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How much does an employer's attractiveness matter to youth employment? Evidence from a developing country

Employee
attractiveness
and youth
employment

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Abstract

Purpose – Drawing on the contemporary literature and the theory of employer attractiveness, the authors aimed to examine key antecedents and consequences of employer attractiveness by proposing functional hypotheses and relationships between some endogenous variables.

Design/methodology/approach – Using the quota-cum-purposive sampling method, the unit of analysis selected for this study was millennials aged 18–35 years and working in the hospitality, travel, tourism and leisure (HTTL) sectors for the last two years. A total of 218 responses were collected in three months (June–August 2022). The data were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM).

Findings – For young employees, company recruitment behaviour, company image and source credibility are significantly and directly related to company attractiveness. The relationship between company image and employee word of mouth (WOM) was significantly positive. Company recruitment behaviour was found to significantly influence employee commitment. Company attractiveness was found to be directly related to young employees' WOM about the company and commitment to it.

Originality/value – The study establishes the significance of company attractiveness because a company's success largely depends on the company's ability to attract and retain a talented and skilled workforce. Moreover, the present study provides much-needed insights to policymakers and regulators that can help the policymakers define and implement favourable policies to promote and protect the country's job market and offer directions to youth employment.

Keywords Company attractiveness, Youth employment, Word of mouth, Commitment, Company image

Paper type Research paper

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Introduction

How much attention do particular companies get from job seekers and young employees? To what extent does company attractiveness affect the employment of youths who are digital natives? How can a company retain its competent and talented young employees? These questions point to the key challenges that companies of different sizes and business volumes are facing these days. These challenges may have become more daunting after the proliferation of smart devices, digital channels and social media platforms and their frequent use by young job seekers to obtain information regarding opportunities to start their professional careers and by employees to search for better employment. To manage these challenges strategically, research (cf. Hussain *et al.*, 2022) has identified company attractiveness and image/reputation as the most important components of a company's human resource (HR) strategy.

The idea of "employer attractiveness" is strongly tied to the idea of "employer branding" (Kashive and Khanna, 2017). Company image/reputation builds company attractiveness and is a key factor affecting job seekers' decisions to join a company and the current employees' decisions to stay with the company (Schaarschmidt *et al.*, 2021). The theory of employer attractiveness, which identifies the different factors influencing employees' views of their employers and the subsequent impact of these views on employees' attitudes and behaviours in the workplace (Ritz and Waldner, 2011; Nápoles *et al.*, 2016), serves as the theoretical underpinning for this study. This theory acknowledges that there are many factors at play when employees evaluate their employers and that these evaluations greatly impact their general involvement and productivity at work (Ritz and Waldner, 2011). Nonetheless, the theory of employer attractiveness is founded on the idea of anticipatory psychological contracts, with a focus on internally perceived employer attractiveness (Dassler *et al.*, 2022). In Dassler *et al.*'s (2022) understanding, this theoretical framework has been used to characterise aspects of employer attractiveness and reflects how prospective employees view the job opportunities offered by companies of different sizes and business volumes.

Company or employer attractiveness includes factors that prompt aspiring and existing employees to choose or stick to a suitable employer or company (Nápoles *et al.*, 2016). Information sources and channels are available to explore and learn about various companies. These information sources are divided into formal and informal sources (Hussain *et al.*, 2022; Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). Formal or traditional sources include companies' official websites, employment agencies and local media. Informal sources, on the other hand, include social media platforms, company employees and word of mouth (WOM) from friends and networks (Finneran and Kelly, 2003; McDonald and Thompson, 2016). Informal sources of information are considered more reliable and trustworthy than formal sources. In particular, Pekkala and van Zoonen (2022) found that social media is a credible source of information regarding employment opportunities in specific companies or organisations. Especially in the retail, hospital, travel and tourism industries, Keeling *et al.* (2013) found that informal communication regarding job opportunities, such as through WOM, is important for new job seekers and existing employees.

The scope of the present study was companies (e.g. start-ups, small and medium enterprises) within the hospitality, travel, tourism and leisure (HTTL) sector in Kazakhstan. The present study was conducted for four reasons. The first was the existing *context deficit*. A detailed literature review revealed that none of the previous studies that have examined company or organisational attractiveness was conducted in the Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan. Prior research (e.g. Dorce *et al.*, 2021) has argued that individuals with different cultural backgrounds usually have different attitudes towards a company or employer and it may thus be prudent to examine the antecedents and outcomes of company attractiveness in various cultural settings or contexts.

The second reason that the present study was conducted was the existing *industry deficit*. Most previous studies targeted universities and large companies, including multinational corporations and public sector organisations with massive resources, examining the factors influencing or contributing to their attractiveness and images/reputations (cf. Cordes and Vogel, 2023; Ahamad and Saini, 2022). Little is known in this regard about resource-constrained firms, such as small and medium-sized enterprises and start-ups within the HTTL sector. This industry deficit poses several challenges to both industry practitioners and researchers. For example, practitioners' capacity to make wise decisions and create successful strategies for the company is constrained by the lack of empirical research. Consequently, practitioners will rely on intuition or anecdotal information in the absence of empirical data, which can result in biased or poor conclusions. The absence of empirical research in the HTTL industry is also a concern for scholars because it prevents further advancement of knowledge and comprehension in this area.

The third motivation for the present study was the *analysis unit*. Contemporary research (e.g. Mostafa, 2022; Presley *et al.*, 2018) has largely considered the opinions of university students or those with job pursuit intentions/behaviours (e.g. Cooper *et al.*, 2020; Hussain *et al.*, 2022) and how they see and consider company attractiveness. Few studies have examined the views and opinions of young mid-career employees. In the present study, the analysis unit was young mid-career employees, particularly the Gen Zers and millennials working at various companies in the HTTL sector. Previous studies have also considered external candidates' perceptions of a company's reputation (Mostafa, 2022). The present study examined companies' internal attractiveness for youth employment.

The fourth motivation for the present study was the selection of the HTTL sector. In 2019, the Kazakh government approved a seven-year strategic plan for developing the tourism and hospitality industry and positioning Kazakhstan as one of the 50 most attractive countries for travel in the world by 2025 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). The plan includes providing incentives to the HTTL industry and improving the citizens' economic status and well-being by developing new tourist destinations that can create new jobs and by upskilling the country's HRs (OECD, 2020). The initiatives and incentives provided to the HTTL sector and the recent spate of digitalisation, automation and augmentation in the country motivated the HTTL sector to invest in and undertake various transformation and restructuring practices with the underlying purposes of increasing the efficiency of the business processes in the sector, increasing the image of companies, streamlining the recruitment process and increasing employee productivity and commitment. After all, attracting and retaining young and competent employees is an unrelenting challenge for many companies (Styvén *et al.*, 2022).

Given the aforementioned research gaps, the present study had a multifold purpose. Firstly, we aimed to contribute to the recruitment and HR management literature in the HTTL sector by examining the job-related challenges that young employees face. The behaviours and opinions of young employees, especially those at the early stages of their careers (not the managerial-level employees, who have already established themselves in their careers), were focussed on in the present study because young employees consider employers attractive based largely on parameters such as the possibilities that they offer for professional advancement and the training and development programmes, work-life balance and supportive workplace culture that they provide (cf. Dassler *et al.*, 2022). This differs from the managerial-level employees, who consider pay, perks, job security and the company's general standing and stability (Dassler *et al.*, 2022). Secondly, drawing on the contemporary literature (cf. Ma *et al.*, 2022; Younis and Hammad, 2020; Ahamad and Saini, 2022) and the theory of employer attractiveness, we aimed to examine the key antecedents and consequences of company attractiveness by proposing useful hypotheses and relationships between some endogenous variables. The unit of analysis selected for the present study was millennials

aged 18–35 years who were digital natives and working in companies in the HTTL sector in Kazakhstan. According to the Eurasian Research Institute (2021), over 53% of the Kazakh population (10.3 million out of 19.17 million) are children and youths, many of whom are digital natives. These digital natives will significantly affect government policies in the coming decades (Eurasian Research Institute, 2021). Thus, soliciting the opinions of youths on youth employment made sense and the results of the present study could serve the interests of the larger population segment and could be generalised.

The research questions below were proposed.

- RQ1. To what extent does a company's reputation or attractiveness influence young employees' decisions to continue or discontinue employment?
- RQ2. What are the key factors influencing the attractiveness of companies in the HTTL sector?
- RQ3. How does the attractiveness of the companies in the HTTL sector affect young employees' tendency to speak well of the company (positive WOM) and commitment to them?

The findings of the present study have several implications at the micro and macro levels and will benefit Kazakhstan's fast-developing service sector, especially the tourism and hospitality industry. At the micro level, the study findings will establish the significance of company attractiveness for youth employees in Kazakhstan because a company's success largely depends on its ability to attract and retain a talented and skilled workforce. This will provide tangible benefits to Kazakh companies by enabling them to deliver quality service to their customers, reducing their employee turnover, improving their image and increasing their profitability. At the macro level, the trends of globalisation and digitalisation and the competition created by information and communication technologies require countries with huge tourism potential, such as Kazakhstan, to revisit and define effective marketing and promotion strategies/policies that can improve their global image and help them attract companies, tourists and highly skilled migrants. The findings of the present study can provide much-needed insights to policymakers and regulators that can help them define and implement favourable policies to promote and protect the country's job market and provide directions for youth employment.

Next, we provide a review of the contemporary literature and explain the antecedents and consequences used in the theoretical model. Section 3 provides the conceptual model and hypothesis development for this study. Sections 4 and 5 present the study methods and findings. Finally, section 6 and 7 discuss the study's implications, limitations, future research agenda and conclusion.

Literature review

Theory of employer attractiveness and young employees

The concept of "employer attractiveness" has been extensively discussed in various fields, including vocational behaviour (Soutar and Clarke, 1983), management (Gatewood *et al.*, 1993), applied psychology (Collins and Stevens, 2002), communication (Bergstrom *et al.*, 2002) and marketing (Ewing *et al.*, 2002). Employer attractiveness is associated with the benefits that a potential employee envisions to obtain whilst working for the concerned company, organisation or employer (Berthon *et al.*, 2005, p. 156). The theory of organisational or employer attractiveness, according to the Encyclopaedia of Management Theory (2013), identifies the degree to which a person believes a company to be a desirable site to work or the general desire a person has to work for a company. This idea focusses on how companies portray themselves as appealing employers in order to recruit and retain employees (Dassler

et al., 2022). It emphasises the importance of both external business branding initiatives and internal attractiveness as seen by present personnel. According to the literature, “the power that draws applicants’ attention to focus on an employer brand and encourages existing employees to stay” (Bakanauskiene *et al.*, 2016, p. 7) is another description of an employer or organisational attractiveness.

Company/organisational attractiveness is defined as the extent to which an individual perceives the company/organisation as a desired place to work (Aiman-Smith *et al.*, 2001) or a generally positive perception of working for the company (Rynes *et al.*, 1991). Thus, applicants’ impressions of a prospective employer (i.e. attractiveness of the organisation) are important for employer success in attracting job applicants (e.g. Albinger and Freeman, 2000). However, Mostafa (2022) presented company attractiveness as a two-dimensional construct: external attractiveness and internal attractiveness. External attractiveness, as discussed above, concerns external candidates’ or stakeholders’ perceptions of an organisation as a great place to work. Internal attractiveness, on the other hand, concerns the current employees’ or internal stakeholders’ perceptions of a company (Table 1 summarises the literature on company attractiveness).

Styvén *et al.* (2022) divided the factors that may account for a company’s attractiveness into five major domains: economic value, development value, application value, social value and interest value. The *economic value* domain includes monetary or financial benefits such as salary and job security. The *development value* domain includes motivation, recognition, career development and prospects for future employment. The *application value* domain includes acceptance and belonging and an opportunity to guide and teach others in the company. The *social value* domain includes a reasonably good social working and collaborative environment and relations with one’s colleagues and management. Finally, the *interest value* domain includes a good work environment and the company’s extensive use of its employees’ creativity. Whilst examining perceived organisational attractiveness, Maier *et al.* (2022) found that workspace design or creative working environment positively influences organisational attractiveness.

Company image

Researchers agree that company, organisational or employer image is one of the important predictors of organisational attractiveness (Hussain *et al.*, 2022; Younis and Hammad, 2020; Chi *et al.*, 2018). Company image is defined as how people perceive a company, including its values, organisational culture, practices, logo, etc. (Susanna, 2019). It also includes the company’s staff, job attributes and employment working conditions that job candidates recall (Cable and Turban, 2001). Recruitment researchers seek out narrations or accounts of the personal experiences of people who have worked or are still working at a company because a company’s image is often based on personal and hearsay experiences about it and a company’s image may affect job seekers’ interest in working for the company (Turban and Keon, 1993).

According to Highhouse *et al.* (2009), company image is the psychological representation of a company by individuals or prospective stakeholders. It is cognitive in nature (especially for the elementalistic and/or affective/holistic approach to company employment image). Tom (1971) referred to company image as knowledge about the company, and Barber (1998) stated that it is the general impression of a company held by those outside it. This image or impression affects how people both within and outside the company view its values, behaviours, promotional schemes and benefits. Company image overwhelmingly incorporates (1) objective-related company information (including culture norms, standard operating procedures and company policies/code of conduct), (2) job information (e.g. job-specific attributes and duties and responsibilities) and (3) information about the diverse types of people working horizontally and vertically in the company (Cable and Turban, 2001). Thus, company image is a significant predictor of company attractiveness (Younis and Hammad, 2020).

Citation	Industry	Context	Variables	Major findings
Kisse and Büttgen (2015)	Recruitment websites	Germany	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate image • Employer attractiveness 	This study reveals crucial elements that influence employer attractiveness on social media, including information-seeking behavior, self-congruity with the company and employees, and corporate image. Tests on corporate-controlled and independent social media platforms show no impact, therefore information credibility isn't a worry. The findings show that a positive corporate image fully mediates the impact of self-congruity and data from social media on perceptions of an employer's attractiveness and application intentions
Ma et al. (2022)	Recruitment market	China	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Corporate green image • Employer attractiveness 	According to the report, a company's green image helps it stand out as an employer. Susceptibility to normative influence moderates the link between corporate green image and green perceived value, and green perceived value partially mediates this relationship. The association between corporate green image and perceived value is larger for job candidates who are more susceptible to normative influence. However, independent of the corporate green image, job seekers with poor receptivity to normative influence have low levels of assessed value for the environment. This article offers implications for academia and business practice as well as a theoretical framework for implementing the circular economy at the firm level
Younis and Hammad (2020)	University student	Egypt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Employer image • Corporate image • Organisational attractiveness 	The results demonstrate that organizational attractiveness is significantly positively impacted by both employer and business image. Additionally, it has demonstrated how social identity consciousness modifies the model in part

Table 1.
Summary of the literature on company attractiveness

(continued)

Employee attractiveness and youth employment

Citation	Industry	Context	Variables	Major findings
Kaur and Dubey (2014)	Conceptual	–	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Source credibility Organizational attractiveness 	As they are most closely related to the job, employee reviews posted on company-independent websites will offer more accurate information about both the positive and bad aspects of the organisation and the job, including both. Furthermore, it is anticipated that information offered by present employees will be more credible in terms of knowledge and reliability. Realistic information from a reliable source provides the job applicant the option of self-selecting themselves out in the event that the needs of the position and organisation don't match their own
Ahamad and Saini (2022)	University student	India	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Information content Employer attractiveness 	Content and valence of the information have different impacts depending on the information source. Depending on the information's source, information content, such as symbolic versus instrumental content, had a different impact on employer attraction, with the company-independent source having a bigger impact than the company-dependent source
Dauth <i>et al.</i> (2021)	Multinational corporations	Germany, Netherlands, UK, Switzerland	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Top management team nationality diversity Firm's efforts to promote diversity Employer attractiveness for foreign job seekers 	Top management team nationality diversity is positively associated with firms' employer attractiveness for foreign job seekers; Firm's efforts to promote diversity mediate the relationship between Top management team nationality diversity and employer attractiveness
Styvén <i>et al.</i> (2022)	Tourism and hospitality	Sweden	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Employer attractiveness (Interest value; Economic value; Development value; Social value; Application value) Intention to stay Intention to recommend 	Creativity and innovation at work is an important driver for employees to stay with their current employer; this factor also influences their intention to recommend employment at the company to others; economic value in terms of total compensation is important for employees, as it affects intention to stay and recommend

Table 1.

Company recruitment behaviour

A company's fair recruitment and selection procedures (Kumar *et al.*, 2021) regardless of whether it is performed internally or externally, is divided into three stages: (1) generating applicants; (2) maintaining the applicants' status and (3) influencing the applicants' job choices (Barber, 1998). In particular, for companies to attract young people with the required skill set and knowledge, recruiters must treat young job applicants professionally and in a friendly way (Chapman *et al.*, 2005).

Source credibility

Dowling (1988) has defined source credibility as the believability of the perceptions of a company by a certain source, usually an earlier employee of the company. Source credibility has also been referred to as the perceived trustworthiness and credibility of the source (Hadinejad *et al.*, 2022; Hussain *et al.*, 2021; Roy *et al.*, 2013). Tham *et al.* (2013) identified three different sources of messages that other people may use as bases for their choices and preferences for a specific action, such as the decision to go to a tourist destination or apply for a job in a company, depending on how credible the sources are: organic, induced and real. Organic sources, such as online reviews, comments posted by consumers, WOM and published literature (e.g. news articles), are considered highly credible (Dickinger, 2011). Induced sources, such as recommendations and messages from marketers or marketing companies, are viewed as less credible. Finally, real sources are comments or information based on consumers' actual experiences and are, therefore, considered credible.

Employee word of mouth

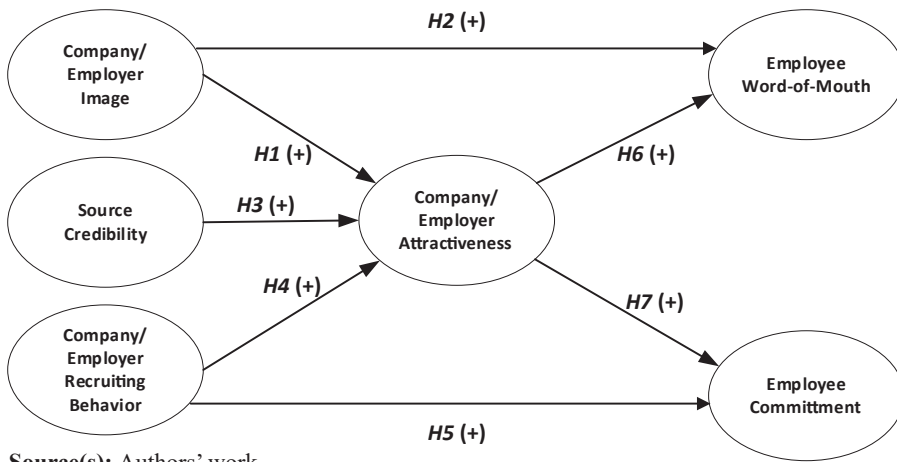
Employee WOM is defined as 'the process of staff and former employees communicating information and opinions about the organisation, both within and beyond their social networks' (Keeling *et al.*, 2013, p. 2). Employee WOM is considered an employee referral programme. Breaugh (2008) and Breaugh and Starke (2000) stated that the employee referral programme is a well-recognised employer-initiated recruitment method in which existing staff attempt to find and recommend potential candidates for a position in the company from their own social networks. According to Cambridge Dictionary's (2012) definition of the programme, the company pays the employee whose recommendee gets hired. Besides referral programmes, general WOM in recruitment includes both employees and non-employees (Van Hoye and Lievens, 2009).

Employee commitment

Employee or organisational commitment is exhibited by employees' regular work attendance, full-day work and willingness to do extra work and embrace the organisation's vision and mission (Boonsiritomachai and Sud-On, 2022; Imran *et al.*, 2017). Employee commitment refers to existing employees' positive intentions regarding the company and extra efforts at doing their jobs well because they trust the organisation's values (Porter *et al.*, 1974). However, Neininger *et al.* (2010) stated that commitment is viable only when there is mutual trust between the employer and employee, thus creating mutual values and leading to mutual efforts at successful employee engagement with the company and promotion of the company's profitability and longevity. In all the three categories of commitment (affective, normative and continuance commitment), the employees voluntarily bind themselves to the organisation (Meyer *et al.*, 2004). This can be explained by past studies' finding that there is a positive relationship between employees' commitment to a company and their early experiences in the company (Meyer *et al.*, 2012).

Conceptual model and hypothesis development

The theoretical model that was used in the present study is shown in Figure 1. By examining the three central antecedents of company attractiveness (company image, company



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Figure 1.
Theoretical model

recruitment behaviour and source credibility) and the consequences of a company's attractiveness to its young employees, we hypothesised seven relationships. The theoretical model also suggests that company attractiveness is positively associated with employee WOM about the company and commitment to it (i.e. the higher a company's attractiveness, the higher its employees' WOM about it and commitment to it). We controlled the theoretical model for the effects of age, gender, income, experience and qualification.

Company image and company attractiveness

The underlying assumption of the aforementioned hypothesis is based on Barbaros's (2020) opinion that a company's image may influence its attractiveness to its employees. Examining the association between company image and attractiveness, Kissel and Büttgen (2015) found a direct and significant relationship: a positive company image is necessary to improve a company's attractiveness. Thus, we formulated hypothesis 1 (H1).

H1. The higher a company's image, the greater its attractiveness.

Company image and employee word of mouth

WOM includes referrals, advocacy intention and recommendations. The proliferation of smart devices and social media channels and the development of online communities have formalised WOM communication. Consequently, companies have started to worry about negative WOM, which, according to Gildin (2022) and Chen and Law (2016), can damage a company's image. Harsono (2015) sought to determine how institutional image and trust produce positive WOM amongst university students and found that positive institutional image and trust significantly and positively bring about positive WOM. Thus, we developed the hypothesis below.

H2. The better the company image, the more positive the employee WOM for the company.

Source credibility and company attractiveness

As mentioned earlier, source credibility is the degree to which a message's source is considered providing accurate and truthful information. Thus, emphasis is placed on the

source of a message and not on the message itself (Cheng *et al.*, 2021). Source credibility and information quality are closely associated terms and are considered crucial characteristics of online information (Cheng *et al.*, 2021). For job applicants, the sources of information regarding a company they are interested in joining may include the company's website and social media pages, its current employees or acquaintances and even a personal visit to the company premises to gain first-hand knowledge about the company. These sources influence job seekers' reactions towards the information (Kaur and Dubey, 2014) and can improve or worsen their opinions about the company's attractiveness. Thus, the relationship between source credibility and company attractiveness is logical.

Using a 2×2 experimental design method, Van Hoye and Lievens (2005) examined the correlation between recruitment-related information sources and organisational attractiveness. They found that two of the major credible information sources, recruitment advertising and WOM, improve a company's attractiveness. Thus, we came up with H3.

H3. The higher the credibility of the source of a positive account regarding a company, the greater the company's attractiveness.

Company recruitment behaviour and company attractiveness

A company's recruitment behaviour refers to the procedures that a company adopts to attract job seekers or applicants. Recruitment is performed using various channels, such as online and print media. Recently, the use of digital platforms such as social media and company websites has played a decisive role in attracting talent and generating applicants. We thus posit that the effectiveness of a company's recruitment using its own website and other digital channels is a crucial determinant of its ability to increase its attractiveness and acquire qualified applicants (Williamson *et al.*, 2003). A seminal article on a study conducted by Turban and Dougherty (1992) reports that applicant perceptions of a company's recruitment behaviour had the strongest influence on attraction in the study. Thus, evidence suggests that a company's recruitment process, conducted either internally or externally, significantly influences job seeker attraction to the company. Thus, we developed the hypothesis below.

H4. The better a company's recruitment behaviour, the greater its attractiveness.

Company recruitment behaviour and employee commitment

A company's recruitment/induction process (i.e. hiring someone for a specific job) is not a one-time activity but a continuous process that includes career planning, on-the-job training, promotions, access to opportunities and rewards and recognitions. This process reduces the chances of losing employee commitment, lowers employee turnover and promotes employee commitment to the company. Thus, it may be concluded that the ultimate purpose of the recruitment/induction process is to retain the employee for a long time (Brown and Roloff, 2011). Employee commitment to the company is one of the consequences of an effective recruitment process (Alansaari *et al.*, 2019). According to Armstrong and Shimizu (2007), employees' organisational commitment is linked with the organisation's recruitment and hiring philosophy and employment policies. Thus, we developed the hypothesis below.

H5. The better a company's recruitment behaviour is, the higher its employees' commitment to it.

Company attractiveness and employees' positive word of mouth about the company and commitment to it

According to Uen *et al.* (2011) and Moser (2005), WOM or referral is an informal source of information that can provide more accurate accounts of companies and the jobs they seek to

fill, thus allowing job seekers to find the best prospective employers according to their interests and skills. Compared with formal sources such as company websites, prior research (e.g. Allen *et al.*, 2004) has found that informal recruitment sources have stronger effects on company attractiveness. Realising how a company's attractiveness or branding could generate positive WOM from its employees, prior research (Charbonnier-Voirin *et al.*, 2017; Uen *et al.*, 2015) has also found a positive relationship between company attractiveness and positive WOM.

When employees are committed to the company, they are proud to be part of it and go beyond their regular job responsibilities to promote the good of the company (Dögl and Holtbrügge, 2014). A company's reputation or attractiveness is thus relevant not only to attract talented and skilled job seekers but also to retain qualified employees (Dögl and Holtbrügge, 2014). Employee commitment should be seen equally across the company, from the top management to the newest recruit (Tüzüner and Yüksel, 2009). Company attractiveness can be achieved, for example, by offering creative and innovative work, which will increase employee retention and commitment and will also influence the employees' intention to recommend employment at the company to others (Styvén *et al.*, 2022). Thus, we developed the hypothesis below.

H6. The greater a company's attractiveness, the more positive its employees' WOM for it.

H7. The greater a company's attractiveness, the higher its employees' commitment to it.

Methods

Survey instrument, sampling technique and data collection

Based on the adopted scale items, a survey instrument was designed and distributed for data collection. The self-reported questionnaire consisted of two parts: demographics (age, education, gender and profession) and six latent constructs (attractiveness, commitment, image, WOM, source credibility and company recruitment behaviour). It was pre-tested on a group of middle-level managers who were representative of the portion of the millennial generation working in HTTL companies in Almaty City, Kazakhstan. The purpose of this pre-test or pilot test was to gather feedback on and make improvements to the instrument, to make sure that the study participants would understand the items or questions and to eliminate potential sources of bias (Choudrie and Dwivedi, 2005; Shaikh *et al.*, 2022). The feedback received was mostly about the length and format of the survey instrument and the comprehension of the survey items (i.e. how clear and understandable they were). The survey instrument was modified and adjusted based on this feedback.

To examine the research model and test the hypothesised relationships, data were collected using two methods. Firstly, an online version of the survey instrument was developed and uploaded to the Webropol platform and the link to it was shared with the people working in the HTTL sector across Kazakhstan. Secondly, to increase the response rate, the services of a professional marketing company were obtained to recruit study participants considering the study scope and objectives and to collect responses.

Drawing on earlier research (cf. Alamoudi *et al.*, 2023), we chose study participants using the quote-cum-purposive sampling method. According to Teddlie and Yu (2007), this mixed-method sampling strategy is regarded as a thorough and well-proven type of stratified sampling. By applying this technique, we were able to properly address our research scope and objectives. For example, quota sampling ensured that the sample reflected the diversity of the employees in the HTTL industry and made it possible to comprehend the research topic more thoroughly. Subsequently, purposive sampling targeted individuals who were likely to offer insightful opinions on the research issue by focussing on those falling under the specified age categories and who had relevant work experience within the HTTL industry.

So that the sample would truly represent the HTTL sector in Kazakhstan, at least 10% of the sample was allocated to each sector within the HTTL domain (travel companies, transport/logistic companies, tour operators, hotels and restaurants and public/private/on-demand taxi services). To justify the use of purposive sampling (Sekhon and Grant, 2021), the study participants were asked two questions at the outset: whether they belong to the millennial or Generation Z cohort (or whether their age was within the range of 18–35 years) and whether they had been working in the HTTL sector in Kazakhstan at least for the last two years. According to Oh *et al.* (2023), the millennials are those who were born within the years 1981 and 1996 and the Gen Zers are those who were born within the years 1997 and 2012. A total of 218 valid responses were received, and they were analysed using partial least squares structural equation modelling (PLS-SEM).

SmartPLS was used as a data analysis tool for various reasons. Firstly, compared with other statistical applications, such as Covariance based structural equation modeling (CB-SEM), SmartPLS is known for its ability to handle smaller sample sizes. In contrast, CB-SEM is frequently employed for larger sample numbers and when confirmatory analysis is the main objective, using tools like AMOS, MPLUS or R software. Secondly, SmartPLS has a user-friendly interface and requires less statistical and coding knowledge. Thirdly, SmartPLS is also appropriate for exploratory studies and is intuitive enough to be applicable to a range of models, both simple and complex.

Measurement scales

Scales from previous studies were used to measure the related variables: Highhouse *et al.*'s (2003) six-item questionnaire on company attractiveness, with adequate reliability ($\alpha = 0.835$); Lemmink *et al.* (2003) four-item company image measurement scale, with adequate reliability ($\alpha = 0.759$); Powell's (1984) eight-item company recruitment behaviour scale, with acceptable reliability ($\alpha = 0.860$); Cable and Turban's (2001) three-item source credibility scale adapted from Hovland and Weiss (1951), with strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.819$); Van Hoye's (2008) three-item employee WOM scale, with strong reliability ($\alpha = 0.888$, above the threshold); and Porter *et al.*'s (1974) six-item employee commitment scale.

All the items were duly adapted and modified as per the requirements of the present study. A 5-point Likert scale (1 = disagree, 5 = agree) was used for the responses. So that the Kazakh respondents would understand the survey instrument, it was translated into Russian from English. To ensure the accuracy of the translation, back or reverse translation was done, as advised by Brislin (1970, 1980). That is, the Russian version of the survey instrument was again translated into English and the original and second English versions were compared.

Descriptive statistics

Table 2 shows the detailed demographic statistics (age bracket, gender, income, employment status, work experience, nature or field of company and education–job match), which were analysed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) 23. Regarding the feedback rate, most of the completed questionnaires were received from male (52%) respondents aged 18–30 years (91%). Most were employees (61%) with 1–3 years' work experience (59%) and who had an income of ₸1,000,000–5,000,000 (65.1%). Most of the respondents were working in a transport or logistics company (35%). Others were working in a hotel or restaurant (22%), a travel company (20.6%), a taxi service company such as Yandex or Uber (12%) or a foreign or local tour operator (10.6%). Fifty-eight percent of the participants stated that their job matched their educational background and 83% reported that their job was their main income source.

The obtained data may be biased if they are non-normally distributed. For the present study, the obtained data were normally distributed based on the standard ± 3 skewness and kurtosis (Trochim *et al.*, 2016). Using SmartPLS, we subsequently found that all the excess kurtosis and skewness values were lower than 3, indicating that the obtained data were accurate and

Characteristics	N (%)	Employee attractiveness and youth employment
<i>Gender</i>		
Male	113 (51.8)	
Female	105 (48.2)	
Total	218	
<i>Income</i>		
1,000,000–5,000,000 ₺	142 (65.1)	
5,000,001–10,000,000 ₺	52 (23.9)	
10,000,001–20,000,000 ₺	16 (7.3)	
Over 20,000,001 ₺	8 (3.7)	
Total	218	
<i>Employee Status</i>		
Employee	133 (61)	
Entrepreneur (own business)	40 (18.3)	
Employer	21 (9.6)	
Retired	–	
Self-employed	20 (9.2)	
Unemployed	4 (1.8)	
Total	218	
<i>Experience</i>		
1–3 years	128 (58.7)	
4–6 years	60 (27.5)	
7–9 years old	20 (9.2)	
≥10 years	10 (4.6)	
Total	218	
<i>What is the field of activity of your company?</i>		
Travel company	45 (20.6)	
Transport company (logistics)	77 (35.3)	
Tour operator (foreign/local)	23 (10.6)	
Hotel/restaurant	48 (22)	
Transportation (Taxi etc.)	25 (11.5)	
Total	218	
<i>Does your basic education match your current occupation?</i>		
Yes	127 (58.3)	
No	91 (41.7)	
Total	218	
<i>Does your current employment is the main source of your income?</i>		
Yes	180 (82.6)	
No	38 (17.4)	
Total	218	

Table 2. Respondents' information

normally distributed. The variance inflating factor (VIF) was also assessed to determine if there was a multicollinearity problem amongst the constructs used. We found that all the VIF values were less than <5, indicating that the present study had no multicollinearity problem.

Results

We used PLS-SEM to test the study hypotheses because it is employed for prediction purposes and maximises the explained variance (Ringle *et al.*, 2015), which is consistent with our research questions. Two-step measurement and structural model assessments were performed at 5,000 bootstrapping iterations (Hair *et al.*, 2014; Henseler *et al.*, 2015). We followed the recommendations of Hair *et al.* (2014) regarding the measurement model. The model includes the following components.

Individual item reliability

To determine the reliability of all the questionnaire items, we evaluated the factor loadings of the studied constructs (Hulland, 1999). According to Field (2013) and Barclay *et al.* (1995), the loadings should not be lower than 0.5. Table 3 shows that all the item loadings in the present study were above the standard range of 0.706–0.888. Thus, all the questionnaire items had adequate reliability.

Item	Description	Loading
<i>Company attractiveness</i> (Highhouse <i>et al.</i> , 2003; $\alpha = 0.835$, CR = 0.883, AVE = 0.602)		
CA1	For me, the company will be a good place to work	0.743
CA2	The company is attractive to me as a place to work	0.808
CA3	I will consider joining this company only as a last resort	Removed
CA4	I will exert a great deal of effort to retain my employment in this company	0.706
CA5	The company's employees must be proud that they are part of the company	0.837
CA6	There are probably many people who would like to work for this company	0.780
<i>Company image</i> (Lemmink <i>et al.</i> , 2003; $\alpha = 0.759$, CR = 0.862, AVE = 0.675)		
CI1	The company provides enough opportunities for career growth	0.868
CI2	The company motivates its employees to fill the vacant positions within it	0.839
CI3	The company assigns many responsibilities from the beginning	0.755
CI4	The job involves various tasks	Removed
<i>Company recruitment behaviour</i> (Powell, 1984; $\alpha = 0.860$, CR = 0.896, AVE = 0.589)		
CRB1	The company's HR department is able and willing to answer my questions	Removed
CRB2	The company's HR department is interested in me as a recruitment candidate	0.779
CRB3	The company's HR department knows my background	0.782
CRB4	The company's HR department seems to understand my point of view	0.746
CRB5	The company's HR department tried hard to recruit me for a job position	0.786
CRB6	I got to know what the company would be like as a place to work	0.802
CRB7	The interview was relaxed and spontaneous	Removed
CRB8	Overall, the interview went extremely well	0.705
<i>Source credibility</i> (Cable and Turban, 2001; Hovland and Weiss, 1951; $\alpha = 0.819$, CR = 0.892, AVE = 0.734)		
SC1	The information is credible because its source works for the company	0.816
SC2	The information that the source gives me is more reliable than the information that other sources give me	0.866
SC3	I can trust what the source tells me about the company and the job	0.887
<i>Employee word of mouth</i> ($\alpha = 0.810$, CR = 0.888, AVE = 0.726)		
WOM1	I will recommend to others working in the hospitality, travel, tourism and leisure sector as an employer	0.817
WOM2	Based on my experiences with the company, I will encourage others to apply for a job in it	0.849
WOM3	I will recommend this company to my family and friends who are looking for a job	0.888
<i>Employee commitment</i> (Porter <i>et al.</i> , 1974; $\alpha = 0.916$, CR = 0.933, AVE = 0.665)		
EC1	I am willing to put in a great deal of effort, beyond what normally is expected of an employee, to help the company succeed	0.798
EC2	I find that my values are very similar to the company's values	0.808
EC3	I am proud to tell others that I am part of this company	0.830
EC4	The company really inspires me to do my best in my job	0.818
EC5	I am extremely glad that I decided to join this company	0.852
EC6	I really care about the fate of this company	0.786
EC7	This is the best company that one can join	0.817

Table 3.

Measurement model

Note(s): CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted; HR = human resources

Internal reliability

Composite reliability (CR) was assessed to ensure internal reliability. Unlike Cronbach’s alpha values, CR values are unbiased. We found 0.819–0.933 CR values in the present study, meeting the threshold value of 0.7 (Hair *et al.*, 2011). Table 3 presents all the study variables’ CR values. Regarding the average variance extracted (AVE [R^2]; e.g. convergent validity), it is measured to evaluate the related constructs (Hair *et al.*, 2006). The AVE values in the present study ranged from 0.589 to 0.734 (see Table 2), meeting the threshold value of 0.50 as recommended by Chin (1998).

Assessment of variance explained

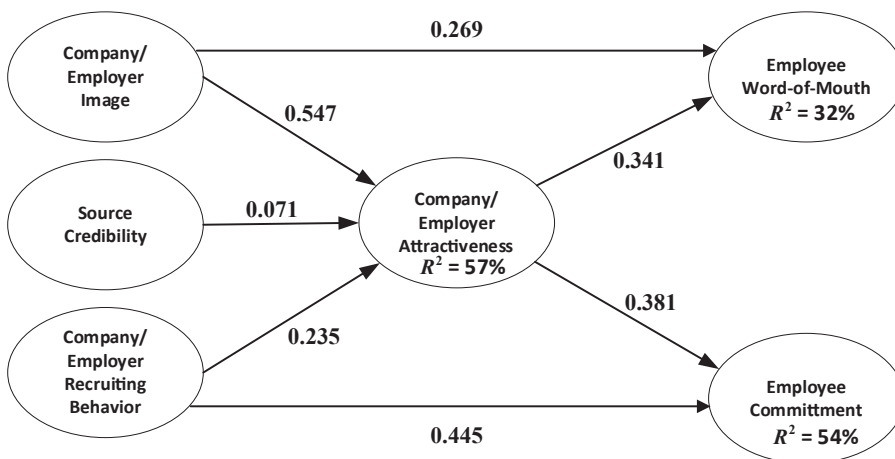
R^2 shows the goodness of fit of data to a model. The R^2 values include the explained accuracy whilst assessing the standard values, as recommended: substantial value (0.75), moderate value (0.50) and weak value (0.25) (Hair *et al.*, 2014; Henseler *et al.*, 2015). The moderated R^2 value of company attractiveness was 57%, that of employee commitment was 54% and that of employee WOM was 32%. Table 4 shows that all these values are below the moderate standard value recommended by Hair *et al.* (2014), thus indicating that the data fit the model (see Table 4 and Figure 2).

Discriminant validity

Due to the criticism of Fornell and Larcker’s (1981) discriminant validity (DV) analysis, we evaluated the heterotrait-monotrait ratio of correlations (HTMT) to assess the DV. According to Henseler *et al.* (2015), the obtained HTMT ratios must be less than 0.9. Table 5 shows that the obtained HTMT ratios were below the recommended threshold, indicating that the study variables had DV.

Latent variable	Variance explained (R^2)
Company Attractiveness	56.5%
Employee Commitment	54.4%
Employees Word-of-Mouth	31.5%

Table 4.
R-Square adjusted
coefficients



Source(s): Authors’ work

Figure 2.
Structural model

Structural model

To test the structural model and to conduct direct path analysis, we bootstrapped the model, as recommended by Hair *et al.* (2014) and Henseler *et al.* (2009). The results of the structural model direct-path coefficients are shown in Table 6. For the results of the hypothesised relationships between the constructs, H1 (company image → company attractiveness; $\beta = 0.547$, $t\text{-value} = 7.762$, $p = 0.000$), H2 (company image → employee WOM; $\beta = 0.269$, $t\text{-value} = 2.489$, $p = 0.013$), H4 (company recruitment behaviour → company attractiveness; $\beta = 0.235$, $t\text{-value} = 2.850$, $p = 0.004$), H5 (company recruitment behaviour → employee commitment; $\beta = 0.445$, $t\text{-value} = 6.688$, $p = 0.000$), H6 (company attractiveness → employee WOM; $\beta = 0.341$, $t\text{-value} = 3.462$, $p = 0.001$) and H7 (company attractiveness → employee commitment; $\beta = 0.381$, $t\text{-value} = 5.389$, $p = 0.000$) showed significantly positive relationships between the constructs and were thus supported. H3 (source credibility → company attractiveness; $\beta = 0.071$, $t\text{-value} = 1.035$, $p = 0.301$) did not show a significantly positive relationship between the constructs and was thus not supported.

Discussion

Our study contributed to the emerging literature on management and HR management by developing seven key hypothesised relationships to determine whether company image, source credibility and company recruitment behaviour promote company attractiveness and whether company attractiveness produces positive employee WOM and develops employee commitment to the company.

Theoretical contributions

The present study contributed to the theory of employer attractiveness by integrating source credibility, recruitment behaviour and corporate image into the theory as important independent variables determining firm desirability for young job seekers. The study also provided a thorough grasp of the underlying dynamics by looking at how different variables interact. For instance, according to our research (Kissel and Büttgen, 2015), there is a significant positive relationship between a company’s image and its appeal to young job seekers ($r = 0.547$, $p 0.05$). This finding suggests that a company’s image or reputation is a

Table 5.
Discriminant
validity (HTMT)

Variables	Attractiveness	Commitment	CRB	Image	Source credibility
Employee Commitment	0.727				
Company Recruitment Behaviour (CRB)	0.696	0.754			
Company Image	0.880	0.775	0.723		
Source credibility	0.582	0.827	0.793	0.623	
Employee WOM	0.639	0.800	0.689	0.657	0.852

Table 6.
Structural model
assessment

Hypotheses	Relationship	β	$T\text{-value}$	$p\text{-value}$	Decision
H1	Attractiveness → Commitment	0.381	5.389	0.000	Supported
H2	Attractiveness → WOM	0.341	3.462	0.001	Supported
H3	CRB → Attractiveness	0.235	2.850	0.004	Supported
H4	CRB → Commitment	0.445	6.688	0.000	Supported
H5	Image → Attractiveness	0.547	7.762	0.000	Supported
H6	Image → WOM	0.269	2.489	0.013	Supported
H7	Source credibility → Attractiveness	0.071	1.035	0.301	Not supported

key factor in this appeal. Similarly, direct and strong relationships were found between company recruitment behaviour ($\beta = 0.235, p < 0.05$) and source credibility ($\beta = 0.071, p < 0.05$) and between the two and company attractiveness (Van Hoye and Lievens, 2005; Turban and Dougherty, 1992). The study results suggest that a company's recruitment behaviour is one of the key factors affecting the company's attractiveness to young job seekers. This finding is in line with that of an earlier study (cf. Kashive and Khanna, 2017) that looked at the engagement of a group of young students. The results of that study support the notion that an organisation's attractiveness is significantly influenced by its recruitment practices and activities.

Concerning source credibility, although it was found not to be as strongly related to company attractiveness as company image and recruitment behaviour were, it was still found to be significant. Therefore, regardless of whether the source of a positive account about a company is organic, induced or real (Dickinger, 2011), it is an important factor in developing company attractiveness. The relationship between company image and employee WOM ($\beta = 0.269, p < 0.05$) was found to be significantly positive (Gildin, 2022), which means that the better a company's image, the more positive the employee WOM about the company.

Young employees' commitment to a firm and employee WOM were two significant outcome factors investigated in the present study in connection with employer attractiveness. Company attractiveness was found to be directly and strongly related to young employees' commitment to the company ($\beta = 0.381, p < 0.05$) and employee WOM about the company ($\beta = 0.341, p < 0.05$). This is in line with previous research findings (i.e. Charbonnier-Voirin *et al.*, 2017; Uen *et al.*, 2015; Dögl and Holtbrügge, 2014). Contemporary research (e.g. Gildin, 2022) considers WOM the most powerful form of communication. Thus, companies need to increase their attractiveness to increase their young employees' positive WOM about them.

Managerial implications

The findings of the present study have some practical implications. First, they established the importance of company attractiveness in retaining young employees and reducing employee turnover, which is considered high in the tourism and hotel industries (Amankwaa *et al.*, 2022). In the present study and especially in the context of youth employment, we identified three key factors contributing to the development of company attractiveness: company image, company recruitment behaviour and source credibility. Researchers (e.g. Lemmink *et al.*, 2003) have argued that a good image is a valuable asset for any organisation; thus, the HTTL sector should create a distinctive and unique brand image to attract and retain qualified employees. This is even more important for newly started or start-up companies in the hospitality and tourism sectors, which need to improve their image to attract and retain qualified and skilled employees so that they could efficiently meet the consumer and market demands and remain profitable.

In the context of Kazakhstan's culture, the three aforementioned fundamental variables (company image, recruitment behaviour and source credibility) are essential. A positive company image is fostered by aligning the workplace culture with Kazakhstan's cultural values of harmony and respect (Aubakirova *et al.*, 2016). Greater employee satisfaction results from tailoring recruitment practices to local norms, which ensures a fit with Kazakhstan's cultural expectations. Building source credibility through trustworthy sources is consistent with Kazakhstan's principle of trust and encourages openness within the workplace culture. These elements work together to foster a workplace environment that values Kazakhstan's cultural heritage and encourages employee engagement and retention. Nonetheless, companies in developing countries, such as Kazakhstan, can improve their attractiveness and image by adopting a three-pronged strategy.

Firstly, they should invest in their employees and increase their well-being so that they would help promote a positive image of the company and would become more committed to the company. Secondly, companies, including those in the HTTL sector, should proactively manage their online presence on various social media platforms to thwart new threats to their image/reputation, which usually arise on such platforms from disgruntled employees or competitor companies. Specifically, companies should develop and implement an explicit social media policy and train and empower its frontline employees so that they could be deployed quickly and without any friction to safeguard the company image/reputation and increase the company's attractiveness. Third, in the current age of metaverse, the use of new technologies to increase companies' attractiveness and image cannot be ignored. Each company in the HTTL sector should invest in developing a virtual spokesperson with an impressive appearance, voice and personality (Laroche *et al.*, 2021) to represent it virtually, especially to lure young job applicants and retain its existing workforce.

The opinions of young and managerial-level employees could differ for various reasons when considering employer or company attractiveness parameters. For example, in the understanding of Nguyen *et al.* (2021) and Dassler *et al.* (2022), young employees or workers, especially those just starting their careers, usually place a high priority on possibilities for professional advancement, training and development programmes, work–life balance and a supportive workplace culture. On the other hand, managerial-level employees, who have gone farther in their careers, could be more concerned about pay, perks, job security and the company's general standing and stability. They might be more worried about long-term security and internal career advancement. Overall, the priorities and perspectives of young and managerial-level employees, which affect how they perceive how attractive or appealing a company is, differ.

In addition, an increasing number of employees in the hospitality industry are favouring the use of sustainable ways and means at their companies to fulfil their social responsibility (Murray and Ayoun, 2010) and sustainable or green practices have become the core of the HR, business and marketing strategies. According to Forbes (2021), no issue is more important than climate change. This is truer in the case of the HTTL sector because its success is considered highly affected by environmental degradation. Policy interventions could provide major relief in this regard. For example, the government should promote sustainable practices by mandating the implementation of a corporate social responsibility culture in the country. These practices at the government level will improve the image/reputation and attractiveness not only of companies but also of the country.

Similar to company image, company recruitment behaviour and associated practices, which are performed at various stages, starting from initial recruitment to on-the-job training and intrinsic rewards, promotions and fair treatment play significant roles in creating company attractiveness. Thus, the companies in the HTTL sector in Kazakhstan must optimise their recruitment and staffing practices by tactfully balancing and considering the local culture and norms and the integration of new technologies, such as social media and artificial intelligence tools, into their recruitment practices.

Source credibility is another factor that can help companies increase their attractiveness. Here, much emphasis must be placed on promoting the credibility of organic and real sources, which include the comments of and recommendations provided by the company's employees and by consumers with some level of interaction with the company.

It was found in the present study that amongst the outcome variables, increasing company attractiveness will provide two major benefits to the company. Firstly, employee commitment to the company will increase, which will reduce the turnover ratio. Secondly, the employees will likely provide positive WOM for the company. The underlying objective here is to reduce the cost associated with employee turnover, which is considered high in the hospitality industry (Jaworski *et al.*, 2018).

Limitations and future research directions

The present study had some limitations that could be managed with our proposed future research agenda. The first limitation was that we obtained the opinions and viewpoints only of mid-career employees about the internal attractiveness of a company. Future research should adopt a holistic approach whilst examining and comparing both the internal and external attractiveness parameters (antecedents and consequences) amongst both aspiring and present employees. Second, the study data were collected only from the HTTL sector, ignoring the other subsectors contributing to the economy and labour market. Future studies should expand the research scope and examine the importance of company attractiveness amongst various industry players, including manufacturing and service companies. Third, the findings of the present study have limited generalisability. We suggest that future studies replicate our suggested theoretical model in other central Asian states and conduct cross-cultural studies, thereby increasing the generalisability of the findings. Fourth, the data collection methods employed in the present study were based on a pre-tested survey instrument and a cross-sectional design. Therefore, the study results may be biased due to the responses received from the participants coming from different HTTL subsectors. Therefore, it would be plausible to conduct a study that focusses only on specific fields, including retail firms or the hospitality and tourism industry. The participant sample from a specific field will provide reasonable responses about the field, which can be generalised.

For other recommendations for future research, the use of metaverse and virtual worlds is another promising avenue that has started to influence various subsectors of the economy. Many companies have started using avatars as major components of their management, business and marketing strategies. To enhance and solidify company attractiveness and increase the company's image locally and internationally, and given the major shifts in the behaviours, attitudes and lifestyles of younger employees, the HTTL sector could use the virtual spokesperson as a recommendation agent to represent the companies virtually. Future research can thus examine the benefits and challenges of using the virtual spokesperson and its efficacy in increasing company attractiveness.

Finally, as the war for talent is ongoing, higher education institutions have a greater responsibility to develop the necessary employability skills amongst new graduates to serve the labour market better. [Kornelakis and Petrakaki \(2020\)](#) consider the recent digital revolution wave the key factor generating a demand for new skills whilst outdated other skills across a wide range of sectors, including the HTTL sector. Future research should therefore examine how universities in developing countries have undertaken a systematic approach to embedding employability skills in the curriculum.

Conclusion

Drawing on recent literature and the theory of employer attractiveness, we contributed to the literature on recruitment and HR management in the HTTL industry by examining the employment-related difficulties experienced by young workers, particularly those just starting out in their careers in a developing country. We analysed the factors affecting company attractiveness and its effects by putting forth hypotheses and correlations between important variables. We concentrated on millennials working in Kazakhstan's HTTL industry due to their prominence as digital natives and their possible influence on governmental policies.

The present study made important theoretical advances. It integrated source credibility, recruitment practices and corporate image as significant independent variables in a novel way to provide a thorough understanding of their combined influence. The study emphasised the importance of recruitment behaviour and of contacts between recruiters and prospective and actual young employees. It also confirmed the strong connections between company

attractiveness, young employees' commitment to the organisation and employee WOM. These contributions, taken together, deepen the understanding of the variables impacting firm attractiveness for young workers and underline the significance of creating and maintaining a positive corporate image and employing efficient hiring procedures to promote successful employee outcomes. The study's conclusions have ramifications for Kazakhstan's government, regulators and service sector, notably the tourist and hospitality sectors and can help in creating marketing and promotion plans that can successfully lure businesses, tourists and skilled migrants and guide the drafting of favourable policies for the country's labour market and youth employment.

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