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Industry talent branding: a collaborative and strategic approach to reducing hospitality's talent challenge

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Industry talent branding: a collaborative and strategic approach to reducing hospitality's talent challenge

ABSTRACT

Purpose: The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the talent challenges faced by hospitality organisations. This paper proposes a new concept – *industry talent branding* – which we argue offers industry stakeholders the opportunity to reduces such issues through working more collaboratively and strategically to magnify the pool in which individual organisations compete for talent.

Design/methodology/approach: This paper proposes a conceptual framework of industry talent branding, based on brand equity theory, signalling theory, and the employer branding literature.

Findings: Industry talent branding opens a potentially new stream of research on how talent attraction and retention issues may be addressed. We propose that there is merit in moving beyond the organisational-level phenomenon of employer branding to industry talent branding through articulating a broader collaborative and strategic agenda to increase and widen the talent pool available to organisations.

Research limitations/implications: The proposed framework offers the hospitality industry and its encompassing stakeholders a means to adopt a more proactive, collective, and strategic approach to addressing long-standing talent challenges.

Originality: This paper combines brand equity and signalling theories to develop the concept of industry talent branding, defined *as a strategically curated, yet realistic impression of the employee value proposition (i.e., the benefits and rewards received by employees in return for their work performance) available within the industry, that by design will sustainably attract new employees into the industry and retain existing talent*.

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Keywords: Industry talent branding, COVID-19, employer branding, signalling theory, brand equity theory, hospitality, talent attraction.

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1. Introduction

Hospitality provides ten percent of jobs globally (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020); however, it is well-recognised that it faces substantial challenges in attracting and retaining employees (Baum, 2019). These talent challenges tend to be exacerbated by macro events such as meteorological disasters, terrorism, and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 saw countries implement severe lockdowns, travel bans, and quarantine regulations which accentuated a talent crisis (Jolly *et al*., 2020) and which threatened the industry's post-pandemic recovery. Substantial numbers of hospitality businesses closed, staff were furloughed, and/or made redundant (e.g., Manoharan *et al*., 2021), while critical talent sources (e.g., international students, migrants) returned to their home countries during the pandemic. This crisis and its associated job insecurity, stress, and negative emotions caused many hospitality employees to reconsider their future in the industry (Bajrami *et al*., 2021; Yu *et al*., 2021) with some switching to perceived better job options in other industries (Croes *et al*., 2021).

The current and projected talent deficit poses a major problem for hospitality organisations and national economies that depend on hospitality and tourism (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020). Talent shortages are not a new phenomenon (Jooss *et al*., 2022) and the reasons run deeper and for longer than COVID-19. For example, a real challenge is how hospitality organisations suffer from a largely negative image in terms of the quality of employment options, terms and conditions, and career pathways. Specific criticisms about the precariousness of work (Robinson *et al*., 2019), the dependence on and exploitation of young persons (e.g., Mooney, 2016; Robinson *et al*., 2019), and legal breaches in the treatment of staff are regularly levelled at the industry (Hight *et al*., 2019). Many hospitality organisations have addressed such matters by improving working conditions with avenues for career development and advancement. This is, however, not a common narrative Although

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organisations can, and should, work on their employee value proposition and employer brand to become more attractive and competitive to job seekers and to retain talent, without a sufficient supply of talent within the wider industry, the impact of these efforts will be constrained.

In this vein, Jooss *et al.* (2022) suggest coopetition in the form of interorganisational talent pools may be an avenue worth considering amongst hospitality industry SMEs, to reduce some talent challenges and recognise the limited resources of smaller players. This idea speaks to scholarly calls on how the industry must to consider more innovative approaches to the talent proposition which will help attract the right skills mix (e.g., Baum *et al.*, 2020; Jiang and Wen, 2020). We concur and propose an extension of the organisation-level concept of coopetition, through explicitly calling for a wider and more strategic multistakeholder, collaborative approach across industry actors. Specifically, we propose the concept – *industry talent branding* – as a novel approach which may, in part, alleviate some of these talent shortfalls.

Our conceptual framework has been developed using brand equity theory, signalling theory, and the employer branding literature. The hospitality industry and employer associations tend to get media exposure mainly around concerns about government proposals to introduce a living wage or increase minimum wages (e.g., Hartnell, 2022; Heery *et al*., 2017), and/or lobbying against further employment protections (Fraser, 2021). While we accept that lobbying and influencing are key roles, they may also be exacerbating the talent attraction issues through depicting a poor image of how people are viewed and valued. Individuals may view these as *signals* of the quality of jobs and terms and conditions and about a lack of care within the industry (Spence, 1973). Given the diversity of employers, ranging from micro to large organisations, and the widespread talent shortages, we contend that there is only so much that individual firms can do on their own to ensure they have the people they need. There are many theories and frameworks (including the Attraction–Selection–Attrition framework

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[Schneider, 2001], Person–Organisation Fit [Kristof, 1996; Rynes and Cable, 2003], Person–Job Fit [Werbel and Gilliland, 1999], and Employer Branding [Edwards, 2010]) that help us understand how individual organisations can attract, recruit, and retain better candidates. However, continuing to focus solely on the organisation is, from our perspective, unlikely to yield sufficient change to deal with the talent attraction issues.

Apart from addressing hospitality's negative employment image (King *et al*., 2021), how talent attraction may be strategically improved at the industry level has received little consideration. We argue that an industry like hospitality needs its key actors (e.g., employers, industry peak bodies) to work strategically and collaboratively at this level to address the fundamental issue of needing to enlarge, widen, and diversify their talent pools. The core contribution of our paper is the development of an industry talent branding conceptual framework. This can serve as a starting point for a more strategic, collaborative, and encompassing lens through which talent issues within the hospitality industry may be considered and improved. We contribute to the burgeoning broader literature on talent management in hospitality (Jooss *et al.,* 2019; Jooss, Burbach, *et al*., 2021; Jooss, McDonnell, *et al*., 2021; Kravariti *et al*., 2022; Shulga and Busser, 2019;) by offering a new research avenue, especially for talent attraction issues in industries that are perceived in an unfavourable light. Further, we contribute to the wider talent management literature by proposing an industry level analysis, which has been markedly absent given researchers' tendency to focus on organisational, individual, and, more recently, national-level macro issues (King and Vaiman, 2019; McDonnell *et al*., 2017; McDonnell and Wiblen, 2021).

2. Literature review

2.1 Talent attraction in the hospitality industry

COVID-19 placed a spotlight on pre-existing employment and talent problems in the hospitality industry (Baum *et al.*, 2020; Jones and Comfort, 2020). After a crisis, there is a

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tendency to revert to the previous 'normal' ways of operating, ignoring underlying structural dysfunctions (Barrios, 2017). However, given the longstanding talent attraction issues within hospitality, a simple reversion post-pandemic is neither viable nor wise. Rather, the post-COVID talent crisis needs to be used as the impetus for constructive disruption and transformation (Menon *et al*., 2021) of the hospitality industry through long-overdue structural reforms (Baum, 2019; Baum *et al*., 2020; Chang *et al.*, 2020), improving the employee value proposition, and by promoting it as an attractive industry in which to work.

Research suggests that tapping into more diverse labour segments can increase the talent pool and potentially improve performance and generate greater customer satisfaction and higher business profitability (Gajjar and Okumus, 2018; Hunt *et al*., 2015). From our perspective, it is insufficient to attract the talent required through employers focusing on how they identify, build, and strengthen their own employee value propositions; the industry needs to do something fundamental. Organisational approaches are helpful but can only achieve so much, given the state of the problem.

2.2 Employer branding

Employer branding involves the 'differentiation of a firm's characteristics as an employer from those of its competitor; the employment brand highlights the unique aspects of the firm's employment offerings or environment' (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004, p. 502). Employer branding equates to the totality of organisational efforts to communicate to current and potential employees that a company offers a desirable workplace (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). A value proposition refers to the collective benefits and values an organisation provides in exchange for employees' services (Edwards, 2010). Its core purpose is to increase the job satisfaction of existing employees (Davies *et al*., 2018) and make an organisation attractive to potential employees (Cable and Turban, 2001; Collins and Han, 2004; Keefe, 2007, p. 20).

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Employer branding is a key element of effective talent management (Maheshwari *et al*., 2017; McDonnell and Wiblen, 2021; Sandeepanie *et al*., 2023; Theurer *et al*., 2018).

To develop an effective employer brand, an organisation needs to identify, clarify, and strategically manage the employment experience offered to employees, focusing on how it is distinctive from other competitors (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). This necessitates identifying the holistic nature of the employment experience, both tangible and intangible, that employees receive within the organisation (Edwards, 2010). An effective employer brand consists of five elements: 1) interest value (innovative or appealing products or services); 2) social value (positive work environment and friendly staff relationships); 3) economic value (financial rewards); 4) development value (future career opportunities); and 5) application value (potential to use previous learnings in other roles) (Berthon *et al*., 2005). Larger hospitality organisations have recently begun to construct employer brands that convey 'brand signals' to reduce applicants' uncertainty about the quality, benefits, and value of their employment offering (Wilden *et al*., 2010).

2.3. The case for industry talent branding

Despite individual organisations' best efforts to develop a strong employer brand, research highlights the influence of stereotypical images on the corporate branding of companies within a particular industry (Burmann *et al*., 2008). The impact might be even more powerful if an employing organisation lacks a well-developed employer brand (Burmann *et al*., 2008) – a situation that is common for hospitality SMEs (Gehrels, 2019; Jooss *et al*., 2022; Styvén *et al*., 2022). Since searching for information signals is costly for potential employees in terms of time and effort (Spence, 1973), Burmann *et al*. (2008) argued that in the absence of an articulated employer brand, potential employees are likely to draw on their knowledge of the industry's stereotypical image as a short cut (Burmann *et al*., 2008; De Goede *et al*., 2011). This tendency to resort to industry stereotypes for information may be stronger early in the

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recruitment cycle (Vanderstukken *et al*., 2019). If that industry stereotype is negative, as appears common in hospitality (Baum, 2019; Robinson *et al*., 2019), then potential recruits will lose interest (Burmann *et al*., 2008; De Goede *et al*., 2011; Vanderstukken *et al*., 2019).

We argue that there is a need to move *beyond* the organisational level of employer branding to consider the role of industry in talent attraction. We know that individuals form incidental impressions about the brands of products, occupations, and industries (Bajde, 2019). Often, these perceptions may be influenced by commonly held sets of beliefs (stereotypes) found in society and/or the media (Gidaković and Zabkar, 2021). To manage the impact of negative industry images, researchers in other fields (e.g., Burmann *et al*., 2008; He and Balmer, 2005; Wallace *et al*., 2012) have recommended that industry associations and employers collaborate voluntarily to create necessary industry-wide improvements, strategically craft a more positive and consistent industry brand image, and engage in positive public relations that promote this brand widely to the public and industry stakeholders through multiple communication channels.

Badje (2019) posited that industry branding involves two intertwined processes: the legitimisation of the industry as acceptable, and its contribution to 'imagineering' or inspiring the vision of a better world. Some relatively successful efforts to rehabilitate negative brand image have previously occurred in the automobile (Rao, 2000), tobacco (Palazzo and Richter, 2005), and oil (Humphreys and Thompson, 2014) industries. The casino industry has undertaken a multi-pronged strategic marketing campaign to legitimise casinos in the minds of the public (Humphreys, 2010). To enhance the industry's political, cultural, and social acceptability, the refreshed brand successfully promoted casinos as committed to legal and regulatory compliance and eschewing crime while offering inspirational experiences of recreational fun and entertainment for the community (Humphreys, 2010).

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There have also been some attempts to engage in positive industry image marketing within hospitality. For instance, in the UK, Hospitality Rising launched a marketing campaign – #risefastworkyoung – to attract young talent to the hospitality industry (Hospitality Rising, 2023). They claimed that this initiative led to an upsurge in the appeal of working within the industry, though this has not been scrutinised. Other initiatives have been undertaken by the Sustainable Hospitality Alliance (2023) which again centres on youth employment. While these initiatives are welcome, we argue that they remain insufficient as they fail to effectively provide a wider image of work and careers within the industry and appear centred on one segment of the labour force.

The concept of clusters and how they can foster talent attraction holds relevance (Chabault *et al*., 2012). For example, innovation clusters have been held up as fertile ground for talent who are attracted by the promise of personal and professional development and wider career opportunities within and across organisations. These clusters see movement between members (i.e., organisations within the cluster), which leads to them building their competencies and career while contributing to the performance of the cluster. While inter-organisation mobility can be viewed through a negative lens, it can also be viewed positively through the exchanges and learnings that it encompasses and the human capital it brings. The relevance is that a cluster can promote the attractiveness of working within such organisations and draw in people who would not traditionally be attracted (Chabault *et al*., 2012); in other words, it offers something *beyond what any one company* can offer on its own.

While the perception of an employer's attractiveness has been noted as influenced by the job seeker's previous experience with an industry sector (Wilden *et al.*, 2010), the concept of an industry talent brand has been absent in the literature. We concur with Baum's (2019) compelling argument that it is high time that the industry, its associations, employing organisations, and educators address the negative terms and conditions of hospitality

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employment to improve the employee value proposition. Reforms are critical, given that Winchenbach *et al.* (2019) have argued that the industry is guilty of undermining the ILO's and UN's social sustainability goals due to its lack of respect for human dignity, its precarious employment offerings (Robinson *et al*., 2019), and its disadvantaging of already marginalised groups (e.g., women, people with disabilities, culturally and linguistically diverse people) (Lewis and Neville, 2015; McDowell, 2018). Long-overdue reforms (Baum, 2019) are needed to develop an authentic, sustainable, ethical, and socially responsible industry brand image. In our view, this in turn would assist in expanding the talent pool available to hospitality organisations.

Creating a viable industry brand image that features the industry's many *existing positive features* (that at present are left unspoken and unpromoted) constitutes an important initiative for resolving the current talent crisis that threatens the hospitality industry's long-term viability. This needs to be viewed as a long-term vision whereby the problematic aspects of employment are addressed, alongside identifying and calling out (signalling) the very real positive features for talent in this industry.

3. Towards a conceptualisation of industry talent branding: theoretical underpinnings

While the concept of employer branding is well-developed at the individual organisation level, it has not yet been conceived as a more strategic and wider multi-stakeholder, collaborative approach across industry actors to address talent shortages. We now draw on the signalling and brand equity theories to explain how industry talent branding is a worthwhile concept and can attract larger and more diverse talent pools.

3.1 Signalling theory

Signalling theory (Spence, 1973) was developed in the information economics literature to underpin the job market signalling model. This theory posits that signals contain information that interested parties require for effective decision-making. The theory describes the behaviour

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that occurs when two parties (e.g., individuals, organisations/industries) have different access to relevant information. It describes how individuals who lack clear information will seek out environmental cues and take short cuts (due to the opportunity costs of finding related information) to guide their decision-making (Spence, 1973). Signalling theory 'addresses problems of information asymmetry…[one way] this asymmetry can be reduced is by the party with more information signalling it to others' (Morris, 1987, p. 48). When applied to talent attraction and recruitment, signalling theory explains how in an information vacuum applicants will 'form impressions of an organisation (or in the case here – an industry) based on information, or signals, conveyed to them through recruitment activities or episodes (Rynes *et al*., 1991)' (Celani and Singh, 2011, p. 226). For instance, Highhouse *et al.* (2007, p. 136) found that job seekers made inferences about unknown characteristics of an employing organisation 'from signals in the marketplace (i.e., via advertising, word-of-mouth, corporate rankings, experience as consumers, etc.).'

We extend the use of signalling theory by describing how, for example, industry peak bodies may position the industry to be more attractive to people and the type of employee required to deliver and sustain organisational needs. There are four key elements of signalling theory: the signaller (*sender*); the *signal* (communicated information); the *receiver* of the signal; and the *feedback* the signaller receives about on the effectiveness of the signal (Spence, 2002). This theory proposes that the receivers, such as potential job seekers, use brand signals to evaluate quality (Dawar and Parker, 1994). The depleted image of the hospitality industry (e.g., poor working conditions and long hours) sends signals that are unattractive to potential employees (Baum, 2019). In addition, since employer brands may be viewed as weak (Gehrels, 2019) and their signals mostly distal, they do not offer a clear picture of the advantages of working in the industry. Since employees prefer to work in industries with positive and desirable images (Burmann *et al*., 2008), hospitality peak bodies that communicate appropriate

and attractive signals through industry talent branding can increase the likelihood of being preferred over competing service industries like aged care and retail.

The signallers are insiders who collect information about a product, service, organisation, or in our case the hospitality industry, that is unavailable to outsiders. Positive information may include, for instance, particular attributes of an employing organisation or industry. In the industry talent brand context, such information might include the aggregated best practices of a specific sector (such as high-end star hotels), research evidence about the industry's contribution to the economy, local jobs, and/or negotiations with the government about pay rates. Such information provides signallers with an advantage in understanding the positive conditions and career advantages of working in the industry.

The signal can be positive or negative. Although signalling theory tends to focus more on information that communicates positive organisational qualities (Connelly *et al*., 2011), evidence suggests that negative signals are more potent (Vanderstukken, 2017). This makes it important to carefully manage the valence of the signal. Signal observability is a critical component of signals (Bliege-Bird and Smith, 2005, related to what extent outsiders notice the signal. The right communications strategy (i.e., potential talent takes note of the signal) is paramount, because without this, the value of the signal remains elusive.

Any contact between a customer and a hospitality organisation creates an impression about the nature of the business and, by extension, the industry (Carlzon, 1987). Such service encounters can produce 'moments of magic' or 'moments of misery' (Sarpong, 2016) but are seldom neutral. Sutherland (2016, n.p.) refers to this as 'accidental marketing', which occurs 'when some action or wording not intended as marketing at all nevertheless has a profound psychological effect' on the receiver.

Without *a receiver*, the signalling process cannot be achieved (Taj, 2016). Receivers are those who do not have clear information about the industry. Employees are the receivers in

human resource management studies (Ehrhart and Ziegert, 2005). How effective a signal will be is dependent on the specific characteristics of the receivers themselves and the nature of their value systems (Connelly *et al.*, 2011). The signalling process will be effective if the receiver is not searching for the signal (Taj, 2016). Also, receivers tend to ignore weak signals (Ilmola and Kuusi, 2006). So, the receiver's attention and interpretation are essential for successful signalling (Perkins and Hendry, 2005; Taj, 2016).

The feedback refers to the signallers receiving information that informs them about how effective their signal has been (Connelly *et al*., 2011). For instance, increased job applicants might be due the positive signals sent by employing organisations or industry associations. To reduce information asymmetry, counter signals are vital as they echo the voices of those who best grasp the message (Taj, 2016).

3.2 Brand equity theory and industry talent branding

A brand is a 'name with the power to influence' (Kapferer, 2012, p. 8). Brand equity refers to the value generated by the recognition of a brand. Derived from the marketing literature, brand equity theory explains why and how brand creation is an important element in attracting consumers. Brand equity is construed as 'a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand that add to (or subtract from) the value provided by a product or service to a firm and/or to that firm's customers' (Aaker, 1991, p. 15). Brand equity consists of five different categories: '*brand loyalty, name awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, and other proprietary assets like patents'* (Aaker, 1991, p. 15). The deliberately curated nature of a brand's identity (in terms of brand knowledge and distinctive value) is likely to have a distinctive effect on the receivers' response, in terms of distinguishing one brand from another or unbranded products and services (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993).

Just like a successful employer brand sets a company apart from its competitors by creating 'an image in the minds of the potential labour market that the company, above all

others, is a *great place to work*' (Ewing *et al*., 2002, p. 12), we view the concept of an industry talent brand as doing so at the macro level. In other words, the hospitality industry talent band will differentiate itself from other industries by articulating what it is like to work within (and, for example, the diversity of work and career options available across the industry) and convey the positive (real) tangible and intangible elements that are encompassed within the talent or employee value proposition. With respect to attractiveness (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003), brand equity refers to potential recruits' positive evaluations of the brand made through 'surface associations' (Collins and Kanar, 2013, p. 287), which then impact their attraction to employment in organisations within that industry (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004). For existing employees, the outcomes of their positive subjective evaluation of the attractiveness of working in the industry should be an affirmation of their decision to stay within it (although they may change employers).

Therefore, an industry talent brand represents how individuals view the package of economic, functional, and psychological benefits provided by organisations that make up the hospitality industry. This brand must provide signals to individuals as to what key benefits they might garner by moving into the industry. For example, what careers exist within the industry? Are the skills developed in one sector relevant to organisations operating within other sectors? What are the positive conditions of working in the industry? Creating an industry talent brand requires a focused, long-term strategy to manage the perceptions of existing employees, potential recruits, and all other relevant stakeholders regarding what it is like to work within that industry and what makes it attractive. This leads us to define industry talent branding as:

> *A strategically curated, yet realistic impression of the employee value proposition (i.e., the benefits and rewards received by employees in return for their work performance) available within the industry, that by design will sustainably attract new employees into the industry and retain existing talent.*

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4. A framework of industry talent branding

Drawing on signalling theory, brand equity theory and the employer branding literature, we propose a conceptual framework for industry talent branding (see Figure 1).

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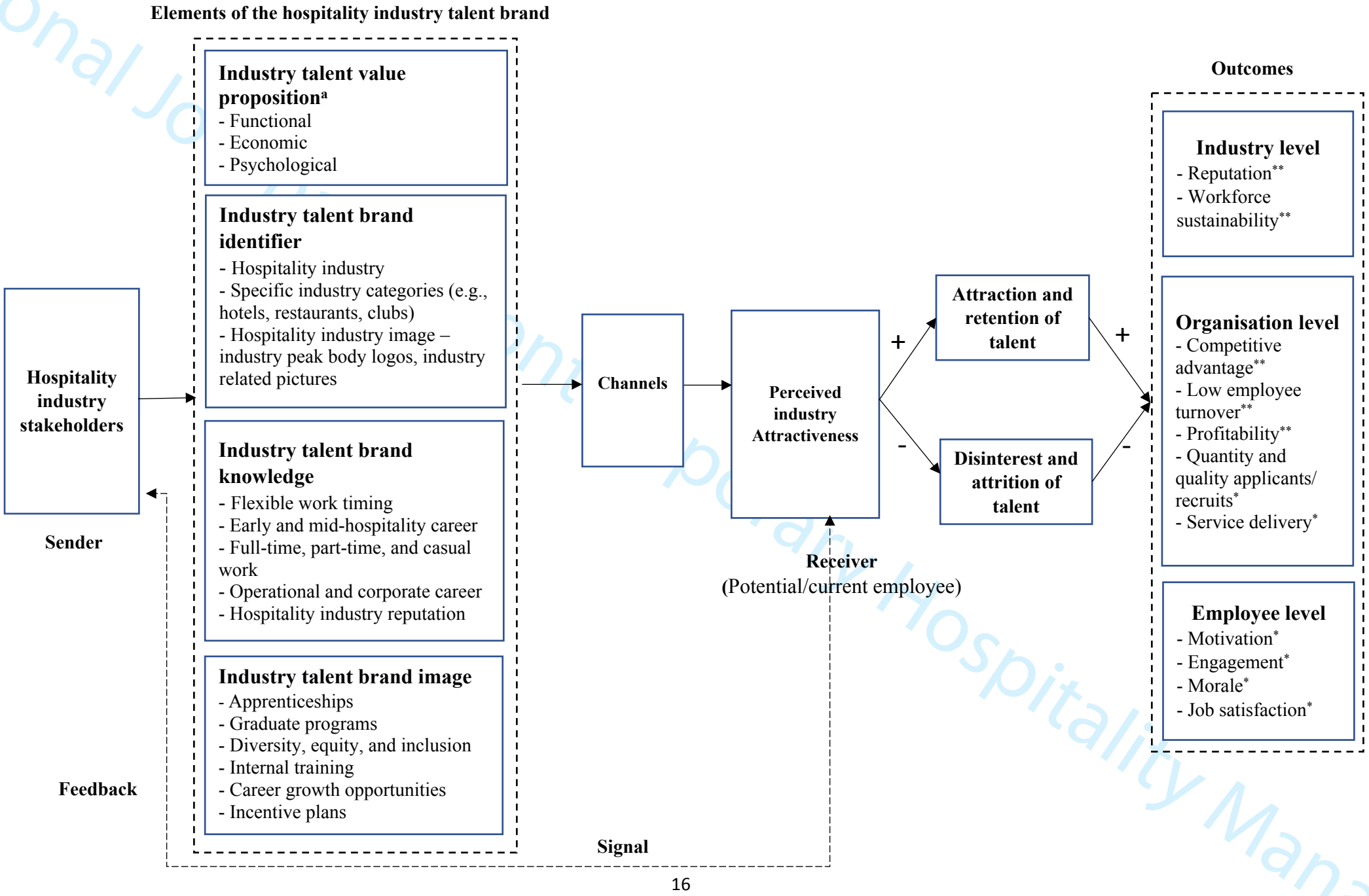


Figure 1. Industry Talent Branding Framework

[a] See Figure 2 for the industry talent value proposition| *Proximal; **Distal

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4.1 The senders (signal developers)

The first stage in the framework involves the signal senders developing the industry talent brand (the controlled signal). In the marketing literature, an effective brand is *co-created* through dynamic collaborative interactions and conversations between multiple key stakeholders (Payne *et al*., 2009) including firms and their employees (Merz *et al*., 2009; Nguyen *et al*., 2021). In this context, we purport that multiple stakeholders or talent brand senders (e.g., industry peak body organisations, employer organisations, the education sector, and existing employees) must come together and work collaboratively to *codesign* an authentic (Sparrow and Otaye, 2015) and realistic (Cohen and Dean, 2005) depiction of the work and careers in the industry. In other words, they need to establish what the brand is in terms of creating a positive impact on impressions of the hospitality sector as an appealing employment proposition.

4.2 Developing the signal

Drawing on the employer brand literature (e.g., Davies *et al*., 2018; Edwards, 2010; Kotler and Keller, 2016), we elucidate the four key elements that constitute the industry talent brand; the specific details within each element must be co-determined and designed between the senders.

- *Industry talent value proposition:* The most critical element (and an area where improvements are much required) is the talent value proposition. In the employer branding literature, the value proposition represents an organisation's unique 'package of reward features or employment advantages and benefits offered to employees' (Edwards, 2010, p. 7). Similarly, an industry talent brand will capture why it is worth working in that industry, (i.e., the distinctive strengths and benefits that the hospitality industry provides to its employees). According to Ambler and Barrow (1996), there are three categories of value propositions that are important to employees: i) functional (role autonomy, career opportunities, skills, and competencies gained), ii) economic (pay, and other financial benefits like discounted

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accommodation or food discounts), and iii) psychological/social (friendly work environment, manager support, teamwork, service culture, respected values like corporate social responsibility and environmental sustainability). The hospitality industry senders must identify authentic bundles of functional, economic, and psychological/social employee value propositions that will be attractive to current and future employees to expand and diversify the talent pool.

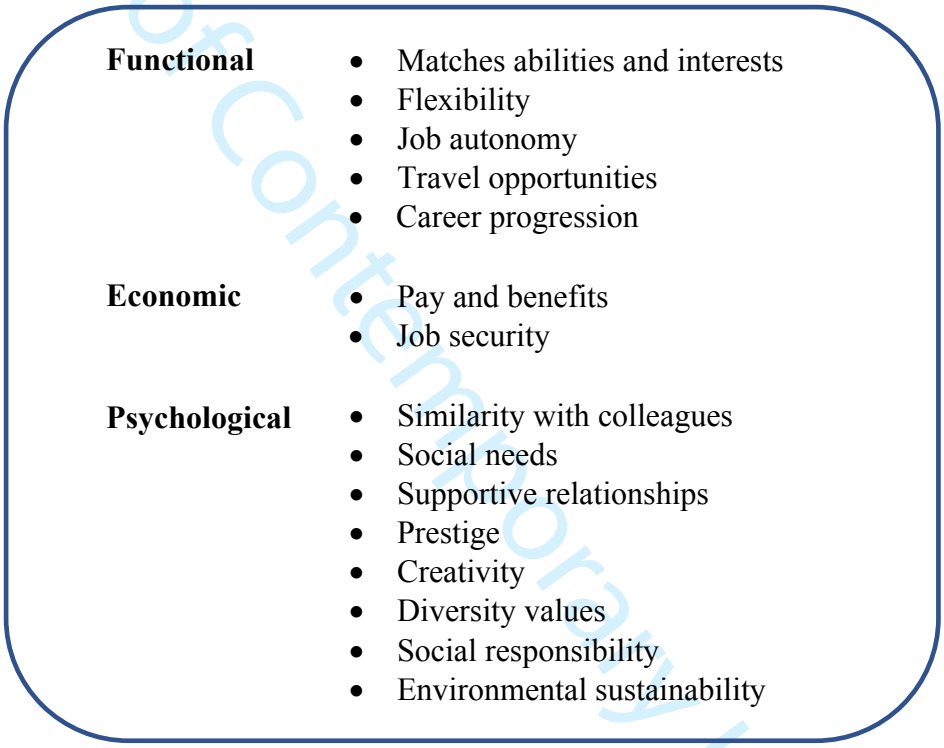


Figure 2. Possible elements of the industry talent value proposition

- *Industry talent brand identifier:* As for employer branding (Kotler and Keller, 2016), the industry talent brand requires an identifier that includes the industry's name (hospitality), which might be segmented in terms of specific categories of the industry (e.g., hotels, restaurants, clubs, etc.). To distinguish it from other industries, this identifier needs to include images of hospitality industry peak body logos and industry-related pictures, which include diverse staff, pictures of different types of hospitality establishments.

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- *Industry talent brand knowledge:* Drawing from Cable and Turban (2001) and Kotler and Keller (2016), relevant positive information about the unique nature of the industry, its careers, employment types, roles, and reputation can be curated to differentiate the hospitality industry's employment offering from those of competing industries. This is especially important in the context of industries that tend to compete for similar talent. The industry offers different forms of employment, such as full-time, part-time, and casual work, which can be seen as flexible options. These flexible work options may appeal to those who prefer more control over their work hours and the ability to accommodate their family obligations (Fuller and Hirsh, 2019; Kim *et al*., 2023), leading to positive outcomes such as job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and employee discretionary behaviour (Anderson and Kelliher, 2009). The dominant casualised workforce may lead to a negative hospitality image; however, the industry could be viewed as offering excellent early and mid-career opportunities in operations (food and beverage, guest services, front office, housekeeping) and corporate jobs (sales and marketing, human resources (HR), finance, accounting, technology, and business management). Are these made clear to potential job seekers?

- *Industry talent brand image:* In contrast to an 'accidental' image formed about an employer or industry (Vanderstukken *et al*., 2019), the industry talent brand image can be purposefully crafted by hospitality industry insiders to create an appealing impression on potential and current employees (i.e., perceived industry talent brand attractiveness). For example, graduate programs are a significant means of hiring hospitality and tourism executives who are looking for capable individuals with the potential to undergo additional talent development (Johnson *et al*., 2019). Diversity management is considered an essential HR endeavour aimed at attracting and retaining skilled individuals (Cooke, 2011). In the hospitality sector, 'investing in diversity management influences organisational attraction' (Madera *et al*., 2018, p. 931). For example, diversity, equity, and inclusion practices which are clearly

communicated through hotel webpages, attract talent (Gröschl, 2011). Offering increased access to training and career growth can also mitigate the negative image of the hospitality sector (Horner, 2017). Incentives can play a significant role in talent retention, especially for frontline employees (Vasquez, 2014). The industry needs to consider and promote what is on offer.

4.3 Signalling industry talent brand and feedback

Once the industry talent brand has been crafted, the industry can use multiple communication channels to send the signal to both future and current employees. Research in the recruitment literature suggests that using multiple channels is more effective than a single channel and that channel preferences may vary according to target groups (Russo *et al*., 2000). Therefore, the mediums need to be considered with respect to diversity and capturing less considered groups. According to signalling theory, feedback enables a signaller to understand the effectiveness of the signals. This feedback includes signal reliability, receiver's attention, and interpretation (Connelly *et al*., 2011) of the industry talent brand. Therefore, we have included a feedback loop in the conceptual framework (see the dotted line in Figure 1).

4.4 Receivers' perception of industry talent brand attractiveness

The perceived attractiveness of the industry talent brand is the most proximal emergent outcome of the received signals. Perceived attractiveness will depend on how well the articulated value propositions match the needs and wants of the receivers – in this case, potential and current hospitality employees. According to brand equity theory (Aaker, 1991; Keller, 1993), if they match well and the industry brand is uniquely differentiated from other competing service industries, then the receivers are likely to form a positive impression of hospitality as an appealing industry in which work (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003). This brand image will only be attractive if it is honest (Cohen and Dean, 2005) and authentic (Sparrow and Otaye, 2015), consistent with candidates' needs and wants, and genuinely enacted in

industry workplaces (Kurtessis *et al*., 2017). If the brand image is inconsistent with an individual's experience, then potential recruits are likely to feel disillusioned and disengage (Jolly *et al*., 2020).

4.5 Outcomes

An industry talent brand may succeed as an effective attraction strategy, but if it fails to deliver on its promises to new recruits, or if existing employees believe that it does not reflect their workplace reality, then the industry talent brand cannot be considered successful. Consequently, there is a longitudinal element to our framework, specifying a series of measurable outcomes that vary in proximity to the immediate emergent attitudinal outcome of perceived industry attractiveness. We now describe indicative outcomes in order of chronological occurrence, commencing with outcomes that are closest to perceived industry talent brand attractiveness.

Immediate proximal outcomes

- The immediately adjacent (proximal) outcomes to the perceived attractiveness of the industry talent brand are the resulting behavioural responses. We argue that if the industry talent brand is perceived as attractive, then potential applicants may seek out and apply for positions in hospitality organisations, when previously they would not have. Perceived industry talent brand attractiveness will impact existing hospitality employees, resulting in them feeling proud and affirmed in their jobs. The positive effects of strong and appealing industry talent brand signals are also likely to encourage staff to continue working in the hospitality industry. On the other hand, we propose that receivers who find the industry value proposition unattractive or false will move away (Jolly *et al*., 2020; Kurtessis *et al*., 2017; Sparrow and Otaye, 2015) and potentially from the industry rather than just one employer.

More temporally distal outcomes

We now draw on the extant literature to propose a set of more temporally distant, yet important outcomes of industry talent branding. These outcomes can be multi-level and occur at the individual, the organisation meso, and industry macro levels.

- *Individual-level employee outcomes:* Based on employer branding research (Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Lievens and Highhouse, 2003, 2016), we propose that new recruits and existing employees who experience attractive industry employee value propositions in their own hospitality workplace will be affirmed in an ongoing manner through feeling a greater sense of belonging, satisfaction, and motivation, engagement, morale, and job satisfaction. As a result, these employees' long term turnover intentions are likely to be reduced.

- *Meso-level organisation outcomes:* Extrapolating again from the employer branding literature (e.g., Chapman *et al*., 2005; Kucherov *et al*., 2022; Theurer *et al*., 2018; Verčič, 2021), it is likely that hospitality employers will benefit from attracting a larger talent pool of quality applicants in which they can compete, through their own employer brands, with other hospitality organisations. An attractive industry talent brand should result in a greater number and quality of both applicants and new recruits, in addition to fostering greater job satisfaction and engagement in existing staff. These outcomes will result in subsequently more distal organisation-level outcomes like improved annual employee retention rates, higher performance, improved service delivery, enhanced competitive advantage, and greater company profitability.

- *Macro-level industry outcomes:* Over time, the ongoing promotion of a clear and attractive industry talent brand is also likely to improve how job seekers and current workers view hospitality employment. Industry-level benefits are in part a consequence of improvements at other levels and therefore may take more time to accrue. A strong and appealing industry value proposition will enhance hospitality's reputation as a desirable

employer and build greater sustainability in the talent pipeline to address the longstanding deficits within the industry (Wallace *et al*., 2012).

5. Conclusion and implications

5.1. Conclusion

Attracting greater numbers and quality of talent to sustain businesses in the hospitality industry is, and has for some time been, a critical global issue (Langford *et al*., 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic appears to have magnified what was already a challenging environment. There is no denying that within the industry there are issues around working conditions and the effective and fair management of staff (Ariza-Montes *et al*., 2019; Zoghbi-Manrique-de-Lara and Ting-Ding, 2017). However, we contend that there are excellent opportunities to attract and retain people who currently do not view the industry as a viable career path. This positive side appears less recognised and highlighted by the hospitality industry who, arguably, adopt too much of a reactionary approach to HR and the value offered. Using signalling and brand equity theories, this paper presents the concept of an industry talent brand. This conceptual framework proposes a broader collaborative and strategic agenda that involves hospitality industry stakeholders to attract and retain the talents.

5.2 Theoretical contributions

This paper makes a novel contribution to the hospitality management and talent attraction literature via a new concept – industry talent branding. Individual organisations within the industry have been exploring and applying the concept of employer branding over the past few decades (e.g., Backhaus and Tikoo, 2004; Davies, 2008; Kucherov *et al*., 2022; Theurer *et al*., 2018; Verčič, 2021). However, this has improved access to talent for some organisations over others. The hospitality sector's poor stereotypical image (Baum, 2019; Robinson *et al*., 2019) is likely to negatively influence candidates' impressions and level of attraction (De Goede *et al*., 2011) since we know that industry stereotypes influence customers'

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trust and value judgments about service brands (Gidaković and Zabkar, 2021). According to signalling theory, this information asymmetry (Connelly *et al*., 2011) will cause candidates to seek out further information (Cable and Turban, 2001) that can provide them with clearer signals about the attributes of that organisation (Uggerslev *et al*., 2012). In the absence of available information, they are likely to fall back on the stereotypical perception of the hospitality industry (Vanderstukken *et al*., 2019).

The industry talent brand concept offers a strategic, macro-level mechanism to help attract and retain a broader range and diversity of workers to meet the staffing needs of hospitality organisations. Although the hospitality industry's unattractive image has been flagged as a major talent deterrent (e.g., Baum, 2019; Robinson *et al*., 2019), there has been limited consideration given to improving the industry's weak or negative image (King *et al*., 2021). This paper redresses the hospitality literature's scant attention to how industry brand may influence an organisation's ability to attract employees. Given the strong competition for talent that exists between industries (Baum et al., 2020), and the negative impact of poor industry image (Baum, 2019; Robinson *et al*., 2019) on employee attraction (De Goede *et al*., 2011; Vanderstukken *et al*., 2019), it is vital that hospitality associations take the initiative to collaboratively reframe the industry's brand. Industry associations and employers can take inspiration from the success of collaborative industry branding efforts in transforming unattractive industry images elsewhere (see, for example, Humphreys, 2010; Humphreys and Thompson, 2014; Palazzo and Richter, 2005; Wallace *et al*., 2012).

The concept of an industry talent brand requires a fundamental rethink of how the industry has tended to operate. To reliably determine the industry's unique talent value proposition, it is critical that all the industry's key stakeholders (e.g., industry associations, members, employers, existing, and potential employees) come together (Bengtsson and Raza-Ullah, 2016) in a collaborative co-design process to identify the specific bundle of dimensions

that is characteristic of the industry's employment offering. Essentially, the co-created value proposition must be authentic and distinctive (Sparrow and Otaye, 2015) to the hospitality industry, distinguishing it from other competing industries (brand equity) (Aaker, 1991), and should convey an attractive image of employment and career conditions to the industry's targeted talent pools. Moreover, we would encourage that as part of this process, they work together to transform the industry's talent brand image by cooperatively improving industry standards (Gidaković and Zabkar, 2021) (e.g., lifting wages, introducing shift predictability) and collectively participating in corporate responsibility or environmental initiatives to demonstrate their care for the community and environment (Shea and Hawn, 2019). To date, the idea of this macro-level industry talent brand has generally had minimal consideration (notable exceptions include the rail [Wallace *et al*., 2012] and power [Heilmann *et al*., 2013] industries), particularly in the hospitality context from a research and practice perspective.

We have expanded the hospitality talent management literature by proposing an industry-level talent concept. Responding to Kravariti *et al*.'s (2022) critique that much of the existing hospitality research is atheoretical, we have drawn on the established theories of signalling and brand equity to offer a fresh perspective to improve the attraction of talent. Specifically, we have developed a definition for the new concept of industry talent branding. We have also created a conceptual framework that can be used to make the hospitality industry more appealing to talent. This novel framework can assist in addressing calls (e.g., Baum, 2019; Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou, 2019) for greater research efforts into practical talent management practices to provide viable solutions for the ongoing talent deficits faced by hospitality organisations worldwide.

5.3 Practical implications

This paper has clear applied relevance to industry association peak bodies with potentially positive talent management outcomes.

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Implications for collaborative efforts: Industry associations can collaborate with government, education, and industry sectors to promote hospitality as an attractive employment option (e.g., Hospitality Rising, UK is a coalition of businesses crowdfunding for recruitment campaigns/providing exemplars of progressive employers). In addition to presenting the benefits of hospitality through industry talent branding campaigns, hospitality associations, employers, and the government will need to collaborate to improve wages, working conditions, flexibility, and work–life balance to ensure there is real substance behind improving the brand image.

Implications for developing an industry talent brand: From a managerial perspective, the framework offers guidance for industry associations and their members on how they could commence curating an industry talent brand. Industry talent branding can be achieved through formal communications signalled to the potential talent, including sending messages through traditional and social media. The choice of these channels and messages can be based on the targeted receiver (e.g., young employees vs. mature employees, minority groups). This can start early by enhancing the industry talent brand understanding among students (Ginige *et al*., 2007). To attract young employees, hospitality companies can launch programs targeting high school students. The expertise and features of the industry, its professional occupation, higher education pathways to professional status, and career prospects are seen as vital by school students (Gale, 1994), so industry associations and employers should highlight these points within the hospitality context. In addition, industry associations can conduct training to help smaller member organisations develop their unique employer brand tailored to the types of employees they require. However, there needs to be a greater strategic focus on and more investment into how such initiatives can provide solutions to the talent deficits faced by organisations.

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Communication tactics can be used to attract older employees whereby, for example, individuals with transferable skills from other careers may be a viable employment option due to flexible working options. In addition, industry associations in the different hospitality sectors can co-design appropriate sector talent brands by engaging member organisations and their employees in the co-creation process. It is essential that this is a collaborative and dynamic exchange so that a positive hospitality industry talent brand resonates with future and existing employees. Indeed, we argue that any potential that exists within the industry talent brand concept can only be realised through a consultative co-designed approach. More fundamentally, while we have focused on the communication aspect of the industry talent brand in this section, none of this is going to work without identifying a clear and real value proposition.

5.4 Limitations and future research directions

Our novel conceptualisation and the associated framework represents only a first step. Since this is a new concept in the hospitality and management literatures, the framework naturally needs further development and refinement. Although employer branding and its associated relationships with talent attraction and management hold true at the organisational level, it is yet to be shown that similar relationships apply at the industry level. Therefore, there is much need for empirical investigation to explore, verify, amend, and advance the new concept. For example, to what extent are the key strands in our framework sufficiently encompassing of such a large and diverse industry? What are the most central features of the talent value proposition within hospitality as an industry that existing staff value? Which ones could be used to target new entrants more proactively? What are the key issues for the industry in doing so?

A second limitation of our framework is that it does not consider how an industry-level talent brand would interface with an organisation's individual employer brand. Future research

is needed to examine the various antecedents and outcomes of an industry talent brand and how it interacts with organisation-level employer branding. For example, does the industry talent brand have a different impact on the types of talent attracted, such as gender, age, different cultural/racial minorities, and those with a lack of hospitality experience but who have potential transversal skills (e.g., customer service, retail, teaching) that would be viewed positively by hospitality organisations?

A third limitation of our study is our lack of empirical validation of the use of signalling theory as a useful overarching theory to study industry talent branding. Future research can explore its utility and operation in the industry-level context. Researchers can examine the key concepts of signalling, such as the signaller, signal, receiver, and feedback to understand the elements of creating a hospitality industry talent brand. Are there stronger impacts depending on who the signaller is and how the signals are communicated? Indeed, who are the critical signallers? We see the signallers as the industry peak bodies, but what other stakeholders may or should be involved (e.g., current employees) to ensure the strongest possible talent brand and influence? Studies focused on the signaller can examine the signaller's honesty and reliability, which are likely to be key in any positive impact. The signal itself can be studied – what are the core messages that encompass the unique value of the hospitality industry talent brand? How is an industry talent brand effectively created and subsequently revised and updated? The concept of the signal can be examined through signal quality, fit (clarity), intensity, and frequency. The receivers are potential talent and the content of the industry talent brand and the way the signals are communicated are likely to have differential impacts on various categories of job seekers. Research that explores the receiver's attention, interpretation, countersignals, and distortion will be important to advance knowledge about this new concept. Table 1 presents an outline of what we see as key elements of signalling theory which is at the

bedrock of the industry talent brand, along with possible research areas and more specific questions to guide future studies.

Table 1. Research in the nexus between industry talent branding and signalling theory

Key concepts of signalling theory	Research areas	Key references	Research questions
Signaller	Honesty	Cohen and Dean (2005)	Do hospitality industry peak bodies send authentic signals about industry branding?
	Reliability	Busenitz *et al*. (2005)	Do hospitality firms have the basic values of talent branded by the hospitality industry peak bodies?
Signal	Signal quality	Kao and Wu (1994); Ramaswami *et al.* (2010)	What different types of signals do hospitality industry peak bodies use to communicate industry brands? Do the hospitality industry peak bodies send signals (industry talent brands) that are strong or weak?
	Signal fit (clarity)	Warner *et al.* (2006)	How clearly do the hospitality industry peak bodies send signals about the industry talent brand to the potential talents? How effective are the industry talent brand signals sent through social media compared with traditional media?
	Signal intensity	Gao *et al.* (2008)	What is the intensity of the industry talent brand signals sent by hospitality industry peak bodies?
	Signal frequency	Janney and Folta (2003)	What is the frequency of the industry talent brand signals sent? What are repetitive industry talent brand signals sent by hospitality industry peak bodies? What is the effectiveness of frequently (and infrequently) sent signals (industry talent brand)?
Receiver	Receiver attention	Janney and Folta (2003)	To what extent do the receivers carefully scan the industry talent brand signals from the hospitality industry peak bodies?
	Receiver interpretation	Perkins and Hendry (2005)	To what extent do receivers carefully scan the industry talent brand signalling environment? How do receivers interpret the industry talent brand signals sent by the hospitality industry peak bodies?

			Do interpretations of industry talent brands vary with different diversity dimensions?
Feedback	Countersignals	Gulati and Higgins (2003)	How does the potential talent receive and respond to industry talent brand signals from the hospitality industry peak bodies?
	Distortion	Zahra and Filatotchev (2004)	How do the industry talent brand signals from non-hospitality peak industry bodies influence the decision of the receiver joining hospitality industry?

A final limitation of our framework is that it does not address a fundamental question around whether an industry talent brand is viable given the diversity and scale of hospitality. Perhaps the focus should be on sub-sectors within the industry? At a minimum, the industry talent brand would need to depict the diversity of sectors (e.g., hotels, restaurants, cafes, clubs, entertainment, and sporting venues) and the types of career options and value offered to individuals. Moreover, we know from the employer branding literature that employee value propositions may be perceived and evaluated differently due to cultural and country characteristics (e.g., Alnıaçık *et al*., 2014; Eger *et al*., 2019); therefore, there is a key question as to what level industry brand would have greater merit? Future research could explore whether there a case for industry bodies across countries to work together on the operationalisation of such a concept. Or would a regional or national approach be likely to bear more fruit? Further research to both conceptually refine, and to empirically test, expand, and contextualise our seminal framework will offer the scope to develop a brand new, innovative stream of industry-level talent management research to address hospitality's ongoing skills shortages.

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