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Exploring the Effects of Employer Branding Strategies for Talent Retention within Luxury Hotels in Dubai

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Abstract

This study explores the effects of employer branding strategies on talent retention withing Dubai's luxury hospitality industry and focused on two popular brands: Palazzo Versace and Madinat Jumeirah Resort. Using inductive studies, the research investigates employer branding by analysing employee perceptions and their point of view on the retention within the properties. Findings show that there are major influencing factors such as Jumeirah's structured planning based of career development and internal branding contribute to employee retention and Versace's faces challenges due to misaligned connections between what's shown externally and what's perceived internally by employees, of their branding. The study highlights the need for hotels to integrate more growth and development opportunities and consider factors such as diversity and inclusive policies. Further mentioning to use employer branding as a strategic tool to manage employees internally, than simply just marketing. By adding to existing practical and theoretical frameworks on employer branding and retention, it aids on further research for more broader insights and allows more practical recommendations for management and human resources departments..

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background information

The hospitality industry is becoming increasingly competitive and talent-focused, and with a location like Dubai, talent retention seems to be one of the critical challenges noticed due to its dynamic, trend focused atmosphere. The purpose of this research is not only to point out the most crucial factors of employer branding but also to analyse employee retention concerns and explore employee perceptions of branding initiatives in the luxury hotels in Dubai. Employer branding, as described by Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) is the ability to attract potential talent into your organisation using the brand as a form of attraction, differentiating themselves from competitors. Attracting high-calibre talent in Dubai, is becoming more significant in the hospitality industry, which includes a strong focus on brand identity (Baum, 2007). Kyndt et al (2009), explains how talent retention, that is maintaining your current force of employees, is crucial for a company's success. Employer branding has been noticed to have significant influence on talent acquisition and employee turnover, especially when the corporate values, work culture and employee value propositions (EVP) are well aligned (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

These factors are crucial, especially within the competitive hospitality sector like in Dubai, where maintaining talent is a hefty task due to the high competition rates having a "16% increase in Q2, 2024, than from in Q1, 2024" (Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, 2024), and increasing guest expectations (AlBattat & Som, 2013). With a dynamic market, such as Dubai, talent can be

influenced by various factors such as competitive pay, career development opportunities, as well as work-life balance (O'Neill & Davis, 2011).

Despite being a benchmark for the city's success (Henderson, 2006), the fast paced market of Dubai's luxury hospitality sector is pressured with the need to deliver exceptional service, going above and beyond (Baum et al., 2016). Understanding the correlation between employer branding and talent retention and contextualising the challenges faced in the luxury hospitality landscape in Dubai, is the main focus of this study.

1.2 Rationale of the study

While there have been plenty of studies done comparing the relation between employer branding and retention (Backhaus & Tikoo (2004), Baum (2007), Sullivan (2004), Ambler and Barrow (1996)), they focus mainly on the concepts of human resource strategies, employer brand marketing and talent retention in general businesses. When it comes to talent retention, there have been papers in relation to organisational culture (Kyndt et al.,2009) and employee engagement (Wildes, 2007) as key influencing factors to retain employees. Another recent study by Gallardo-Gallardo et al. (2013), explored the concept of impact on organisational goal outcomes due to talent management strategies.

This paper aims to add more context to already existing literature, with a focus on Dubai's luxury hospitality industry. While previous research has been more general, in terms of the focus being simply employer branding and its relation to retention, this study will focus on key aspects for a market like Dubai, which is very differentiated in comparison to other hospitality focused countries or cities. Identifying and analysing the various influences within the context of Dubai's luxury hospitality industry, the research will add more practical insights to the luxury hospitality industry itself.

This research would be important to assess a critical issue of employee retention within the city's luxury hospitality industry, seeing that it is one of the key contributors to Dubai's economy. By gaining a deeper understanding of how employer branding strategies can help mitigate challenges that arise with retention, the finding will help contribute to the wider studies done with human resource management with a focus on luxury and competitive markets. Dubai, being extremely dynamic, and continuously evolving as one of the biggest tourism hubs, talent retention is crucial for high quality service and reputation.

By providing insights into the correlation of employer branding and talent retention with the luxury hotel sector, an area that has not been focused on research before, especially with a location like Dubai, the research will provide significant academic and practical contributions. Addressing specific challenges within a competitive and luxury sector, the paper will provide context for future research in both human resources and hospitality management point of views.

1.3 Aim and Objectives

The research paper aims to explore the influence and impacts of employer branding strategies in retaining talent within the luxury hotel sector in Dubai, United Arab Emirates.

1. To identify the specific aspects of employer branding that most significantly influence talent retention in luxury hotels within Dubai
2. To analyse employee retention concerns within luxury hotels in Dubai.
3. To analyse the perceptions of employees regarding the branding initiatives implemented by specific luxury hotels in Dubai.

1.4 Summary of methodology

An inductive approach, using semi-structured interviews was utilised to collect the data for this research. Focused on two luxury hotels, purposive sampling was used to select the population and explore their perceptions on the branding and their retention. The population was limited to 10 participants within HR and line staff levels. The data was then thematically analysed, connecting key patterns which aided in finding and exploring results for the factors that influenced talent retention in Dubai luxury hotels.

Chapter 2. Literature review

2.1 Employer Branding Strategies

Employer branding could be simply described as a strategic masterplan of an organisation promoting its created identity and contributing values and standards to current and potential employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Employer image or brand could also be defined as a compound of cognitive impressions left by the brand on an individual (Highhouse et al, 2009, cited by Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). Sullivan (2004) pictures the employer brand as a competitive asset, highlighting that the company's reputation can affect how much talent it can attract. One of the initial and popular exploratory research by Ambler and Barrow (1996, p.185) states "the employer can be seen as a brand with which the employee develops a closer relationship". The paper focuses on bridging the brands' marketing and human resources management - mentioning the idea of substitution of an employee for a customer. This connects with Kotler and Keller's (2006) concept of a brand and their promise, a layout of the knowledge and reactiveness of a customer towards a brand reflecting responses to their marketing efforts. Keller (2008) describes the idea of the customer's resonance with a brand, using a pyramid to portray the customer's relationship with a brand, his model fits with the idea of connecting marketing to employee attraction (see Fig.1 below), explaining the idea of what feelings a customer might process while developing an association with the brand (Aaker, 1991). Consisting of four stages, each

section represents a development the brand creates with the customer, the ultimate being brand resonance, which is in basic terms, brand loyalty. From the bottom it starts with salience, which is the common way a customer would start recalling a brand. Next is performance and imagery, these are the customer's perception of the value and functionality of the product and how emotionally they can connect with it. Following that, are judgements and feelings, which are the brand's worth and emotions the brand might arouse. The last being resonance, which is the deep loyalty and engagement with the brand.

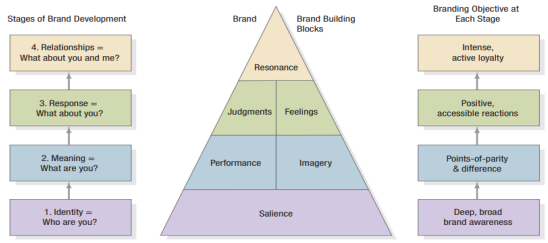

Figure 1. Brand Resonance Pyramid (Kotler and Keller, 2006)

Employer Value Proposition (EVP),was identified by Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), as a core component of employer branding, seeing that it is pivotal in segregating and creating distinctiveness in an aggressive talent market and improving employee loyalty. By providing an articulation of the organisation's value and cultures, it joins the gap for employees to know what to expect from the company and what is offered. A well strategized EVP, as perceived by Chhabra and Sharma (2014), which would ideally emphasise that the more strategically an organisation structures their EVP, the stronger it would appeal to prospective employees. Particularly when it comes to enhancing personal development, inclusivity and corporate social responsibility (CSR) - ideally attracting more higher-calibre candidates (Theurer et al., 2018). (Reis and Braga, 2016), also mention that this not only improved internal perception of the organisation but also increased retention and satisfaction amongst employees. Internal branding is another critical aspect of employer branding aligning employee values with the brand (King et al., 2012). Effective internal branding creates organisational identity, generating brand ambassador-like behaviour unconsciously (Punjaisri et al., 2009). This will only be achieved with consistent communication, and appropriate training and guidance form the leaders within the organisation. Employee engagement adds to this as well, as it highly reflects how well the branding is maintained. Nikolova et al. (2019), mentions that employees gaining appropriate engagement tend to exhibit highly positive outcomes and more productive behaviour, spanning from small initiatives, like even, decision -making and big initiatives like growth opportunities (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Xiong et al. (2016), also associates high employee engagement reflecting on external brand perceptions. These reinforce the employer branding strategies and create the proposition for talent retention and reputation (Alshathry, Clarke ad Goodman, 2017).

2.2 Talent Retention

Often characterised by its high employee turnover rates, the hospitality industry has always been a victim to high labour and training costs attributed to the same. Christensen Hughes and Rog (2008), pointed out how this could be a particularly pressing issue in locations with high requirements for skilled hospitality labour, like Dubai. Long working hours coupled with continuous stress-bound situations, simply adds fuel to the retention rates. The transient and multi-cultural nature, in locations like Dubai, makes it difficult to retain a proper skilled workforce, which can be caused by various factors beyond just job satisfaction (Michael & Fotiadis, 2022; Zopiatis et al., 2014; Baharin and Hanafi, 2018; Madera et al., 2017) Often, it stems from lack of connection between personal goals and what the organisation wants to achieve (Haldorai et al., 2019), which is common if the organisation has a naturally high pressured environment (Jawaad et al., 2010). Hou et al., (2014) introduced the Pull-Push-Mooring (PPM) theory (see fig 2. below), to explain reasons for job 'migration' in industries such as hospitality. Push factors could include unpleasant prior experiences and pull factors might be more attractive or potential opportunities somewhere else. The mooring concept considers factors like internal loyalty programs or work culture.

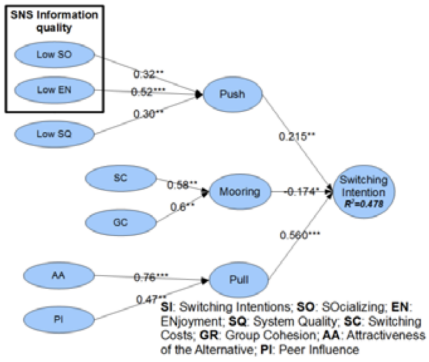

Figure 2. Pull-Push-Mooring (PPM) theory model (Hou et al., 2014)

To mitigate the challenges faced by talented retention, effective strategies, such as those suggested by Ghani et al. (2019), which range from appropriate compensation, career and growth development opportunities and employee engagement, can help balance the demands of an industry like hospitality (Jawaad et al., 2010). Employee engagement has shown significant impact on turnover rates (Ghani et al., 2019). A positive working environment and work

culture further aids employee job satisfaction (O'Neill & Davis, 2011). Training or learning and development are now emerging topics, Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou (2019) also highlighted how it can affect turnover. Branding practices and perceptions can influence employee retention, Baharin and Hanafi (2018), mentioned how the more supportive the organisation is, the more the employees show loyalty and commitment (Ohunakin et al., 2008). In a situation, where the majority of the workforce is based on expatriates, well-being and employee benefits significantly affect talent turnover rates (Ghani et al., 2022). Fostering employee commitment (Christensen Hughes and Rog, 2008), is also frequently seen to be influenced by the leadership and management (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). A prioritisation of communication, well-being, rewards and recognition increase the retention of employees, encouraging more personalised management strategies, continuously developing more positive employee engagement (Ghani et al., 2022). Dubai being more of a tourism hub, demands a more proactive approach to talent management. Having skilled employees not only arises as a business want, but also a strategic need (Qasim, 2020) , due to the emirate's reliance on luxury. Expat based workforces, require critical addressing of professional and cultural expectations (Shakeel and But, 2015). This further leads to the need for innovation and excellence in the retention strategies (Ghani et al., 2019; Ghani et al., 2022). A good example would be that of technology for exemplifying the employee engagement techniques such as offering more flexible shifts, recognition programs (Ruel & Njoku, 2020), to ensure more long-term commitments for smoother organisational success. Talent retention is a multifarious challenge and requires thorough planning and a good balance of factors like compensation, employee development opportunities and work support. The findings of the Christensen Hughes and Rog (2008), Baharin and Hanafi (2018), Ghani et al. (2020), all highlight the importance of the factors above along with uniquely tailoring and addressing each strategy.

2.3 The Luxury Hospitality Industry in Dubai: Overview and Importance for World Hospitality

Home to over 200 nationalities, Dubai is the hub for business and leisure, "breathing a sense of possibility and innovation" (Visit Dubai, 2024). It increased its focus on hospitality and tourism as part of their strategic national plans in 2010 as well as the 2020 plans. (Dubai Municipality, 2020). The latest reports on luxury hotel occupations from Dubai Department of Economy and Tourism (2024), show around 15 million international visitations annually and high demand for luxury stays, which also shows an average of 76.2% occupancy throughout 2024. Characterised by its unparalleled architectural designs and service quality, Dubai's hospitality sector, emphasises extravagance with unique technology and sustainability implementation, marking itself as a strong competitor for other tourism and hospitality destinations (Visit Dubai, 2024). With more than enough varieties of unique hotel and leisure facilities, they have set themselves as global benchmarks, having significant influence on trends and innovation within the sector (Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, 2021). High focus on personalisation and experiential tourism has helped them redefine guest expectations and brought a new longing for luxury blended with culture. It has also been defined for its vast ability for hosting event based tourism, like EXPO2020, showing its capability to cater seamlessly to large scale events. This event, despite being delayed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, benefitted the city, as it boosted the hotel industry development, to build the rebound capacity of visitors (Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, 2021). The emirate's location having a good accumulation of the east and west access, further allows other tourists and travellers easier access (Bodolica, Spraggon and Saleh, 2020). With more than proportionate benefits and support from the government, allows the hospitality industry in Dubai to focus on luxury while the visitor numbers keep increasing due to the planning for the Dubai Tourism Vision 2025, where the goal is to bring in 25 million annual visitors (Dubai Department of Tourism and Commerce Marketing, 2021). By setting global benchmarks, Dubai is now focusing on sustainability and innovation, which with the hospitality scenario, is a step-ahead from other locations. Blending sustainability with luxury has promoted more eco-friendly designs and hotel infrastructure, with approvals like LEED-certifications. (Giardina, 2019). It also is the perfect training ground for new hospitality professionals, specifically due to the existing multi-cultural diversification of workforces. With active collaborations with hospitality schools all around the world (Zaghmout et al., 2024) and high focus on a new human resource expedition - the Learning and Development department - there is a high contribution to employee training and development, through all luxury hotels. The other emirates have also followed suit, taking Dubai as an example. By being deeply reliant on their skilled workforce, it is the backbone of the known luxury standards and excellence, which leads to high focus on cultural inclusivity and personalised service not just to guests but also the employees (Zaghmout et al., 2024; Giardina, 2019). Hence professional development is a priority to retain their talent, such as training programs and career development planning (Bodolica, Spraggon and Saleh, 2020). Employer branding strategies further connect the employees to the core aspects of the hotel as well as the city, by solidifying their hospitality reputation (Nadkarni,and Heyes, 2024; Stephenson and Ali-Knight, 2010; Wippel, 2023). The emirates success highlights their continuous development on how tourism and hospitality can procure sustainable development while still having its own distinct level of global recognition and validation (Stephenson and Ali-Knight, 2010).

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

In relation to the context of this research, an interpretivist paradigm and inductive research was a good fit. Saunders, Lewis, and Thornhill (2012), explain interpretivism as subjective meanings that individuals, in this case being the employees, relate with their own experiences and reciprocity with the concerned organisation. By focusing on the actual experiences and perceptions of existing luxury hotel employees, interpretivism allows this research to have a more in-depth understanding on how branding influences them staying or leaving the organisation (King and Grace, 2010). Moreover, an inductive approach goes quite hand in hand with interpretivism by permitting the buildout of theories directly derived from the data collected, compared to testing with existing hypotheses (Hyde, 2000). Inductive reasoning, by facilitating the sequences and discoveries of patterns and correlations that might not be originally visible, helped understand the culturally bound luxury hotel industry in Dubai (Mosley, 2015). Jiang and Iles (2011), mention its importance in a field like hospitality, where the employee's perception heavily influences the retention rates. Together, interpretivism and inductive reasoning provide a robust framework for understanding the complex, context-specific influences of employer branding on employee retention.

Given the approach above, the author opted for a case study design, following the context-specific nature of the research aim. Yin (2018) highlights that case studies are most suitable for exploring modern phenomena in more real-life scenarios. This research paper, being more concerned with the organisational, cultural and economic aspects of luxury hotels within Dubai, a case study approach can assist in deeper identification of the subtle but varied relationships between employer branding strategies and employee retention. By enabling the author to explore more dynamic scenarios and connect them with theory, which would normally be overseen in more deductive research designs (Dubois and Gadde, 2002), case studies gave a broader perspective of employee experiences with more open insights on how the branding efforts influence their loyalty decisions (Stake, 1995). The objectives, being more focused on the impacts of employer branding strategies with a Dubai specific context of luxury hotels, a case study can help facilitate new theories, where existing theories might prove insufficient (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007), by exploring patterns and relationships arising from the empirical evidence (Bryman,2016). By also offering the flexibility of examining different luxury hotels environments - multinational and standalone properties, where the cultures, employee demographics and positioning in the market could be a variable for employer branding strategies (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013), a case study will ensure practical relevance for Dubai's hotel industry.

3.2 Sampling and Data Collection

This study, following the research design outlined above, employs a semi-structured interviews to collect data. Interviews were the primary method for data collection, for clear insights of employee perceptions. Maintaining a semi-structured format allowed flexibility in the responses and permitted room for deeper exploration of the employee's experiences, in alignment with the research objectives of the study (Edwards & Holland, 2013). The interview format focused on questions in relation to talent retention and employer branding and open-ended questions, to collect richer data and encourage the participant's engagement and varied responses. The study focused on two prominent, luxury hotels in Dubai - Madinat Jumeirah Resort and Palazzo Versace Dubai, which have significant influence in terms of their branding. From each hotel, a sample of four employees were selected, rounding to a total of eight participants in total. Yin (2018), highlights that data saturation is yielded with a smaller sample size, preventing data redundancy in the results. The sample was purposive and included one human resources representative, one supervisory/managerial employee and two from line staff. This helped maximise relevance in relation to the objective of retention reasonings, as it included different levels of perceptions, variable to the employees' organisational position. In reflection to Dubai's diverse and multicultural workforce, the participants' nationality was varied to identify and capture the inclusive nature in the hotels' employer branding strategies.

3.3 Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed all recorded interviews verbatim, to ensure accuracy in data analysis. Poland (2002), terms that in inductive research, transcription can lay a solid foundation to sync the gap between data collection and interpretation, enabling authenticity and credibility in the findings. Verbatim transcription allows frequent verification of the researcher's interpretation against the employees' actual data, providing a tool for continuous enrichment of the analysis (Riessman, 2008), and allowing respectful representations of the participants point of view. This also boosts identification of elusive insights and text meanings (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), which aligns with the precepts of thematic analysis, which stresses the need to deeply analyse and identify themes in that data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), in this case being the participants' perspective on the branding initiatives of the hotel. Within this research, a thematic approach aided exploration of repetitive employee perceptions on employer branding strategies, further providing insights on the reasonings for their influence on the retention. An inductive "bottom-up" orientation, focuses on data driven themes, which following the

observation of the collected data, will identify codes, to draw up broader themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006), all maintaining genuine reflection of the employees' perspective and preventing any overlooking of the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006) or researcher bias (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This use of latent thematic analysis will align with the inductive approach to form more organic data, beyond surface level data, allowing appropriate imports of the influential dynamics between the employee and the brand (Braun and Clarke, 2006), connecting it more deeply with the objectives. The data was coded, which means, systematically categorised and labelled, based on patterns and relationships. In relation to the coding technique, value coding, which according to Saldaña (2021), promotes identification of values, in this case being that of the workplace, and identifies the connection between branding and its impact on retention. Tzafrir (2005), also highlights how bridging non-external employee values with employer branding assists in nurturing more engagement with the organisation, hence backing up why value coding was extremely useful for this research.

3.3 Ethical Issues

In terms of ethical concerns, the primary one was that of consent and voluntary participation of the participants, as there is risk of professional harm if any issues arise. Hence appropriate and strict confidentiality measures were put in place, along with promised anonymity to protect their identities. Another potential issue was to ensure that the transcriptions were accurate and without any manipulation, given that it could cause an influence on the reader's perception of the company reputation. To maintain objectivity, thematic analysis was used to cross-reference details and identify trends, instead of relying on just one or two statements. Cultural sensitivity also played a critical role due to the diversity of the participants, hence the researcher kept a neutral focused and structured interview with a variety of nationalities of the participants to ensure there is little bias in interpretation of the results after transcribing. Overall, aiding to more feasibility and credibility to the fairness of the research.

3.4 Limitations

This research acknowledges certain limitations in relation to its methodology. A prominent limitation, due to the nature of a case study, is researcher bias, which varies from the researcher being influenced by their own perspective on the data collected (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Again, the case study, which would be focused on a specific population's contextual perspective, would also reflect on the relevance of the findings. It might not be valuable for other geographical locations, in broader terms, in relation to the nature and specifics of the hospitality sector in Dubai. Another limitation is responder bias, which is also affected by social desirability, which could have influenced the populations' responses. This might have caused more expedient views instead of authentic views (Furnham, 1986). An alternative of data collection method could have been used, such as surveys or focus groups, to mitigate such biases. There are further approaches, which could have also yielded better results, depending on the case, such as a different aim or methodology, like a phenomenological approach would induce more intrinsic in the responses. Future research can explore these possible limitations to get more rounded views on this topic.

Chapter 4. Findings

This section presents the key findings on the employer brandings strategies affecting the talent retention success at two luxury hotels – Madinat Jumeirah and Palazzo Versace Hotel. The findings have been organised into themes for easier identification of data from the responses.

4.1 Employer Branding Initiatives and Strategies

Figure 3. Thematic analysis network for employer branding initiatives.

Jumeirah and Versace both emphasise employee training and development, but due to the nature of their management, they have different approaches towards it. Jumeirah is more well defined with a hefty emphasis on structured trainings and career growth opportunities. Their effort is recognised by the employees, and it is shown that they have well-organised development programs for the staff. Their investments for employee engagement and development are visible, aligning it with their branding initiatives for employees. This allows them to leverage their existing brand image, in terms of retaining talent.
P6: 'We provide training programs, opportunities, career growths, and
the company's culture is also very supportive and collaborative.'
Versace on the other hand has mentions of trainings but otherwise seems to fall short of being consistent. This creates a lack of structure for employees in terms of their career development and training programs, despite there being opportunity for growth. It drifts aways in reinforcing the 'investment in employees'

aspect as compared to Jumeirah, to the existing employees of all levels.

In terms of being multi-cultural with the work environment, Jumeirah has a high focus on having a diverse workforce, which is appreciated by the employees. This cultural understanding is imbedded in the recruitment process and management strategies, to ensure inclusivity. However, the hotel is still perceived as a challenging place to work by employees, despite of the positively branded work environment. Versace also displays diversity, but shows challenges with acceptance, with the employees showing difficulty in adapting to each other's culture. Biased hiring also shows signs of refinement in employer branding. Branding reputation and popularity also significantly affects the employer branding strategies at both the properties. Jumeirah's strong reputation in Dubai aids generously to its overall attractiveness as a potential employer, claiming its 'prestige', in comparison to other hotels. Jumeirah's branding itself is considered as a 'look good on the CV' brand, where employees explain the value, the brand carries with the luxury hotels in Dubai. Versace is also similar in those terms, due to the brand rooting form an existing popular household name brand. However, there are indications that the employer branding slightly stray form employee expectations. The image is self-created, however employees who perceptions of being on the negative side, in terms of the employee engagement. Employees also perceive the brand to be more focused on external branding that on internal branding and development, like, employee satisfaction.

4.2 Employee Retention Challenges and Initiatives

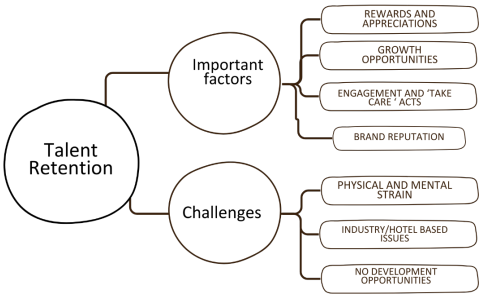

Figure 4. Thematic analysis network for talent retention.

Jumeirah shows positive aspects of employee engagement and structure with growth and recognition plans. Employees and given the perception of being ingrained and critical to the hotel's success, which reinforces their employer branding. Despite that, there is still some disassociation with the level of internal promotions offered. Versace, on the other hand, while it actively focused on engagement, there is a severe disconnect between the employee's perception of the branding message and the actual environment, creating a confusion on the real reputation of employee prioritisation. Employee recognition is severely lacking structure and is regarded inconsistent, including the career support opportunities. Both hotels have key factors in similarity that play variable factors in their employee retention. Rewards, recognition and appreciation are the key highlights for both properties. Jumeirah shows focus on leadership support and positive work environments for colleague to stay longer. A strong career support and departmental trainings further affects their retention. Versace in contrasts, offers more competitive salaries as a branding tool. The employees feel the lack of genuine investment in their developmental growth with no career path being clarified, which leads to a retention challenge.

4.3 Dubai as an influencing factor for retention

A common issue for both properties is the strain – both mental and physical – which is directly associated to what strings from a typical hospitality environment. While Jumeirah employees citied that the long working hours and pre-expected luxury standards are the main stressors. Burnout is one of the key influencers as well, despite a try an addressing work-life balance. Versace, as well, the employees address the high-pressure in the work environment, with lengthy shifts and lack of appropriate support, which contributes to dissatisfaction. Furthermore, there is an expectation to go beyond the job description, adding to the employee's frustration. All employees recognise the natural challenges that the hospitality industry carries, such as the pressures of Dubai's existing competitive market and the dynamic nature of development. However, a strong branding, such as those of the Jumeirah and Versace, mitigate the concerns, in terms of job stability. A concern, however, from Versace employees is that the branding is not focused enough on terms of industry-wide hospitality concerns, such as one participant described it as "cheap labour'.

P5: 'but I can tell you is that there were things in Dubai that you see especially in terms of acceptance and race that people don't really mention and this is stuff that goes on in the background, the majority of the labour is cheap labour, that comes from mostly Asian and African countries where they don't have general literacy, as well as they don't have exposure to different cultures, which causes them to reject or be opposed to certain things that don't come naturally to them'

The others also collectively mention biased hiring and limited adaptability to diverse cultures. Additionally, lack of employee well-being initiatives, significantly contribute to high turnover rates.

4.4 Employer Branding Perceptions

Mentorship and career development programmes were suggested by both properties' employees as well as internal promotions (see fig. 5). Jumeirah's employees recommended an expansion of the existing development and training programs to increase retention. Versace employees stressed the need for 'visibility' in the employee engagement. The

employees from both hotels also highly request more consistency of incentives and engagement programs. Verace shows a demand for more respect and acknowledgement for the employees' effort for the hotel. While Jumeirah shows more success with their branding strategies, work-life balance is a factor that still needs to be addressed. Versace, on the other hand benefits form the existing brand image, but still downfalls with the factors such as employee engagement and career development for employees.

Figure 5. Thematic analysis network for employer branding perceptions

Chapter 5. Discussions

The findings above suggests that while employer branding strategies at both properties emphasise training and career growth, execution is the key differentiator and affecting factor. Jumeirah's current program for trainings and similar programs links to existing literature, like Backhaus & Tikoo (2004), who mention how retention is affected by how much investment is done for employee growth and development. Chhabra and Sharma's (2014) empirical study also link for the same criteria of promoting employee skill development through planned training initiatives. Versace, in contrast, does not make good use of the adoption of these theories mentioned. Literature suggests that structure and pre-planning career development aids to the satisfaction of employees (Ambler & Barrow, 1996). But, Versace seems to have a severe misalignment between their employees' perception and the branding strategies, creating a gap in the retention efforts, which only further reinforces Kotler and Keller's (2006) idea of how credibility is an essential when it comes to delivering brand stories or brand image.

Diversity was highlighted as acritical factor for employer branding, aligning with studies such as that of Zaghmout et al. (2024), which persist on inclusivity at the workplace, which Jumeirah abides to, but integrating diversity into recruiting colleagues as well as in the current workforce. This explains how inclusivity could be a driver for employee engagement in terms of employer branding (Hughes & Rog, 2008). Despite that, employees still show signs of perceiving the industry as tedious and stressful. Qasim's (2020), argument backs this up that employer branding alone is insufficient. Versace's multicultural hires showing resistant to workplace culture adaption also points to how employer branding strategies don't always address concerns with diversity and inclusion. This goes against literature that suggests the opposite (King and Grace, 2010), mentioning that it would improve commitment. Inconsistent execution simply highlights the need for more focus on the branding initiatives with an overall composition of all practical factors. This aligns with Marinakou and Giousmpasoglou (2019), who emphasise that HR policies must genuinely reflect the real practices held.

Brand reputation is one of the key employer attractiveness factor (Keller, 2006). Jumeirah benefits form this global recognition, despite being mainly Dubai based, which helps maintain its employee retention rates. Movere, the mere perception of working with Jumeirah also adds value to the employees' career, which matches Highhouse et al. (2009), saying that employee decisions are rooted from the company's reputation. Versace benefits form the brand recognition, but struggles internally with aligning it with the employees, and this contradiction is supported by Wilden et al. (2010), who mentions the connection between employer branding and employee expectations, which must be connected to maintain the level of loyalty and commitment. Therefore, just having brand prestige, doesn't help Versace retain the employees, factually and critically because they do not meet the employee engagement standards they claim. Literature by Shakeel and But (2015), highlights the importance of employee engagement for talent retention. In the case of Jumeirah, there is a structure which allows reinforcement of the idea that employees feel the value of their work, which connects to Ghani et al (2022), saying this leads to loyalty to the organisation. The key drawback was the internal promotions, which show that the branding initiatives have an area of error that needs completion, which underscores that simply employer branding is not enough, and structure is required to add to it for it to be more rounded. (Shakeel and But., 2005). Versace's drawback with employee engagement also reflects the growing gap of employees being disconnected form the branding initiatives, this is supported by Allen et al. (2010) empirical study that branding efforts need to be conjoined with a week-structured growth plan to show effectiveness. The findings suggest the superficial aspect of Versace's; branding promise, supporting the need for more employee-based policies to be implemented in employer branding strategies (Ghani et al., 2022). Work-life balance is another hospitality industry concern, the findings reinforce existing literature that there is a high-pressure environment on hospitality (Baum, 2007; O'Neill and Davis, 2011). Jumeirah shows signs of addressing the said challenge but not to the extent of alleviating it completely. It supports Alshathry, Clarke & Goodman, (2017), who suggest that employer branding might aid attraction to the organisation, but it does not make up for the stress the job brings. Versace's failure for the same further strengthens the argument of the need for structure. O'Neill and Davis (2011), back this by saying there are expectations to exceed job roles with no rewards attached, further

justifying the negative aspects often expected workload in a luxury setting and questioning the employer branding efforts' requirement to be more tangible in terms of the balance between work and personal life, to keep talent retention. Furthermore, the findings back up the literature, by reinforcing that the luxury hospitality industry presents industry-specific challenges, with naturally highly competitive markets and turnover rates (Davidson et al., 2011). Jumeirah's strong brand reputation may aid with job stability concerns, but appropriate employer branding will enhance the perceived job security (Hou et al, 2014). However, with Versace, it displays signs of inadequate comparisons to industry issues such as cheap labour and no signs of career development. Baum's (2015) study argues that branding efforts are required to be appropriately paired with adequate job condition for turnover reduction. The findings depict the need or two aspects: mentorship and career development. While Jumeirah has an existing standpoint with both criteria, Versace shows signs of the lack of appropriate levels of both aspects. Meyer and Allen (1991), suggests that mentorship increases commitment. In terms of employee engagement as well, literature shows that it inks to increased retention rates (Ohunakin et al., 2020; Sullivan, 2004; King and Grace, 2010)

Chapter 6. Conclusion

The key findings of this study are that employer branding plays an essential part in relation to talent retention, especially in locations like Dubai and their luxury hotels, as given the evidence by the two hotels. While both hotels ae based of branding, how the manage it is what affects the retention. Both are on equal levels of reputation and image but one is better structured (Jumeirah) than the other (Versace). The key take way of the findings is that employer branding works at its best when implemented correctly based of the hotel's operational and management framework (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), and that these branding efforts needs to go beyond just being an external view and be more structured within, internally, to meet employee expectations after joining the hotel. Jumeirah manages to translate the external branding into internal development, (Ambler and Barrow, 1996), which leads to retention. Versace still has not fully reached that criteria yet.

There are significant implications brought by this research for luxury hotels and their stakeholders, mainly the human resources department. The study highlights the need for 'structure', i.e., aligning employer branding with employee engagement and benefits to retain talent and reduce turnover rates. Hotels, in this case being Versace, for example, shows risks of high turnover due to disassociating these factors. Human resource professionals can use this research to further develop more initiatives for employee engagements for operations running in a similar setting to both Jumeirah and Versace. Internal consistency with branding efforts displayed outside, will foster more retention, which further leads to more productivity and better operational service. As well, as with a competitive market like Dubai, diversity is a key player for the bardning strategies and must be used as an asset and handled with care to prevent uncalled loss of retention reasons – such as the case of Versace, where the diversity seems superficial. The study also contributes to existing literature and knowledge by giving more empirical insights on specific luxury hospitality sectors in Dubai's dynamic environment. Slight being differentiated form previous studies, which have focused mainly on theoretical aspects, this research adds more to the niche section of luxury hospitality and employee retention. It also further analyses two approaches within the same industry and this comparative analysis adds a depth of varied effects of employer branding and how it could affect the talent retention, adding more practical sense to theory. It also adds to the possibly and need to understand an adapt branding initiatives with changing employee expectations to maximise long-term retention rates.

While this study offers more practical insights on employer branding and talent retention, there are areas which could further be researched to keep updated with the dynamic nature of the luxury hospitality industry. The first one being, exploring past Dubai, within different cultural contexts and doing comparative studies between different international markets to have a broader perspective. Secondly, since the research focused on inductive methods, and thematic analysis, further studies could opt for a mix-methods to strengthen the validation of the findings spread across a larger sample. Thirdly, further research could also consider diving deeper into sections like generations, and focusing on specific aspects pf employer branding that work better, depending of the age group. Research could also be done to explore employer branding and retention rates being affected due to specific metrics, such as the hotel's financial performance. Allowing more holistic approaches in understanding the concept more in-depth. The study displays the importance of employer branding being a strategic tool to retain employees, going beyond than just being a marketing effort.

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