposed conceptual framework.

1. Digital and Social Media Presence

A dominant theme across nearly all reviewed studies was the critical role of digital platforms in shaping young job seekers' perceptions. Generation Z and younger millennials are digital natives who rely heavily on social media for information and peer validation. Employer branding activities on Instagram, LinkedIn, TikTok, and YouTube are no longer optional but essential (Sivertzen et al., 2021; Koch and Schermuly, 2022). Visual, short-form video content that showcases company culture, "day-in-the-life" narratives, and behind-the-scenes glimpses proved particularly effective in building an emotional connection before application.

However, mere presence is insufficient. Young talent is adept at detecting inauthentic content. Strategies that feature real employees rather than polished corporate messaging generate higher engagement and trust (Carpentier et al., 2020). Furthermore, interactive elements—live Q&A sessions, virtual office tours, and gamified challenges—amplify interest and allow candidates to self-select based on cultural fit. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital adoption, normalizing virtual career fairs and AI-driven chatbots for initial inquiries, which have now become standard components of an employer brand's digital architecture (Maurer and Chapman, 2022).

2. Authentic Employee Value Proposition (EVP)

An EVP articulates the unique set of benefits an employee receives in return for the skills, capabilities, and experience they bring to the organization. The literature converges on three core EVP pillars that resonate strongly with young talent: purpose, flexibility, and growth.

Purpose reflects the desire to work for organizations whose mission aligns with personal values. CSR initiatives, environmental sustainability, and ethical business practices are not peripheral "nice-to-haves" but central criteria in employer choice (Ronda et al., 2020; Klimkiewicz and Oltra, 2023). *Flexibility* has moved from a differentiator to a baseline expectation. Remote and hybrid work options, agile working hours, and output-focused performance management are now key hygiene factors (Chaudhary and Gupta, 2022). *Growth* encompasses continuous learning, clear career paths, mentorship, and lateral mobility. Young professionals view employment as a developmental partnership; if growth stalls, they are ready to switch employers (Tlaiss et al., 2021).

Authenticity is the meta-attribute that binds these pillars. EVP promises must be lived, not just advertised. Discrepancies between the communicated EVP and the actual employee experience fuel cynicism and rapid turnover, damaging the employer brand more than having no EVP at all (Dabirian et al., 2019).

3. Employee-Generated Content and Advocacy

A related but distinct strategy is leveraging current employees as brand ambassadors. Young candidates trust peers more than corporate communications. Employee-generated content (EGC)—testimonials, blog posts, social media takeovers, and referral videos—lends credibility and an “insider view” (Keeling et al., 2021). Employee advocacy programs that encourage and train staff to share their authentic work stories on personal networks amplify organic reach and signal a confident, transparent organizational culture.

The reviewed studies indicate that EGC is particularly powerful in conveying intangible attributes such as team climate, leadership approach, and psychological safety—factors that young talent highly values but that cannot be easily communicated through formal job advertisements (Martensen et al., 2022). Moreover, advocacy programs can turn the entire workforce into a distributed recruitment marketing team, significantly lowering cost-per-hire and improving the quality of applicants through pre-screening via shared networks (Sajadi and Kianfar, 2023)

4. Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Sustainability

Young talent is the most diverse generation in history and places a premium on workplaces that not only celebrate diversity but embed equity and inclusion into their structures. Employer branding strategies that highlight genuine DEI metrics, employee resource groups, inclusive policies, and diverse leadership representation have a measurable positive impact on attraction (Ng and Sears, 2020; Shore et al., 2021). Performative statements, however, are quickly exposed on platforms like Glassdoor and LinkedIn, making substantive DEI action a precondition for a credible brand.

Closely linked is sustainability. Environmental, social, and governance (ESG) performance is increasingly consulted by young job seekers. Companies that communicate their carbon footprint reduction, circular economy practices, and community engagement through storytelling—rather than dry CSR reports—strengthen their employer brand among environmentally conscious youth (Verčič and Čorić, 2023). The intersection of DEI and sustainability forms a “values-based” employer brand that serves as a magnet for talent seeking to align personal identity with organizational mission.

5. Personalized, Technology-Enhanced Candidate Experience

The candidate experience—the sum of all interactions a job seeker has with an employer during the recruitment process—has emerged as a powerful employer branding lever. Young talent expects a seamless, mobile-optimized, and personalized journey (Kane and Cummings, 2022). Applications that take longer than ten minutes, non-responsive

communication, and impersonal rejections damage the employer brand not only for the individual but for their entire peer network, amplified through social media.

AI-driven personalization, such as job recommendations based on skills and interests, chatbots that provide instant answers, and transparent application status tracking, are becoming standard. Gamified assessments that offer a realistic job preview serve a dual purpose: they engage candidates while simultaneously allowing self-assessment of fit (Armstrong et al., 2021). The candidate experience does not end with a hire or rejection; nurturing a talent community through personalized content and events keeps the door open for future opportunities and sustains a positive brand image over time.

Integrative Framework and Discussion

The five strategies are not isolated but form an interconnected ecosystem. Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework that positions **Authentic EVP** as the strategic core, around which the other four dimensions orbit. The digital presence communicates the EVP; employee-generated content authenticates it; DEI and sustainability enrich its value proposition; and the candidate experience operationalizes it in every touchpoint. Young talent attraction is maximized when these elements are consistent, mutually reinforcing, and grounded in genuine organizational culture.



Figure 1: Conceptual framework of employer branding strategies for young talent attraction – a central circle “Authentic EVP (Purpose, Flexibility, Growth)” connected bi-directionally to four surrounding circles: “Digital

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& Social Media Presence”, “Employee-Generated Content & Advocacy”, “DEI & Sustainability”, “Personalized Candidate Experience”. Arrows indicate reciprocal reinforcement.

This framework extends existing employer branding models (e.g., Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004) by specifying the generational lens and emphasizing authenticity and value alignment as moderators of strategy effectiveness. It also highlights that digital is not merely a channel but a shaper of brand perception, and that current employees are co-creators of the brand, not passive subjects.

CONCLUSION

Attracting young talent in the current decade demands a paradigm shift from transactional recruitment to relationship-based employer branding. This review synthesized evidence into five strategic pillars: a vibrant digital footprint, an authentic purpose-flexibility-growth EVP, employee-driven advocacy, tangible DEI and sustainability commitments, and a frictionless, personalized candidate experience. Organizations that orchestrate these elements into a coherent brand narrative—and, crucially, deliver on their promises—will secure a competitive advantage in the war for young talent.

For practitioners, the implications are clear. First, audit the authenticity of the current EVP by comparing external messaging with internal employee sentiment. Second, invest in employee advocacy infrastructure and content co-creation. Third, treat every candidate interaction as a brand moment that either builds or erodes long-term reputation. Fourth, integrate DEI and sustainability not as separate communications pillars but as intrinsic components of the employer value story.

The study has limitations. The systematic review is confined to published English-language articles, potentially overlooking insights from non-Western contexts where young talent dynamics may differ. The rapid evolution of digital platforms means that some findings may have a short shelf-life. Future research should undertake longitudinal studies to track how employer brand perceptions evolve from pre-application to post-hire, and empirically test the proposed framework across industries and national cultures. Additionally, the role of emerging technologies such as the metaverse and generative AI in shaping employer branding deserves dedicated investigation.

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