ЮБИЛЕЙНА МЕЖДУНАРОДНА НАУЧНО-ПРАКТИЧЕСКА КОНФЕРЕНЦИЯ

ТУРИЗМЪТ В ЕПОХА НА ПРЕХОДИ: ЗНАНИЯ, ПОЛИТИКИ И УСТОЙЧИВИ БИЗНЕС МОДЕЛИ

Сборник с доклади

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PRACTICES FOR DEVELOPING EMPLOYER BRANDING IN BLACK SEA COASTAL TOURISM

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Abstract: The tourism and hospitality industry faces persistent challenges related to labor shortages, employee turnover, and seasonality, increasing the importance of employer branding as a strategic human resource management tool. This study investigates employer branding practices in hotels operating along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast and explores how these approaches contribute to employee attraction, retention, and engagement in a highly seasonal tourism environment. A qualitative research approach was adopted, combining a literature review with semi-structured interviews conducted with managers from five hotels representing different market segments. The findings reveal that employer branding is primarily based on staff-centered values, professional development opportunities, supportive working environments, and a combination of financial and non-financial incentives, while seasonality remains the main challenge affecting workforce stability. The study contributes to the limited research on the approach in coastal tourism by identifying key practices and challenges specific to the sector and highlighting the importance of sustainable, people-oriented human resource strategies for enhancing organizational attractiveness and competitiveness.

Keywords: Employer branding, Black Sea coast tourism, hospitality, HRM in tourism, employee retention.

Introduction

In an era of relentless competition, tourism enterprises make use of every available tool that enables them to stand out. Alongside efforts to attract customers and build a strong corporate brand, increasing importance is being placed on employer branding, which focuses on attracting, developing, and retaining high-quality employees. This is particularly important in the tourism sector, which has traditionally been characterized by a shortage of qualified personnel, high employee turnover, and pronounced seasonality of employment.

The study is based on a qualitative research approach **aimed** at exploring employer branding practices in hotel chains operating in Black Sea coastal tourism. The research design combines a literature review with primary empirical

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data collection. The first stage of the research involved a comprehensive review of academic literature, industry reports, and professional publications related to internal marketing, employee engagement, talent attraction, and retention in the tourism and hospitality sector.

The literature review served as the theoretical foundation for identifying key dimensions and practices associated with employer branding. Based on the findings from the publications, a research instrument consisting of open-ended interview questions was developed. The questions were designed to explore existing staff-oriented practices initiatives, and managerial perceptions regarding their role in strengthening the employer image. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively through thematic analysis, enabling the identification of common patterns, challenges, and good practices in employer branding development within the studied organizations. A **limitation** of the study is that it focuses exclusively on hotels belonging to hotel chains. Therefore, the findings may not fully reflect employer branding practices in independent hotels or other tourism businesses operating in the region. Moreover, large corporations are increasingly paying more attention and putting more effort into training, retaining, and attracting staff.

1. Theoretical framework

Brands can generally be understood as identifiers that enable differentiation among products, services, organizations, or other entities (Špoljarić & Došen, 2023). They represent a set of values and benefits recognized by individuals and associated with a specific offering (Kotler, 1997; Levitt, 1980). When the object of differentiation is an employer, the concept is referred to as an employer brand. Although employer branding is often associated with human resource management (Backhaus, 2016), it is inherently interdisciplinary, integrating elements of relationship marketing, human resource management, and corporate communication (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Barrow & Mosley, 2005).

The concept emerged in the marketing literature during the mid-1990s. Ambler and Barrow (1996) defined the employer brand as the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits associated with employment in a particular organization. Later, Rampl and Kenning (2014) described it as the image of an employer held by current and prospective employees, as well as by the wider public. The concept aims to create and communicate an organizational identity that positions a company as an employer of choice. Depending on whether the focus is directed towards current employees or potential recruits, employer branding may be categorized as internal or external. According to Gioia et al. (2000), employer images are first established internally and subsequently communicated externally through personnel members, who act as ambassadors of the organization.

The transformation of employer branding from the 1990s to the present day represents an evolution from a niche concept to a significant business strategy, driven by technological progress and changing societal attitudes.

Main Stages in the Development of Employer Branding

- **The 1990s**: The Birth of the Concept

Origin: The term employer brand was first introduced by Simon Barrow in 1990.

Initial definition: In 1996, Ambler and Barrow defined it as the set of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment.

Approach: Initially, employer branding was simply an application of product-branding techniques to human resource management. The primary focus was on recruitment advertising and attracting talent during periods of labor shortages.

- **Late 1990s and 2000s**: The "War for Talent" and the Digital Revolution

War for Talent: The phrase introduced by McKinsey in 1998 became a catalyst for organizations to differentiate themselves from competitors in order to attract top managers (Kizi, 2025).

Digital platforms: The emergence of platforms such as LinkedIn and Glassdoor changed the dynamics by giving employees a voice (Odland & Amurs, 2025). Branding shifted from controlled one-way communication to reputation management, where employee experiences became publicly visible.

Integration: By 2001, 40% of leading companies in North America were already engaged in employer branding activities.

- **After 2015**: Strategic Asset and Employee Value Proposition (EVP)

EVP as a priority: Employer branding ceased to be merely a recruitment tool and became a strategic asset with measurable return on investment (ROI) (Monzon, 2025).

Transparency: Recruit Holdings' acquisition of Glassdoor in 2018 highlighted the growing importance of transparency, as candidates increasingly researched reviews before applying for jobs (Monzon, 2025).

- **The 2020s:** Flexibility, Well-being, and Remote Work

Pandemic reset: COVID-19 forced companies to redefine their EVP, placing greater emphasis on safety, trust, and a people-centered approach (Monzon, 2025).

New pillars: Flexibility (remote and hybrid work), meaningful work, and mental health became key factors in attracting employees (Daggerfinn, 2026). Remote work also created new challenges for maintaining organizational culture due to the lack of physical interaction.

- **Looking Ahead to 2026**: Artificial Intelligence and Trust

Impact of AI: Artificial intelligence is beginning to shape how candidates discover and evaluate employers through generative search tools (GEO) (Parsons, 2026).

Trust repair: Due to declining global trust in institutions, employer branding is increasingly becoming a trust-building initiative based on authenticity and evidence rather than marketing promises (Parsons, 2026).

Focus on skills: Attention is shifting from static job positions to skills development in order to address employees' concerns about their future employability.

Consequently, employer branding has evolved from a recruitment-focused communication activity into a comprehensive approach encompassing the entire employee lifecycle. Research indicates that strong employer brands contribute to lower recruitment costs, improved employee retention, higher levels of engagement and innovation, and enhanced organizational reputation (Singh & Shree, 2025). These benefits are particularly significant in tourism and hospitality, where service quality is highly dependent on employee attitudes and behavior. In this context, employer branding plays a crucial role not only in attracting talent but also in fostering employee commitment, supporting professional development, and strengthening organizational culture. Given the persistent challenges of labor shortages, employee turnover, and seasonality, effective employer branding has become an essential component of sustainable competitiveness within the tourism sector.

2. Employer Branding in Tourism and Hospitality

Employer branding is particularly important in the tourism and hospitality industry due to the sector's unique labor market characteristics. As service quality is largely determined by employee performance and interactions with customers, human resources represent a critical source of competitive advantage. A key characteristic of tourism and hospitality organizations is the direct relationship between employees and customers. Unlike manufacturing industries, where product quality can be standardized, service quality in tourism is highly dependent on employees' attitudes, motivation, and behavior. Research suggests that satisfied and engaged employees contribute to higher levels of customer satisfaction, creating a virtuous cycle that enhances organizational reputation and business performance (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). Consequently, employer branding in tourism extends beyond recruitment and plays a central role in delivering superior customer experiences.

Another important aspect concerns employee engagement and retention. While many organizations initially adopted employer branding as a recruitment tool, studies in the tourism sector emphasize the importance of maintaining long-term relationships with employees and fostering organizational commitment (Kizi, 2025). Given the sector's traditionally high turnover rates, employer branding initiatives aimed at strengthening employee loyalty can significantly reduce recruitment costs and improve workforce stability. Internal communication also represents a critical component of successful employer branding in tourism. Clearly communicating organizational values, expectations,

and development opportunities helps personnel understand their role within the organization and strengthens their sense of belonging. In highly dynamic service environments, effective internal communication contributes to higher job satisfaction and staff engagement.

Furthermore, the attractiveness of tourism and hospitality employers is increasingly influenced by organizational values and corporate social responsibility initiatives. Contemporary employees, particularly younger generations, often seek to work for organizations whose values align with their own. As a result, sustainability practices, ethical business conduct, and community engagement have become important elements of the employer value proposition.

Professional development opportunities constitute another essential dimension of employer branding in the sector. The industry is often criticized for offering limited career advancement prospects, which can negatively affect its attractiveness as a long-term career choice. Organizations that invest in training, continuous learning, and career progression opportunities are more likely to attract and retain talented team members while strengthening their employer brand.

Finally, employer branding in tourism should not be viewed solely as the responsibility of the human resources department. Rather, it should be considered a collective organizational process involving managers, supervisors, and frontline employees. Since employees serve as ambassadors of the organization and directly influence external perceptions of the employer, building a strong employer image requires consistent actions and shared commitment across all organizational levels (Kizi, 2025).

3. Methodology, results and discussion

In order to explore employer branding practices in the hospitality sector, semi-structured interviews were conducted with managers from hotels operating in different market segments along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. The interviews were carried out between 10 and 20 May 2026. A total of five managers participated in the study. Their profiles are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Profile of the respondents

Participant	Job position	Category	Location
1	Quality Manager	3 stars	Resort
2	Human Resources Manager (HRM)	5 stars	Resort
3	Front Office Manager (FOM)	4 stars	Resort
4	Human Resources Manager (HRM)	4 stars	Resort
5	Hotel Manager	4 stars	City hotel

Source: The authors

The interviewed participants represent a group of professionals in different management positions. The respondents work in hotels with categories, ranging from 3 to 5 stars. The establishments are representative of midscale to upscale segments of the market. The sample includes resort and city hotels located on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast. Overall, this diverse group contributes to a broader understanding of employer branding practices in the sector.

The interview took between 15 to 30 minutes. The questionnaire was composed of five main questions. They are:

Q1. How would you describe your organization's employer brand? What values and messages do you aim to communicate to current and future employees?

Q2. What specific practices do you apply to attract and retain employees? And which of them do you think have the strongest impact? (e.g., training, bonuses, flexible working hours, accommodation, career development, etc.)

Q3. How do you communicate your employer brand to potential candidates? Do you use social media, employee referrals, partnerships with universities, etc.?

Q4. What challenges do you face in building a positive employer brand in the tourism sector? How does seasonality in tourism affect your HR policies/ towards your employees?

Q5. In your opinion, which practices should be developed in the future in order to improve the employer brand in the hotel sector along the Black Sea coast?

The responses show a largely consistent understanding of employer branding as a combination of a positive work environment, professional development opportunities, and strong interpersonal relationships. Participants frequently mention values such as professionalism, teamwork, respect, responsibility, and employee well-being, indicating that these elements are for them the core of their employer value proposition. Respondent 1 emphasized employee satisfaction and work-life balance, arguing that organizational success is related to employee engagement. Similarly, participants 2 and 4 highlighted fairness, mutual respect, and opportunities for professional growth as key messages communicated to both current and future employees. Respondent 5 accentuated on employees as ambassadors of the hotel brand, highlighting the importance of trust, support, and a sense of belonging within the organization. In contrast, Respondent 3 noted that the seasonal nature of employment makes it difficult to establish and consistently communicate organizational values. Overall, the findings suggest that employer branding in the surveyed hotels focuses on people-oriented values, despite the difficulties associated with seasonal tourism.

The analysis indicate that hotels rely on a mix of financial and non-financial practices to attract and retain employees. The most frequently mentioned ones are fair compensation, performance-based bonuses, training opportunities, career development, and the provision of favorable working conditions. Respondent 1 highlighted the importance of accommodation, meals, and company transport. This is a specific need for resort hotels that often employ seasonal staff. Similarly,

respondents 4 and 5 emphasized onboarding programs, continuous training, and opportunities for internal promotion, suggesting that career development is an important component of their employer branding strategy. Several participants also mentioned a positive working environment, with manager 2 saying that it is having a stronger impact than material benefits alone. For the interviewed people employee retention is the result of a broader combination of financial rewards, professional growth opportunities, and supportive workplace relationships. It can be concluded that hotels seek to balance immediate economic incentives with long-term development and engagement practices in order to strengthen employee loyalty.

Hotels use various channels to communicate their employer brand including employee referrals, partnerships with educational institutions, and job advertisements. Several respondents highlighted collaborations with tourism schools such as the College of Tourism in Varna. Employee recommendations were also considered a particularly valuable recruitment channel due to the trust they generate among candidates. While social media was mentioned, respondents 4 and 5 say that it is used primarily for promoting the hotel and its services rather than for direct recruitment.

The analysis show that the main challenge in building a positive employer brand in the tourism sector of the Black Sea coast is seasonality, which contributes to high workforce turnover, short hiring cycles, and difficulties in maintaining stable teams. Participants emphasized that the dynamic and competitive nature of the industry, combined with peak-season workload, makes it harder to attract and retain qualified staff. Some managers also mentioned the need for continuous recruitment and training each season, often without certainty that employees will return. In addition, expectations of younger workers such as Gen Z regarding pay, flexibility, and rapid career progression were identified as a further challenge.

According to the five managers, future improvements in employer branding in the Black Sea hotel sector should focus primarily on strengthening employee retention and reducing the negative effects of seasonality. A key recommendation is the development of more stable, year-round employment opportunities, including innovative solutions such as cooperation between summer and winter resorts to enable seasonal staff rotation, as noted by respondent 1. The managers also highlighted the importance of investing in employee development, training, and long-term career pathways in order to reduce the need for repeated seasonal recruitment. In addition, more flexible compensation systems and differentiated pay for returning staff were suggested. Several participants focused on the need for stronger collaboration with schools and universities, as well as more authentic employer branding through real employee experiences rather than promotional messaging. Overall, the analysis point to a shift towards more sustainable, people-centered HR practices as a key direction for improving employer branding in the region.

4. Discussion

It can be summarized that the practices for developing employer branding in Black Sea coastal tourism are very people-centred, focusing on values such as teamwork, respect, and employee well-being, but they are also shaped by the problems of seasonality. The findings show that hotels combine a range of HRM practices, including fair compensation, bonuses, training, and career development, to attract and retain employees, although high turnover continues to limit long-term effectiveness. Employer branding practices are primarily implemented through interpersonal and institutional channels, particularly employee referrals and cooperation with colleges and universities where tourism is studied, while social media plays only a supplementary role in recruitment.

Conclusion

The findings confirm that employer branding has evolved beyond its traditional recruitment function and is increasingly recognized as a strategic component of human resource management in tourism and hospitality organizations. These findings support previous research suggesting that effective employer branding depends on the integration of both tangible and intangible elements of the employee value proposition. At the same time, the study highlights the specific challenges faced by tourism organizations operating in coastal destinations. Seasonality remains the most significant obstacle to building a stable and attractive employer brand, contributing to workforce turnover, repeated recruitment cycles, and difficulties in maintaining organizational culture. The findings suggest that addressing these challenges requires a shift from short-term staffing solutions toward more sustainable human resource strategies focused on employee retention and long-term engagement.

Another important finding concerns the communication of the employer brand. While social media is used to support organizational visibility, hotels continue to rely heavily on staff referrals and partnerships with educational institutions. This underlines the importance of authentic work experiences and internal organizational culture in shaping external employer reputation.

The study also indicates that the future development of employer branding in Black Sea coastal tourism should focus on creating year-round employment opportunities, strengthening cooperation between industry and educational institutions, expanding professional development programs, and implementing innovative retention practices. Such measures may help reduce labor shortages while enhancing employee satisfaction and organizational commitment.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. The research is based on a relatively small sample and focuses exclusively on hotels belonging to hotel chains. Future research could include independent hotels, other tourism subsectors, and employees' perspectives in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of employer branding practices in the tourism industry. Overall, the

results suggests that employer branding represents a valuable strategic tool for tourism organizations seeking to improve employee attraction and retention, strengthen service quality, and achieve sustainable competitive advantage in an increasingly challenging labor market environment.

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