
When Employer Branding Alone Isn't Enough: The Mediating Power of Candidate Satisfaction in Talent Attraction.

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Abstract

Purpose. In a context shaped by globalization, accelerated digital transformation, and an intensifying war for talent, employer branding has emerged as a strategic lever for organizations seeking to attract scarce and valuable competencies. While the direct effects of employer branding on organizational attractiveness are well documented, the intermediary and contextual mechanisms through which this influence unfolds remain insufficiently understood, particularly within specific sectoral and national settings such as the Moroccan call center industry. This article addresses this gap through a sequential mixed-methods design, combining an exploratory qualitative study with a confirmatory quantitative study.

Design/methodology/approach. The study was conducted at the Concentrix call center in Agadir, Morocco, a sector characterized by high workforce turnover and intense competition for talent, through a sequential mixed-methods design combining an exploratory qualitative study with a confirmatory quantitative study, the former informing the construction of the latter.

Sample. The exploratory phase relied on thirteen semi-structured interviews conducted with recently hired employees, analyzed through computer-assisted thematic analysis using NVivo 11, combining within-case and cross-case coding. The confirmatory phase relied on a structured questionnaire administered, following an exhaustive sampling strategy, to employees and candidates of the same organization, analyzed through Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), entirely implemented within the R statistical environment using the psych, REdaS and semnr packages.

Findings. The qualitative phase identified three structuring themes, employer branding (reputation, organizational culture, compensation, communication), candidate satisfaction (clarity of information, recruitment process experience, feedback interactivity, expectation matching), and talent attraction (value compatibility, development opportunities, value proposition, organizational engagement), together with a transversal contextual theme, labor market conditions, acting as a moderating factor. The quantitative phase statistically confirmed these qualitative insights: the direct effect of employer branding on talent attraction proved weak and non-significant ($\beta = 0.018$; $t = 1.24$; $p = 0.216$), whereas the indirect effect mediated by candidate satisfaction was robust and highly significant (employer branding, satisfaction: $\beta = 0.052$; $t = 4.37$; $p < 0.001$; satisfaction, attraction: $\beta = 0.061$; $t = 5.12$; $p < 0.001$), raising the explained variance from $R^2 = 58\%$ to $R^2 = 72\%$. The integration of control variables and the labor market moderator raised the model's explanatory power to $R^2 = 94\%$, with all interaction

coefficients between labor market conditions and satisfaction dimensions proving significant (coefficients ranging from 0.187 to 0.447; $p < 0.05$).

Conclusion. Taken together, these results show that employer branding does not attract talent directly: its influence operates almost entirely through the satisfaction candidates experience during the recruitment process, a mediating mechanism whose strength is itself shaped by prevailing labor market conditions. For organizations, and for call centers in particular, this implies that investing in the coherence and quality of the candidate experience yields more than communication effort alone, and that retention and attraction strategies should be adjusted to the state of the labor market.

Originality/value. This research offers one of the few empirical investigations of employer branding grounded in the Moroccan call center sector, an industry that remains scarcely represented in the international literature on this topic. Methodologically, it illustrates a complete sequential mixed-methods protocol, from inductive thematic analysis to confirmatory PLS-SEM modeling entirely conducted in the open-source R environment, offering a transparent and reproducible alternative to proprietary structural modeling software. Theoretically, it provides robust empirical support for the full mediating role of candidate satisfaction and for the moderating role of labor market conditions in the employer branding–talent attraction relationship.

Keywords: employer branding; talent attraction; candidate satisfaction; labor market conditions; mixed methods; thematic analysis; PLS-SEM; R software; call centers; Morocco.

1. Introduction

Globalization, the acceleration of digital transformation, and the intensification of what Michaels, Handfield-Jones and Axelrod (2001) famously termed the « war for talent » have placed human resource management at the very core of organizational competitiveness. Organizations no longer simply search for skilled employees; they must attract, convince, and retain them in an environment where human capital constitutes a durable and difficult-to-imitate source of competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Wright, Dunford and Snell, 2001). Within this context, employer branding has progressively established itself as a central construct in human resource management research, defined as the bundle of functional, economic, and psychological benefits associated with employment and identified with the employing company (Ambler and Barrow, 1996).

Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) distinguish two complementary dimensions of employer branding: an external dimension, oriented towards attracting prospective candidates, and an internal dimension, oriented towards engaging and retaining current employees. This duality invites scholars and practitioners to consider employer branding not as a one-off communication exercise, but as a relational and experiential construct, whose effectiveness ultimately depends on the coherence between the promise communicated to the labor market and the experience actually lived by stakeholders (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016).

While the direct effect of employer branding on organizational attractiveness has been extensively documented through the lenses of organizational attractiveness theory (Turban and Greening, 1997) and the symbolic-instrumental framework (Lievens and Highhouse, 2003), the intermediary mechanisms that traverse this relationship remain comparatively underexplored. Two such mechanisms appear particularly relevant in light of recent literature. The first is candidate satisfaction throughout the recruitment process, whose potential mediating role has been suggested by Moroko and Uncles (2008) and Edwards (2010), without however being fully operationalized and empirically tested within a specific organizational and national context. The second, more structural, concerns the state of the labor market, which classical labor economics theories of job search (Rees, 1973) and segmented markets (Doeringer and Piore, 1971) suggest might condition the strength with which employer branding signals actually influence candidates' decisions. More recently, Gandasari, Tjahjana, Dwidienawati and Ichsan (2024) confirmed that employer brand remains a decisive driver of candidates' intention to apply, while Dassler, Khapova, Lysova and Korotov (2022) called for greater attention to

how employer attractiveness is experienced not only by prospective candidates but also by current employees, a distinction further substantiated by Thao, Kim and Kim (2024).

The call center sector offers a particularly relevant empirical setting to explore these mechanisms, owing to structurally high staff turnover and intense competition among employers for access to comparable candidate profiles (Azzouzi, 2020). This sector occupies an economically significant position in several Moroccan regions, yet remains scarcely studied within the international employer branding literature, which is largely dominated by North American and European empirical settings. The Moroccan context, marked by its own specific labor market dynamics, cultural configurations, and organizational practices, therefore constitutes a valuable and underexplored research site.

This article addresses the following central research question: how is employer branding perceived and experienced by call center employees in Morocco, and through which experiential and contextual mechanisms does it contribute to talent attraction? To answer this question with both depth and statistical rigor, the study adopts a sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018), in which an exploratory qualitative phase informs the construction of a conceptual model that is subsequently tested through a confirmatory quantitative phase.

The contribution of this article is threefold. Theoretically, it proposes an integrated reading of employer branding that combines communicational (signaling theory), perceptual (organizational attractiveness theory), relational (brand promise coherence), and contingency (labor market) perspectives, while empirically testing the mediating and moderating mechanisms that link them. Methodologically, it illustrates a complete and transparent mixed-methods protocol, combining software-assisted thematic analysis (NVivo 11) with PLS-SEM modeling entirely conducted in the open-source R environment, an approach still rarely documented in detail in the human resource management literature. Empirically, it provides original data from an underrepresented Moroccan and call center context, broadening the geographical and sectoral diversity of employer branding research.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on employer branding, organizational attractiveness, signaling theory, candidate satisfaction, and labor market contingency, leading to the formulation of the research hypotheses. Section 3 presents the conceptual model. Section 4 details the mixed-methods research design. Section 5 reports the findings of the qualitative exploratory study. Section 6 reports the findings of the quantitative confirmatory study. Section 7 discusses these findings in light of the literature, and

Section 8 concludes with theoretical and managerial implications, limitations, and avenues for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Employer branding: origins, dimensions, and the employer promise

The concept of employer branding, introduced by Ambler and Barrow (1996), transposes brand marketing principles to the domain of human resources, treating employment itself as a product to be marketed to a target audience of prospective candidates. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) further conceptualize employer branding as operating across two interdependent registers: external employer attractiveness, which shapes candidates' application decisions, and internal organizational engagement, which shapes current employees' retention. This duality positions employer branding not as an isolated communication campaign, but as an integrated organizational device that engages the firm over the long term.

Schein (2010) situates employer branding within a broader understanding of organizational culture, conceived as a shared system of values, norms, and practices that shapes the organization's identity, both internally and externally. The resulting employer promise, according to Edwards (2010), is considerably more than a marketing slogan: it constitutes a visible and verifiable strategic commitment that structures the relationship between the organization and its internal and external stakeholders. When authentic, differentiated, and consistently delivered, this promise becomes a powerful tool for value creation, retention, and competitiveness; conversely, an unfulfilled promise produces the opposite effect, generating disillusionment and distrust among both candidates and employees (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016).

2.2. Organizational attractiveness: perceptual, symbolic, and instrumental approaches

Organizational attractiveness theory (Turban and Greening, 1997) constitutes a central theoretical framework for understanding talent attraction. This approach adopts a perceptual logic, according to which individuals do not select an organization solely on the basis of objective elements, but also, and primarily, on the basis of subjective attributes perceived through various communication channels, including overall

corporate reputation, social responsibility, ethical commitment, and the perceived quality of managerial practices.

This framework is enriched by the symbolic-instrumental attractiveness model proposed by Lievens and Highhouse (2003), which distinguishes two types of attributes shaping employer image: instrumental attributes, related to concrete and utilitarian aspects such as salary, job security, or working conditions, and symbolic attributes, which reflect intangible values allowing individuals to project themselves onto the organization on an identity level, such as prestige, innovation, or conviviality. This model highlights that candidates do not seek material advantages alone, but also a symbolic affinity with the organization, in terms of values, mission, and culture, an idea that resonates with the conceptualization of candidates as « career consumers » (Minchington, 2005), who select their future employer based on perceived image, online reputation, and experiences shared by others.

2.3. Signaling theory and recruitment communication

Signaling theory, introduced by Spence (1973) within the field of information economics, posits that under conditions of information asymmetry, parties holding an informational advantage must emit credible signals to influence the perceptions of less informed parties. Applied to recruitment, this theory suggests that organizations, aware that their true internal characteristics, culture, managerial practices, social climate, are not directly observable by external candidates, must rely on visible signals to reduce this uncertainty: employer certifications, employee testimonials, digital platform presence, or diversity labels.

Collins and Stevens (2002) demonstrate that early recruitment-related communication activities, particularly institutional advertising and proactive reputation management, strongly influence candidates' application intentions even before they encounter a specific job offer. However, not all signals carry equal weight: an effective signal must be costly to imitate for organizations that do not genuinely possess the qualities they claim to have. A personalized development pathway or a demonstrably engaged management style are, by nature, considerably harder to simulate than a mere promise stated in a job advertisement.

2.4. The mediating role of candidate satisfaction

While the direct effect of employer branding on organizational attractiveness is well documented, several scholars suggest the existence of indirect effects, mediated by the experience lived by the candidate throughout the recruitment process. Moroko and Uncles (2008) show that the most successful employer brands distinguish themselves less by the intensity of their communication than by the perceived coherence between promise and experience. Edwards (2010), in an integrative review of the employer branding and organizational behavior literature, argues that this coherence translates empirically into a state

of candidate satisfaction, which operates as an intermediary mechanism between brand perception and the candidate's actual decision to join the organization.

This mediation logic aligns with the methodological framework proposed by Baron and Kenny (1986), according to which certain relationships between variables can only be fully understood by incorporating the intermediary mechanisms that underlie them, an approach now commonly operationalized in structural equation models through the joint estimation of direct and indirect effects (Hair, Hult, Ringle and Sarstedt, 2021).

2.5. Labor market conditions as a contingency factor

Beyond organizational and experiential mechanisms, part of the labor economics literature invites researchers to consider the structural context within which candidates' decisions unfold. Segmented labor market theory (Doeringer and Piore, 1971) shows that professional opportunities are unevenly distributed according to economic conditions, creating zones of employment security and zones of precariousness. Job search theory (Rees, 1973) further argues that the availability of job openings directly influences candidate selectivity: in a constrained market, the opportunity cost of declining a job offer increases substantially, reducing the relative weight of employer branding considerations in the final decision.

Rynes, Bretz and Gerhart (1991) confirm, within the human resource management field, that organizational attractiveness is conditioned not only by intrinsic organizational characteristics, but also by the alternatives available on the market, while Highhouse, Thornbury and Little (2007) show that the weight of reputation in candidates' decisions increases as the number of available opportunities grows. This body of literature provides the theoretical foundation for introducing labor market conditions as a moderating variable within the structural model tested in this study.

2.6. Qualitative inquiry in human resource management research

Unlike quantitative studies, which seek to measure and generalize phenomena, qualitative research aims to explore, interpret, and make sense of the lived experiences of organizational actors (Miles and Huberman, 1994). According to Paillé (2007), qualitative inquiry allows researchers to open the « black box » of organizational processes and identify the subjective meanings individuals attribute to their work environment, making it particularly well-suited to the study of sensitive and contextual topics such as organizational attraction, job satisfaction, or corporate culture. It also plays a validating and confronting role between theoretical results

and empirical reality, revealing gaps, limitations, or tensions between theoretical models and observed practices (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013).

This study adopts an abductive reasoning approach (Mesly, 2015), a mode of inference particularly suited to exploring complex and unstabilized phenomena. Unlike deduction or induction, abduction generates hypotheses from singular empirical observations while mobilizing existing theoretical frameworks as anchoring points. This stance aligns with the position defended by Glaser and Strauss (1967), according to which theory is not simply discovered in the data but actively constructed by the researcher, within a constructivist epistemology where knowledge results from a close interaction between the researcher and the object of study.

2.7. PLS-SEM as a confirmatory analytical strategy

Methodologically, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) has established itself as a reference method in management sciences for testing theoretical models involving latent variables, mediation, and moderation relationships (Hair, Ringle and Sarstedt, 2011). This method offers the advantage of accommodating moderately sized samples and data that do not necessarily satisfy the multivariate normality assumption, unlike covariance-based approaches such as LISREL (Hair, Risher, Sarstedt and Ringle, 2019). While this method has long been associated with proprietary software such as SmartPLS, the development of specialized packages within the R ecosystem, such as *semnr* (Ray, Danks and Calero Valdez, 2022) or *plspm* (Sanchez, 2013), now allows the entire estimation, bootstrapping, and validation protocol to be conducted within an open-source, free, and fully reproducible environment (R Core Team, 2024).

It is at the intersection of these seven bodies of literature, employer branding, organizational attractiveness, signaling theory, satisfaction-based mediation, labor market contingency, qualitative inquiry, and PLS-SEM methodology, that the conceptual model and research hypotheses presented in the following section are situated.

3. Conceptual Model and Research Hypotheses

Building on the literature reviewed above, the conceptual model tested in this study mobilizes four latent constructs. Employer branding (EB) is operationalized through six dimensions: social value (SV), economic value (EV), development value (DV), perceived market values (PMV), reputation and external credibility (REC), and external employer attractiveness (EEA). Candidate satisfaction (CS) is operationalized through four dimensions: clarity of information provided (CIP), recruitment process experience (RPE), interactivity and feedback (IF), and

expectation matching (EM). Talent attraction (TA) is operationalized through three dimensions: value proposition (VP), organizational engagement (OE), and value compatibility (VC). Finally, labor market conditions (LMC) are introduced as a moderating variable acting on the relationship between candidate satisfaction and talent attraction.

On this theoretical basis, three principal hypotheses are formulated:

H1: Employer branding exerts a direct, positive, and significant effect on talent attraction.

H2: The relationship between employer branding and talent attraction is mediated by candidate satisfaction.

H3: Employer branding contributes positively and significantly to candidate satisfaction.

A fourth, transversal hypothesis postulates that labor market conditions significantly moderate the strength of the relationship between candidate satisfaction and talent attraction (H4).

4. Research Methodology

To address the research question with both interpretive depth and statistical rigor, this study adopts a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018), combining an exploratory qualitative phase with a confirmatory quantitative phase, both conducted at the Concentrix call center in Agadir, Morocco. The qualitative phase, detailed in Section 4.1, served to generate the conceptual model and refine its constructs through grounded empirical insight. The quantitative phase, detailed in Section 4.2, served to statistically test the relationships suggested by the qualitative exploration.

4.1. Qualitative phase: design, sampling, and data analysis

The qualitative phase was conducted among employees recently integrated into the Concentrix call center in Agadir. This methodological choice reflects a deliberate intention to access authentic and situated narratives, allowing an in-depth exploration of the representations, expectations, and lived experiences of these employees during a critical phase of their professional integration, a phase particularly conducive to revealing potential discrepancies between organizational promises and perceived realities.

Thirteen semi-structured interviews were conducted until a satisfactory level of thematic saturation was reached, that is, until the final interviews no longer yielded substantially new thematic content. The sample displayed diversity in terms of gender, age, position held, and family situation, allowing for the capture of a plurality of viewpoints within the organization, as summarized in Table 1.

Participant	Gender	Age	Position held	Family status
R-1	F	27-30	Customer advisor	Married
R-2	F	23-26	Project lead / Supervisor	Single
R-3	M	23-26	Customer advisor	Single
R-4	F	31-34	Customer advisor	Single
R-5	F	35-38	Quality controller	Single
R-6	F	27-30	Quality controller	Single
R-7	M	23-26	Customer advisor	Single
R-8	M	35-38	Team manager	Single
R-9	F	23-26	Quality controller	Married
R-10	M	27-30	Team manager	Single
R-11	F	35-38	Project lead / Supervisor	Married
R-12	M	27-30	Team manager	Married
R-13	F	23-26	Customer advisor	Single

Table 1. Profile of qualitative study participants.

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview guide organized around three main themes: employer branding, candidate satisfaction, and talent attraction. This guide was not intended to impose a rigid structure, but to ensure coherent coverage of the essential themes related to the research question, while allowing space for a co-constructive dynamic of meaning with each participant. Open and general questions favored the emergence of dense, expressive narratives, often charged with emotional content, capturing subjective dimensions rarely accessible through standardized instruments.

Interviews were fully transcribed and then subjected to a thematic analysis assisted by NVivo 11 software. The treatment followed two complementary and successive stages. A within-case analysis first identified, within each theme, participants' verbatims, grouped into sub-themes through node coding, then aggregated into main themes. A cross-case analysis then sought to highlight causal relationships and interdependencies between the central concepts of the study,

based on the recurrence of associations observed across participants' discourses, building a systemic understanding of the studied phenomenon. Consistent with the heuristic nature of qualitative inquiry, this analysis did not aim to produce definitive conclusions, but to formulate propositions capable of guiding subsequent quantitative validation.

4.2. Quantitative phase: instrument, sample, and analytical protocol under R

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire administered to employees and candidates of the Concentrix call center in Agadir, following an exhaustive sampling strategy. Each latent construct was operationalized through items measured on Likert scales, derived from validated scales in the literature and adapted to the sectoral and national context of the study. The questionnaire also included sociodemographic variables, age, gender, marital status, position held, education level, and tenure, subsequently mobilized as control variables in the structural model.

The entire statistical treatment was conducted under R (version 4.x), in the interest of methodological transparency and full reproducibility of the analysis. The analytical protocol unfolded in four successive stages, each mobilizing specialized packages.

The first stage consisted of data import and preparation, using the `readxl` and `dplyr` packages, including missing value checks, recoding of sociodemographic variables, and the computation of univariate descriptive statistics (mean, median, standard deviation, skewness, kurtosis) for each item, using the `psych` package.

The second stage focused on scale purification, through principal component analysis with Varimax rotation, using the `principal()` function of the `psych` package, and the computation of factorial adequacy indices, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) index and Bartlett's test of sphericity, using the `REdaS` package.

The third stage consisted of the specification and estimation of the PLS-SEM model proper, using the `sempr` package (Ray, Danks and Calero Valdez, 2022), which allows the measurement model and the structural model to be defined declaratively, before estimating parameters through the PLS algorithm and conducting bootstrapping to test the significance of path coefficients.

The fourth and final stage consisted of evaluating the quality of the measurement model (composite reliability, average variance extracted, discriminant validity via the Fornell-Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio) and of the structural model (path coefficients, bootstrap t-statistics based on 5,000 resamples, p-values, and coefficients of determination R^2 for

endogenous variables), using the native functions of the *semnr* package, cross-validated with the *plspm* package (Sanchez, 2013).

5. Qualitative Findings

5.1. Employer branding: reputation, culture, compensation, and communication

The analysis of verbatims related to employer branding revealed four structuring sub-themes, summarized in Table 2.

Sub-theme	Illustrative verbatims
Corporate reputation	« The company's image plays a big role in our choice, especially what is said in the sector. » « I wanted to join a company recognized for its seriousness. » « What people say about us online has a real impact. »
Organizational culture	« Here, you can feel there is a real culture of mutual support. » « The atmosphere and values matter as much as the salary. » « The company genuinely values diversity and listening. »
Compensation	« Salary remains an essential criterion in my decision. » « What attracted me were the salary prospects. » « A good compensation package can make the difference. »
Communication	« I appreciated the transparency from the very first contact. » « They explained the missions clearly, which was reassuring. » « Their social media communication is engaging. »

Table 2. Aggregated verbatims for the « Employer Branding » theme (Source: QSR NVivo 11).

Corporate reputation emerged as a determining factor of talent attraction, with extracts emphasizing the influence of external discourse, social media, and organizational notoriety. These elements reflect the way in which socially constructed perceived image acts as a signal of credibility and trust, consistent with Spence's (1973) signaling theory and Collins and Stevens' (2002) findings on the role of early communication activities. Organizational culture was evoked through verbatims emphasizing mutual support, humanism, autonomy, and inclusiveness, reflecting candidates' search for a work environment coherent with their personal values, in line with the symbolic-instrumental distinction proposed by Lievens and Highhouse (2003). Compensation reflected explicit expectations around financial recognition and material benefits, perceived not only as an attraction factor but also as a tangible indicator of

organizational recognition. Communication, particularly upstream of the recruitment process, was widely valued for its clarity, transparency, and coherence across digital channels.

5.2. Candidate satisfaction: a four-dimensional mechanism

The second theme, candidate satisfaction, was structured around four dimensions, presented in Table 3.

Sub-theme	Illustrative verbatims
Clarity of information provided	« The information given during the interview was clear and precise. » « From the beginning, I knew what to expect. » « I had no bad surprises after being hired. »
Recruitment process experience	« The recruitment process was smooth and well organized. » « The time between stages was reasonable. » « I was kept informed about the progress of my application. »
Interactivity and feedback	« I appreciated receiving detailed feedback after the interview. » « The recruiters took the time to listen to my expectations. » « The feedback I received helped me better understand the role. »
Expectation matching	« The position matched exactly what had been announced. » « My expectations regarding the missions were met. » « The work environment matches what I was looking for. »

Table 3. Aggregated verbatims for the « Candidate Satisfaction » theme (Source: QSR NVivo 11).

The clarity of information provided highlighted the importance of transparency in initial communication: extracts reflect a positive perception when candidates have precise information about missions, working conditions, and organizational expectations, reinforcing their sense of trust. The recruitment process experience reflected participants' overall lived experience throughout the selection stages: reasonable delays, a warm welcome, and a smooth process all contributed to building a favorable impression of the organization. Interactivity and feedback underscored the importance of bidirectional exchanges and constructive feedback, with candidates particularly valuing interviews where their expectations were heard and where detailed feedback helped them better understand their fit with the proposed role. Finally, expectation matching referred to the alignment between the employer's promise and the reality experienced after integration; when the position, environment, and conditions matched initial

announcements, this translated into increased satisfaction and a strengthened organizational image.

Beyond these four recruitment-specific dimensions, interviews revealed an extension of satisfaction into daily working life. Several participants emphasized this point. One respondent summarized: « So far, my experience has been globally positive », while another specified: « The work is formative and allows me to collaborate with other departments, which strengthens my skills. » Adaptation to job constraints emerged as a sometimes demanding but rewarding process: « This position taught me to adapt quickly to a fast pace, and this ability now serves me in all my tasks. » Coherence between expectations and post-hiring reality was unanimously cited as a key driver of lasting satisfaction: « If I had to give a rating after being hired, I would say the promises were kept; I am fully satisfied and feel a real sense of belonging. »

5.3. Talent attraction: value compatibility, development, value proposition, and engagement

The third theme, talent attraction, was structured around four sub-dimensions, presented in Table 4.

Sub-theme	Illustrative verbatims
Value compatibility	« A well-perceived company naturally attracts more candidates. » « Online reviews strengthen or weaken our desire to apply. » « We can really feel a sense of cohesion among teams. »
Development opportunities	« Shared values create a strong sense of belonging. » « Knowing that the company invests in skill development motivates me to apply. »
Value proposition	« Social benefits play a decisive role. » « Performance bonuses are a strong motivating factor. » « A good package can make the difference, especially with a stimulating environment. »
Organizational engagement	« The information shared matched the reality I experienced. » « Exchanges with the recruiter were smooth and precise. » « Management is attentive and implements concrete actions. »

Table 4. Aggregated verbatims for the « Talent Attraction » theme (Source: QSR NVivo 11).

Value compatibility highlighted the central role of perceived image in the attraction process: notoriety, credibility, and external perception, notably through social media and word-of-mouth, constituted decisive signals in candidates' decision to apply or not. Development

opportunities were associated with a strong sense of belonging, as candidates sought an environment allowing them to envision a long-term future. The value proposition, including compensation, social benefits, and recognition, acted as a strong signal of valuation of accomplished work, while organizational engagement referred to the perceived quality of managerial support and concern for employee well-being.

5.4. Cross-case analysis: the virtuous loop between employer branding, satisfaction, and attraction

Cross-case analysis revealed strong and circular interactions among the three identified themes. The data first show that employer branding constitutes the initial foundation upon which candidates' perceptions and expectations are built, through two principal vectors: projected image, referring to the organization's perceived notoriety and credibility, and conveyed message, encompassing both formal and informal organizational communication. One participant illustrated the first vector: « When I saw how the company was perceived in the market, I became certain I was joining a stable and respectful environment. » Another illustrated the second: « What the company highlighted during recruitment, career prospects, team spirit, respect for commitments, is exactly what I experience today. »

This coherence between discourse and lived reality directly leads to candidate satisfaction, which in turn becomes, according to cross-case analysis, a driver of attracting new talent through an amplification effect. Participants' statements confirm this dynamic: « My positive experience is my best advertisement for the company; when people ask me whether I recommend working here, my answer is always yes. » This spontaneous diffusion of a positive image by employees plays the role of an amplifier, reinforcing external reputation and the organization's capacity to attract new talent, in line with the relational and self-sustaining dimension of employer branding theorized by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) and Berthon, Ewing and Hah (2005).

5.5. Labor market conditions as a transversal moderating factor

In-depth analysis of the interviews revealed a transversal dimension that emerged with particular force: labor market conditions. The results show that this structural factor acts as a moderating variable, conditioning the intensity of relationships between employer branding, candidate satisfaction, and talent attraction. Several participants expressed this idea clearly. One declared: « Honestly, in a period when job offers are scarce, we don't really have the luxury of comparing employers. What matters is getting a job, even if the company's image isn't perfect.

» This testimony highlights that, in a labor market characterized by high unemployment, employer branding signals lose relative weight in the decision to join an organization.

Conversely, when the labor market is more dynamic and hiring opportunities are numerous, candidates become more selective in their choices. One participant affirmed: « Today, in my field, there are many job offers. I can afford to look for a company that truly matches my values and respects its commitments. » Another added: « When you know you could find something elsewhere, you become more demanding. If reality doesn't match the company's discourse, you don't stay. » These statements illustrate that, in a context of strong labor demand, coherence between promise and reality takes on its full importance, thereby reinforcing the impact of employer branding and satisfaction on talent attraction.

6. Quantitative Findings

6.1. Descriptive statistics and scale quality

Examination of descriptive statistics for sociodemographic variables, obtained via the describe() function of the psych package, revealed a concentration of respondents within an intermediate age bracket (mean = 2.59 on a four-category ordinal scale; standard deviation = 0.80), a slight predominance of one gender category (mean = 1.41), and an overrepresentation of lower-level positions in terms of role held (mean = 1.61). Univariate normality tests, conducted via the Cramér–von Mises test, yielded consistently non-significant p-values across sociodemographic variables, confirming the absence of major departures from normality likely to compromise subsequent analyses.

Principal component analysis, conducted separately for each of the four constructs using the principal() function, confirmed the satisfactory psychometric quality of the retained measurement scales, as summarized in Table 5.

Construct	Cronbach's alpha	KMO index	Bartlett's test (p)
Employer branding (EB)	0.885	0.755	p < 0.001
Candidate satisfaction (CS)	0.803	0.845	p < 0.001
Talent attraction (TA)	0.916	0.825	p < 0.001
Labor market conditions (LMC)	0.902	0.880	p < 0.001

Table 5. Reliability and factorial adequacy indicators of the measurement scales (R output: psych::alpha, REdaS::KMOS, REdaS::bart_spher).

For all four constructs, Cronbach's alpha coefficients largely exceed the 0.70 threshold recommended by Nunnally (1978), while KMO indices, ranging from 0.755 to 0.880, fall within the « medium to good » to « meritorious » categories according to Kaiser's (1974) classification. Bartlett's test of sphericity proved highly significant for each construct ($p < 0.001$), confirming sufficient correlations among items to justify the pursuit of factor analysis. Principal component analysis applied to the « Employer branding » scale nonetheless revealed two items, EEA_1 and EEA_2, presenting high cross-loadings on several components simultaneously, reflecting an absence of discriminant validity; these items were removed from the final scale to strengthen its structural clarity.

6.2. Measurement model assessment

Estimation of the reflective measurement model, conducted via `estimate_pls()` from the `semnr` package, confirmed satisfactory composite reliability and average variance extracted (AVE) for all constructs, in line with the reference thresholds of 0.70 for composite reliability and 0.50 for AVE (Fornell and Larcker, 1981). Examination of the Fornell-Larcker criterion, complemented by the computation of Heterotrait-Monotrait (HTMT) ratios, further confirmed the absence of discriminant validity issues among the model's constructs, a necessary condition for interpreting structural relationships.

6.3. Structural model estimation: direct and indirect effects

Estimation of the baseline structural model, excluding control variables and the moderating variable, is presented in Table 6.

Tested relationship	Coefficient (β)	t (bootstrap)	p-value
EB \rightarrow TA (direct effect)	0.018	1.24	0.216
EB \rightarrow CS	0.052	4.37	< 0.001
CS \rightarrow TA	0.061	5.12	< 0.001

Table 6. Path coefficients of the baseline structural model, estimated through bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples (*R* output: `semnr::bootstrap_model`).

The direct relationship between employer branding and talent attraction proved weak and statistically non-significant ($\beta = 0.018$; $t = 1.24$; $p = 0.216$), with the explanatory power of the direct model remaining limited ($R^2 = 58\%$). This result statistically confirms the insight derived from the qualitative exploration, namely that employer branding, taken in isolation, is insufficient to explain talent attraction.

The indirect path, by contrast, revealed a robust dynamic. The relationship between employer branding and candidate satisfaction proved positive and highly significant ($\beta = 0.052$; $t = 4.37$; $p < 0.001$), while the relationship between candidate satisfaction and talent attraction was also confirmed ($\beta = 0.061$; $t = 5.12$; $p < 0.001$). Incorporating this mediated path raised the model's explanatory power to $R^2 = 72\%$, a substantial improvement over the direct model, providing statistical evidence of the full mediation exerted by candidate satisfaction in the relationship between employer branding and talent attraction.

6.4. Integration of control variables and the moderating variable

The progressive integration of sociodemographic control variables, conducted by successively adding interaction terms to the model estimated under *seminr*, raised the model's explanatory power from $R^2 = 76\%$ to $R^2 = 87\%$ depending on the specification tested. The final integration of the labor market conditions moderating variable (LMC), operationalized by adding multiplicative interaction terms between this variable and the dimensions of candidate satisfaction, raised the overall model to its highest level of explained variance, $R^2 = 94\%$.

Tested interaction	Coefficient (β)	t (bootstrap)	p-value
LMC \times CIP \rightarrow Value proposition	0.447	2.91	0.006
LMC \times RPE \rightarrow Value proposition	0.440	4.14	< 0.001
LMC \times IF \rightarrow Organizational engagement	0.307	3.05	0.026
LMC \times EM \rightarrow Organizational engagement	0.412	2.95	0.015
LMC \times CIP \rightarrow Value compatibility	0.383	3.96	< 0.001

Table 7. Interaction coefficients for the « Labor Market Conditions » moderating variable (excerpt), full model $R^2 = 94\%$ (R output: *seminr::bootstrap_model*).

All interaction coefficients proved statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), ranging from 0.187 to 0.447, confirming the amplifying role of labor market conditions on the strength of relationships between candidate satisfaction and talent attraction. Direct relationships between employer branding and talent attraction, when crossed with control variables, remained consistently non-significant, whether for gender ($\beta = 0.201$; $t = 0.94$; $p = 0.288$), age ($\beta = 0.208$; $t = 0.88$; $p = 0.302$), marital status ($\beta = 0.189$; $t = 1.36$; $p = 0.195$), education level ($\beta = 0.223$; $t = 0.69$; $p = 0.347$), position held ($\beta = 0.217$; $t = 1.34$; $p = 0.261$), or tenure ($\beta = 0.247$; $t = 0.70$; $p = 0.255$). The path linking employer branding to candidate satisfaction, conversely, remained robust in

the global model ($\beta = 0.654$; $t = 2.62$; $p = 0.020$), confirming the centrality of this mediation across all tested specifications.

6.5. Summary of hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Statement	Decision
H1	Direct, positive and significant effect of employer branding on talent attraction.	Rejected
H2	Mediation of candidate satisfaction in the employer branding–talent attraction relationship.	Supported
H3	Positive and significant effect of employer branding on candidate satisfaction.	Supported
H4	Moderating effect of labor market conditions on the satisfaction–attraction relationship.	Supported

Table 8. Summary of statistical decisions on the research hypotheses.

7. Discussion

Taken together, the qualitative and quantitative findings of this mixed-methods study converge to challenge a purely communicational understanding of employer branding. The qualitative exploration first revealed the centrality of coherence between the employer's promise and the lived experience of employees, a finding that resonates with Backhaus and Tikoo's (2004) and Lievens and Slaughter's (2016) conceptualization of employer branding as a relational rather than purely communicational construct. The recurrence of the organizational culture theme, frequently placed by participants on equal footing with compensation, nuances approaches that reduce organizational attractiveness to its purely economic dimension, and supports the symbolic-instrumental attractiveness model of Lievens and Highhouse (2003), according to which candidates seek identity-based affinity as much as material benefits.

The quantitative phase provided robust statistical confirmation of these qualitative insights. The rejection of H1 and the support found for H2 and H3 converge towards a single conclusion: employer branding does not, by itself, exert an automatic and direct attractive power over prospective candidates; its effectiveness depends entirely on its capacity to translate into a satisfying experience throughout the recruitment journey. This result aligns with Moroko and Uncles' (2008) and Edwards' (2010) theoretical intuitions regarding indirect effects of employer

branding, and provides statistical confirmation of the mediation model theorized by Baron and Kenny (1986).

The support found for H4, regarding the moderating role of labor market conditions, constitutes, on a quantitative level, the statistical validation of a result that had emerged inductively during the qualitative analysis. The systematic significance of interaction coefficients, all exceeding the critical significance threshold, reinforces the theoretical contributions of Doeringer and Piore (1971) and Rynes, Bretz and Gerhart (1991) regarding the contingent nature of organizational attractiveness, and invites scholars to consider any employer branding model as structurally dependent on the macroeconomic context within which it operates. This convergence between inductively generated qualitative insight and deductively tested quantitative confirmation constitutes, in itself, a methodological argument in favor of sequential mixed-methods designs in human resource management research (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2018).

Methodologically, this study demonstrates the full viability of the R environment for conducting advanced PLS-SEM analysis, including scale purification, structural model estimation, and the testing of mediation and moderation effects through bootstrapping. The results obtained, consistent with those that an equivalent proprietary software would produce, confirm that the choice of statistical tool does not, in itself, constitute a factor of variation in a study's substantive conclusions, but rather reflects a trade-off in terms of reproducibility, cost, and integration with the broader data analysis ecosystem.

8. Conclusion, Implications, and Future Research

8.1. Summary of contributions

This mixed-methods study set out to understand the mechanisms through which employer branding influences talent attraction within Morocco's call center sector, drawing on the case of the Concentrix call center in Agadir. The exploratory qualitative phase, based on thematic analysis of thirteen semi-structured interviews, identified three structuring themes, employer branding, candidate satisfaction, and talent attraction, together with a transversal contextual theme, labor market conditions, suspected of moderating their interrelations. The confirmatory quantitative phase, based on PLS-SEM modeling entirely conducted under R, statistically validated these qualitative insights, confirming the full mediating role of candidate satisfaction and the significant moderating role of labor market conditions.

8.2. Theoretical implications

On a theoretical level, this research enriches the understanding of the mediating role of candidate satisfaction, still scarcely documented in the employer branding literature, by precisely specifying its constitutive sub-dimensions and providing robust statistical evidence of its mediating function. It also contributes to integrating, within a field of research traditionally dominated by organizational perspectives, a structural reading borrowed from labor economics theory, opening the way for more contingent and contextualized conceptual models of employer branding.

8.3. Methodological implications

This article also offers a methodological contribution by documenting, in detail, a complete sequential mixed-methods protocol combining software-assisted qualitative thematic analysis (NVivo 11) with confirmatory PLS-SEM modeling conducted entirely within the open-source R environment. To our knowledge, this constitutes one of the few detailed illustrations of a full PLS-SEM protocol applied to employer branding research and implemented under R, offering a transparent, reproducible, and freely accessible alternative to proprietary structural modeling software, with direct implications for researchers operating under resource constraints.

8.4. Managerial implications

On a managerial level, these findings invite human resource directors in the call center industry, and more broadly in high-turnover sectors, to move beyond an approach centered solely on compensation, in order to invest in the coherence between employer communication and lived experience, as well as in the intrinsic quality of the recruitment process itself. They also invite these directors to adjust their communication and retention strategies according to labor market

dynamics: in periods of labor market tension, authenticity and coherence of practices become decisive levers of differentiation, whereas in constrained markets, the priority shifts towards securing rapid access to employment for candidates.

8.5. Limitations and avenues for future research

This study presents certain limitations inherent to its mixed-methods design. The qualitative sample, comprising thirteen participants from a single organization, limits the generalizability of thematic findings beyond the studied context, and the retrospective nature of interviews conducted with already-integrated employees may introduce a degree of post-hoc rationalization bias in the evaluation of recruitment experience. The quantitative model, while statistically robust, remains anchored in a single organizational case, which calls for caution regarding the generalization of estimated coefficients to other sectoral contexts.

Future research could usefully replicate this R-based analytical protocol across multi-organizational samples, in order to test the invariance of the measurement model across different call centers or industry sectors, using multi-group analysis techniques themselves available within the R ecosystem via the `semnr` package. Comparative studies across other high-turnover sectors, or across other national contexts characterized by different labor market dynamics, would also help assess the transferability of the mechanisms identified in this study, and further refine the contingent and mixed-methods understanding of employer branding proposed here.

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