FROM INTERNSHIP TO INTENTION: EMPLOYER BRANDING EFFECTS ON JOB APPLICATION INTENTION OF FINAL-YEAR MANAGEMENT UNDERGRADUATES IN SRI LANKA

Kanishka, R.D.S[1], Rathnakara, K.A.K.S.[2]

[1,2]Department of Human Resource Management, Faculty of Management Studies, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka,

[1]rdskanishka@gmail.com, [2]sakunthalar@mgt.rjt.ac.lk

Abstract

In the contemporary competitive global employment landscape, employer branding is an essential approach for attracting and retaining premier talent. This trend is apparent in Sri Lanka, where firms leverage employer branding to mitigate brain drain and retain qualified graduates. This study investigates the influence of employer branding on the job application intentions of final-year management undergraduates participating in industrial training at state universities in Sri Lanka's Western Province. Data from 318 undergraduates were evaluated using a conventional questionnaire and stratified random sampling, employing SPSS for descriptive, correlation, and regression analysis. The results indicate a substantial correlation between employer branding and the propensity to apply for jobs. Critical factors, including interest value, social value, and developmental value, substantially impact students' job application decisions. The study highlights the significance of employer branding in influencing career decisions and offers critical insights for firms seeking to improve their recruitment efforts and attract proficient graduates.

Keywords: *Employer Branding, Job Application Intention, Management Undergraduates*

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Correspondence: Rathnakara K.A.K.S.- sakunthalar@mgt.rjt.ac.lk

ORCID of authors: **https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2307-5155**

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Background

Employer branding has become a crucial strategic instrument utilized by firms to recruit top-tier applicants and gain a competitive edge in the intensifying talent acquisition competition (Wilden et al., 2010). Human capital is widely acknowledged as a vital asset influencing organizational performance and innovation; thus, the capacity to attract, engage, and retain premier talent is key for long-term sustainability and success. In reaction to escalating global talent shortages, firms have progressively implemented employer branding tactics over the past thirty years to establish themselves as preferred employers (Ramadhan, 2023).

The intention to apply for a job, characterized by an individual's readiness to submit an application to a particular firm, is significantly influenced by employer branding. It indicates the degree to which job seekers are affected by the organization's image, culture, and perceived value offer. Effective employer branding entails the strategic oversight of an organization's identity and reputation within the labor market, with the objective of attracting talented and compatible workers by fostering a positive perception of the firm as an appealing workplace. In the context of Sri Lanka, the significance of employer branding is increasingly evident, reflecting global trends in human resource management. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2017) said that the nation's leading ten corporate organizations have progressively emphasized employer brand building as a strategic approach to attract high-potential individuals. This emphasis has intensified due to the nation's persistent brain drain, as numerous competent individuals emigrate in pursuit of superior employment opportunities outside. Sri Lanka, as a developing nation, offers a unique socioeconomic and cultural framework for analyzing the dynamics of employer branding and its effects on talent acquisition.

Final-year management students represent a crucial talent reservoir for both public and private sector enterprises. Students from state universities exemplify a varied demographic, embracing various socioeconomic backgrounds. These individuals, particularly those involved in industrial training, are at a critical juncture in their career progression, actively assessing prospective employers and establishing work preferences. Thus, examining their attitudes and preferences concerning employer branding provides essential insights for recruiters, HR experts, and policymakers. While certain studies in Sri Lanka, including Jayasinghe (2023), have examined specific job attributes (e.g., academic reputation, development opportunities, and training), they have not explicitly linked student preferences to the overarching theoretical frameworks of employer branding. A significant vacuum exists in the literature regarding the impact of several elements of employer branding on job application intentions among undergraduates at Sri Lankan state universities.

This study aims to fill that vacuum by concentrating on final-year management undergraduates engaged in industrial training, thereby elucidating their intentions regarding actual and imminent employment prospects. The study examines the influence of five essential elements of workplace branding interest value, development value, economic value, social value, and cooperative value on the intention to apply for jobs. Prior research indicates that these variables significantly impact employer appeal and affect application behavior (Agrawal & Swaroop, 2009; Sanjana, 2020). Comprehending the influence of these employer branding elements on student decision-making can produce tangible advantages. The findings will assist companies in enhancing branding efforts to more effectively engage this essential talent sector. The findings may guide colleges in improving career advising services, facilitating more focused and effective student readiness for the job market. Moreover, the study may assist in pinpointing particular brand associations that firms ought to highlight throughout the recruitment of management trainees. Employer branding has become a crucial component of strategic human resource management. It allows firms to differentiate themselves from competitors, articulate a persuasive employee value proposition (EVP), and cultivate a robust psychological contract with both prospective and current employees (Ioannis, 2020). Ambler and Barrow (1996) characterized employer branding as the amalgamation of functional, economic, and psychological advantages linked to employment, acknowledged and esteemed by both existing and potential employees. Organizations communicate their culture, beliefs, and offerings through their employer brand identity, thereby molding candidate views and affecting recruitment results.

Comprehensive empirical studies confirm the impact of employer branding on job-seeking habits. Ergun (2016) contends that candidates are more inclined to apply to firms regarded as providing enhanced career prospects, inclusive environments, and purposeful employment. The significance of different employer branding features can vary considerably based on country culture, industry standards, demographic characteristics, and economic circumstances. Sivertzen et al. (2013) identified development value, interest value, and application value as major determinants of business reputation and application intentions within Norway's engineering sector. Conversely, Eger et al. (2019) emphasized leadership and vision as primary motivators of job application intents among Indonesian job seekers. Santiago (2019) also found social value and interest value as key determinants of workplace attraction among Portuguese millennials. From a theoretical perspective, examining the inadequately investigated Sri Lankan environment enhances the formulation of culturally nuanced and region-specific employer branding frameworks, especially within the developing economies of South Asia. The scarcity of empirical studies pertaining to this region underscores the necessity for regional research that captures distinct social, economic, and institutional processes. This study intends to investigate the impact of several employer branding features on the job application intentions of final-year management undergraduates at Sri Lankan state universities. It aims to provide both theoretical insights and practical recommendations. This research aims to assist HR practitioners in formulating branding strategies that resonate with the goals and ideals of young Sri Lankan professionals, while also contributing to wider discussions on talent management in emerging economies.

In Sri Lanka's emerging economy, management graduates from public universities represent a significant and economical talent reservoir, increasingly sought after by businesses in search of competent management trainees (Petersburg, 2023). Although strategically significant for addressing workforce needs, empirical studies investigating the business branding elements that affect the job application intentions of this population are scarce. Although comprehensive research in Western contexts has demonstrated that multiple facets of employer branding positively affect organizational attractiveness and job application intentions (Sivertzen et al., 2013), the relevance of these findings to Sri Lanka is questionable due to significant institutional, socioeconomic, and cultural disparities.

This presents two key research gaps that the present study aims to address:

1. Lack of empirical linkage between employer branding dimensions and job application intentions: There is a need for a systematic, quantitative exploration of how recognized employer brand associations relate to actual job application intentions among final-year management undergraduates. Such an investigation can help determine which branding dimensions exert the strongest influence, thereby enabling organizations to develop targeted employer branding strategies to attract this specific talent segment.
2. Limited understanding of how employer brand perceptions convert into application behaviour**:** While many studies focus on perceived organizational attractiveness, few have examined the conversion of such perceptions into actual job-seeking behaviour, particularly in South Asian or developing country contexts (Priyadarshi, 2011). Understanding which brand associations most effectively drive real application decisions can provide critical insights for employers striving to become an "employer of choice."

Moreover, current Sri Lankan research on employer branding frequently examines diverse or generalized student cohorts, such as business or engineering undergraduates, without differentiating data by discipline, type of school, or training status. Final-year management undergraduates from state universities constitute a distinctive group, possibly possessing unique professional objectives, expectations, and views from employers. Considering that state institutions serve students from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, examining their preferences provides essential insights into inclusive and comprehensive talent acquisition tactics.
A further limitation of the current study is its primary emphasis on theoretical employer preferences or broad views of organizational appeal, rather than investigating job-seeking behavior in relation to real job vacancies. Nonetheless, transforming favorable views into tangible application choices is a crucial factor in the efficacy of employer branding, especially during the entry-level recruitment phase. In assessing genuine career prospects, factors such as employer reputation, brand recognition, and congruence with personal beliefs may significantly influence candidate choices. This study aims to address theoretical and practical gaps by examining the correlation between fundamental employer branding elements and job application intents among final-year management undergraduates participating in industrial training within Sri Lanka's public university system. Consequently, it seeks to provide:
This study contextualizes employer branding theories within a non-Western, developing economy, enhancing comprehension of how employer brand perceptions affect application behaviors in culturally and institutionally unique settings.
The results will aid companies in customizing branding strategies to meet the expectations of high-potential graduates and guide university career

services and policy initiatives designed to enhance graduate employability. This research examines a pertinent and under-researched domain in human resource management and organizational behavior, providing valuable insights into the efficient utilization of employer branding to attract prospective talent in Sri Lanka and similar emerging nations.

Literature Review

In the contemporary competitive global employment market, the capacity to attract and retain premier talent has emerged as a fundamental element of organizational sustainability and long-term success. Employer branding, a strategic tool gaining significance, refers to an organization's intentional attempts to develop and convey a positive image as an employer to both prospective and current employees. According to Ambler and Barrow (1996), employer branding comprises a combination of functional, economic, and psychological advantages that collectively influence an organization's perceived value as an employer.

An essential behavioral result of successful employer branding is the intention to apply for a job. Highhouse et al. (2003) characterize this construct as “cognitions regarding a company that explicitly suggest subsequent action,” such as applying for a position or seeking employment with a particular corporation. Empirical research substantiates that an employer's reputation substantially affects job seekers' intentions to apply (Chapman et al., 2005; Powell, 1984). Due to its robust predictive validity, intention to apply is frequently utilized as a surrogate for actual job-seeking behavior in studies. Silva and Dias (2022) assert that job application intention may be quantified through three fundamental dimensions: (1) organizational attractiveness, (2) intentions toward the company, and (3) corporate prestige. Organizational attractiveness denotes the degree to which a corporation is seen as an appealing workplace. Intentions about the company reflect an individual's motivation to pursue future opportunities inside the corporation. Prestige pertains to socially influenced beliefs, including a company's reputation, popularity, and perceived standing in the labor market (Highhouse et al., 2003).

Employer branding is inherently multimodal. Berthon et al. (2005) delineated five principal characteristics that affect employer brand impression from the viewpoint of prospective applicants: Interest Value, Social Value, Economic Value, Development Value, and Value Cooperation. These variables jointly affect how job seekers evaluate an organization and their propensity to apply. Interest Value denotes the extent to which individuals are drawn to firms that provide engaging, innovative, and creative work environments. This encompasses opportunity to undertake tough activities and demonstrate ingenuity. Studies regularly indicate that organizations regarded as intellectually stimulating and active are more likely to attract candidates (Berthon et al., 2005; Santiago, 2019). Social Value includes the emotional and interpersonal dimensions of the work environment, such as camaraderie, collaboration, and a constructive workplace culture. Research has demonstrated that firms that cultivate robust social connections and supportive environments are more appealing to prospective employees (Turban & Keon, 1993; Biswas & Suar, 2013). Economic Value relates to monetary remuneration, employment stability, and opportunities for progression. While historically seen as a principal motivator, current research suggests that its impact may vary depending on the context. Pham and Vo (2022) discovered that monetary incentives were less impactful than other brand characteristics for specific student demographics.

Development Value denotes the degree to which an organization provides career advancement, educational opportunities, and acknowledgment. Potential employees are more inclined to seek positions at businesses that guarantee personal and professional development (Tansky & Cohen, 2001; Sivertzen et al., 2013).

Value Cooperation pertains to the organization's capacity to enable employees to engage significantly in a collaborative and customer-centric setting. This entails appreciating employee contributions and harmonizing work processes with human-centered principles. Berthon et al. (2005) contend that applicants are attracted to employers who enable them to utilize their skills in a meaningful and influential way.

Theoretical and Practical Importance

Employer branding possesses both theoretical and practical significance for firms seeking to establish sustainable talent streams. A robust employer brand not only attracts talent but also improves employee engagement, retention, and overall job satisfaction, hence enhancing organizational performance. Organizations exhibiting robust employer branding frequently experience diminished recruitment expenses, less turnover, and enhanced labor efficiency (Taylor, 2010).

Furthermore, corporate branding shapes candidate perceptions at the outset of the recruitment process. Gatewood et al. (1993) observed that the initial employer image profoundly influences candidate assessments, whereas Gittell et al. (2010) discovered that company branding improves views of recruiter credibility and trust in organizational leadership. Lievens and Highhouse (2003) defined employer branding as a signaling technique that allows job seekers to interpret essential organizational indicators, including culture, ethics, and alignment with personal beliefs. In this context, factors such as corporate social responsibility (CSR), organizational transparency, and ethical leadership act as significant indicators of an employer's attractiveness. The increasing impact of digital channels, including corporate websites, social media, and online job portals, has heightened the significance of coherent and strategic employer brand communication (Pham & Vo, 2022; Ergun, 2016).

In emerging countries like Sri Lanka, employer branding is swiftly becoming a significant strategic function in human resources. The Central Bank of Sri Lanka (2017) indicated that numerous premier firms have commenced initiatives to bolster their employer brand to attract local talent and alleviate the persistent brain drain of competent people. Sri Lankan public universities, especially in the Western Province, cultivate a diverse and proficient cohort of management undergraduates, many of whom participate in industrial training as a component of their academic curriculum. These undergraduates constitute a crucial portion of nascent talent, rendering their attitudes and behaviors essential for comprehending the efficacy of corporate branding initiatives. Notwithstanding its significance, empirical investigations of employer branding within South Asian contexts are scarce. Jayasinghe (2017) investigated students' preferences for job qualities but failed to directly link these preferences to recognized dimensions of corporate branding. This highlights a notable deficiency in the literature: the necessity to methodically investigate how particular features of employer branding affect job application intentions among final-year management undergraduates in Sri Lanka.

Hypotheses

Based on a comprehensive review of literature and the observed research gaps, the following hypotheses are proposed to guide the empirical investigation:

H1: Employer Branding has a significant positive impact on Job Application Intention of final-year management undergraduates.

H2: Interest Value has a significant positive impact on Job Application Intention in the same cohort.

H3: Social Value positively influences Job Application Intention.

H4: Economic Value has a positive effect on Job Application Intention.

H5: Development Value positively impacts Job Application Intention.

H6: Value Cooperation positively influences Job Application Intention.

These hypotheses will enable an assessment of the relative strength and significance of each employer branding dimension in shaping job-seeking behavior among future graduates. The findings are expected to offer practical guidance for employers, HR professionals, and university career centers.

Empirical Evidence from Existing Literature

A growing body of international research supports the proposed hypotheses. Sivertzen et al. (2013), in a study of Norwegian engineering graduates, found that interest value and development value were critical drivers of employer attractiveness. Similarly, Ramadhan (2023) developed a brand image–intention model in the Indian context, revealing that an admired and innovative workplace culture significantly predicts job application intention while economic benefits had comparatively limited influence.

Tuan et al. (2022) noted that students value development opportunities but often hesitate to apply to less familiar organizations due to limited brand awareness. This was echoed by Mousios (2021), who demonstrated that a well-designed, informative, and aesthetically pleasing career website enhances perceived employer responsiveness, which in turn boosts application intentions. These findings underscore the importance of transparent, engaging, and strategically curated employer communication**.**

Agrawal and Swaroop (2009) observed that corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives influence job-seeking behavior positively, especially when integrated into consistent employer branding efforts. Meanwhile, Chapman et al. (2005) found that organizational prestige **and** social reputation significantly enhance job application intentions by contributing to an aspirational employer image.

Significance of the Study

Employer branding has evolved into a core strategic function within contemporary human resource management. As organizations globally compete for scarce talent, particularly in knowledge-intensive sectors, understanding the branding dimensions that shape job application intentions are vital. This is especially important in emerging markets such as Sri Lanka, where talent competition is compounded by both emigration trends and private sector expansion.

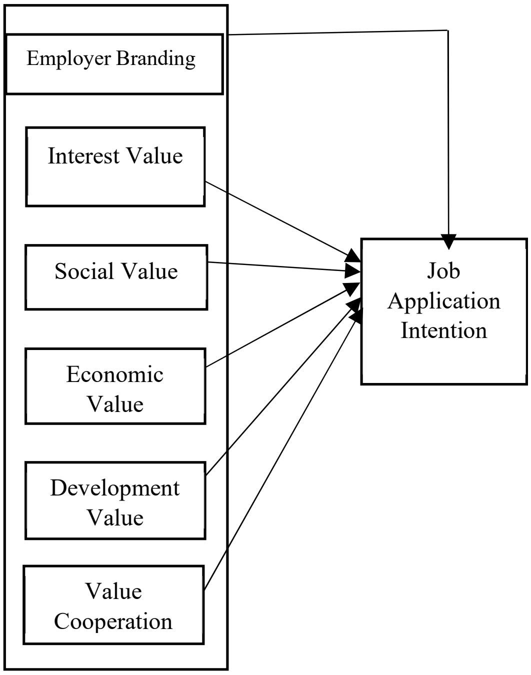
The present study focuses specifically on final-year management undergraduates engaged in industrial training, a group with active exposure to real-world employment contexts. By investigating how key employer branding dimensions interest value, social value, economic value, development value, and value cooperation affect application intentions, the study aims to deliver actionable insights for:

- Employers seeking to strengthen talent acquisition strategies.
- University career services aiming to align graduate readiness with labor market demands.
- Policymakers and educators striving to reduce talent outflow from the country.

Ultimately, a strong employer brand helps align organizational identity with employee expectations, bridging the gap between talent attraction and retention. For Sri Lankan corporates navigating increasing competition and global talent mobility, employer branding is not merely a strategic advantage it is an operational imperative.

The conceptual framework serves as the theoretical scaffolding for this study, defining and organizing the core variables, constructs, and their interrelationships. It acts as a lens through which the research problem is examined, supporting the formation of hypotheses, guiding the research design, and informing the interpretation of findings.

Figure 01 Conceptual Framework



Methodology

This study employed a mono-method quantitative research approach, where only quantitative data collection and analysis procedures were used to address the research questions. A cross-sectional study design was adopted, enabling the researcher to collect data from final-year management undergraduates at a single point in time. This design provides a snapshot of the population’s current status and allows for the identification of patterns and associations between variables.

The unit of analysis in this study is the individual final-year management undergraduate. This decision aligns with the nature of the research objectives, which focus on understanding personal perceptions and intentions related to employer branding.

The population refers to the entire group of individuals relevant to the research objective. According to Sekaran and Bougie (2016), the population is the total set of elements people, events, or objects that the researcher intends to investigate and draw conclusions about. In this study, the target population consisted of 2,200 final-year management undergraduates enrolled in state universities in the Western Province of Sri Lanka (University of Sri Jayewardenepura - 1000, University of Colombo- 650 and University of Kelaniya- 550).

Using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, a sample size of 327 undergraduates was selected for the study. Participants were chosen through stratified sampling techniques to ensure representativeness (University of Sri Jayewardenepura -149, University of Colombo- 96 and University of Kelaniya- 82).

Results

A total of 318 students completed the online survey and were included in the final analysis. The majority of respondents were female, representing 67.9% (n = 318) of the sample (Table 1).

Table 1 Gender Composition of the Sample

Gender	Frequency	Percent%
Male	102	32.1
Female	216	67.9
Total	318	100

Source: Survey Data, 2024

Reliability of the measures were checked using Cronbach's Alpha and all Cronbach's α values above 0.7 indicate an acceptable internal consistency of the scale (Table 2).

Table 2 Cronbach's Alpha Coefficients

Variables/Dimensions	Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items	Decisions Attributes
Employer Branding	0.989	23	Excellent
Interest Value	0.948	05	Excellent
Social Value	0.950	05	Excellent
Economic Value	0.894	03	Good
Development Value	0.946	05	Excellent
Value Cooperation	0.943	05	Excellent
Job Application Intention	0.978	15	Excellent
Attractiveness of the organization	0.932	05	Excellent
Intention toward the organization	0.942	05	Excellent
Prestige of the organization	0.948	05	Excellent

Source: Survey Data,2024

Validity of the measures were checked using KMO Bartett's Test and according to Kaiser's guidelines, a minimum value of 0.5 is considered acceptable for the KMO, indicating the suitability of the data for factor analysis. The Bartlett's test can be used to determine how strongly two variables are related. The study's validity analysis is displayed in following table.

Table 3 KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.765
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	4829.212
	df	15
	Sig.	.000

Source: Survey Data,2024

According to table 3, the KMO Measure of Sampling Adequacy value is 0.765. This value ranges from 0 to 1, where values closer to 1 indicate that a factor analysis will yield reliable results. A value above 0.7 is considered acceptable, indicating that the sampling is adequate and the data is suitable for factor analysis.

Table 4 Correlation between Employer branding and job application intention

		Job Application Intention
Employer Branding	Pearson Correlation	.810**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000
	N	318

Source: Survey Data,2024

According to the table 4, the Pearson correlation Value is .810 with the significance value of .000. Which is less than 0.01. It means Employer branding has the strong positive relationship with dependent variable of Job Application Intention

Table 5 Correlation between Interest Value, Social Value, Economic Value, Development Value, Value Cooperation and Job Application Intention

		Job Application Intention
Interest Value	Pearson Correlation	.809**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000
	N	318
Social Value	Pearson Correlation	.787**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000
	N	318
Economic Value	Pearson Correlation	.768**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000
	N	318
Development Value	Pearson Correlation	.815**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000
	N	318
Value Cooperation	Pearson Correlation	.801**
	Sig. (1-tailed)	.000
	N	318

Source: Survey Data,2024

According to the results presented in Table 5, the Pearson correlation coefficient between Interest Value and Job Application Intention is 0.809, with a significance level of 0.000 ($p < 0.01$), indicating a strong and statistically significant positive relationship. This suggests that higher perceptions of interest value are strongly associated with increased intention to apply for jobs. Similarly, Social Value exhibits a Pearson correlation coefficient of 0.787, also significant at the 0.01 level ($p = 0.000$), confirming a robust positive association between the perceived social environment of an employer and students' job application intention.

Moreover, the correlation between Economic Value and Job Application

Intention stands at 0.768 ($p = 0.000$), reflecting a strong and significant positive relationship, implying that the attractiveness of financial and job security benefits positively influences application behavior. The Development Value dimension demonstrates the strongest positive correlation, with a coefficient of 0.815 ($p < 0.01$), emphasizing the critical role that career advancement and personal growth opportunities play in shaping undergraduates' job-seeking intentions.

Lastly, Value Cooperation is also positively correlated with Job Application Intention, exhibiting a coefficient of 0.801 ($p = 0.000$), which is statistically significant at the 0.01 level. This underscores the importance of collaborative and humanistic work environments in influencing students' decision to pursue employment opportunities. Collectively, these findings validate the theoretical premise that each dimension of employer branding exerts a substantial and positive impact on the job application intentions of final-year management undergraduates undergoing industrial training.

Multiple Regression Analysis

This section analyses the impact of Interest value, Social value, Economic value, Development Value and Value Cooperation on the job Application intention of final year management undergraduates of state universities who are undergoing industrial training in Western province Sri Lanka. When examining the influence of Interest value, Social value, Economic value, Development Value and Value Cooperation on the job Application intention, it becomes essential to employ the technique of multiple regression.

Table 6 Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.812[a]	.659	.654	.319

a. Predictors: (Constant), Value Cooperation, Development Value, Social Value, Economic Value, Interest Value

Source: Survey Data,2024

According to Table 6, the model summary of the multiple regression analysis reports an R-value of 0.812, indicating a strong positive correlation between the predictor variables Interest Value, Social Value, Economic Value, Development Value, and Value Cooperation and the dependent variable, Job Application Intention. This high R-value demonstrates a substantial overall relationship between the combined independent variables and the outcome variable. Furthermore, the R-squared (R^2) value of 0.659 suggests that approximately 65.9% of the variance in Job Application Intention can be explained by the collective influence of these five employer branding dimensions. This indicates a strong explanatory power of the model in predicting job application intention among final-year management undergraduates undergoing industrial training.

Table 7 ANOVA of the Regression Model

Model	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	61.494	5	12.299	120.681	.000b
Residual	31.796	312	.102		
Total	93.290	317			
a. Dependent Variable: Job AI					
b. Predictors: (Constant), Value Cooperation, Development Value, Social Value, Economic Value, Interest Value					

(Source: Survey Data,2024)

According to table 7, F (Model Fitness) Value is 120.681 with the significant value of.000 which is less than 0.05. Statistically prove that model fitness is available.

Table 8 Coefficients of Regression Model

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	.496	.163		3.039	.003
Interest Value	.225	.057	.254	3.923	.000
Social Value	.153	.042	.153	3.635	.000
Economic Value	.069	.045	.091	1.545	.123
Development Value	.329	.035	.543	9.492	.000
Value Cooperation	.083	.057	.098	1.449	.148
a. Dependent Variable: Job AI					

(Source: Survey Data,2024)

According to Table 8, the standardized beta coefficients derived from the multiple regression analysis indicate the strength and direction of the relationship between each independent variable and the dependent variable, Job Application Intention. The interpretation of each coefficient is as follows:

The Interest Value variable has a standardized beta coefficient of 0.225 with a standard error of 0.057. This relationship is statistically significant (t = 3.923, p = .000), suggesting that, holding other variables constant, a one-unit increase in Interest Value is associated with a 0.225-unit increase in Job Application Intention.

The Social Value variable shows a beta coefficient of 0.153 with a standard error of 0.042, and is also statistically significant (t = 3.635, p = .000). This indicates that a one-unit increase in Social Value predicts a 0.153-unit increase in Job Application Intention, assuming all other variables remain constant.

The Economic Value variable has a beta coefficient of 0.069 and a standard error of 0.045, but **does** not demonstrate statistical significance at the 0.05 level (t = 1.545, p = .123). Therefore, although there is a positive relationship, it is not strong enough to be considered a significant predictor of Job Application Intention in this context.

The Development Value variable demonstrates the strongest effect, with a beta coefficient of 0.329 and a standard error of 0.035. This relationship is highly statistically significant (**t** = 9.492, p =

.000), indicating that a one-unit increase in Development Value is associated with a **0**.329-unit increase in Job Application Intention, controlling for the other factors.

The Value Cooperation variable has a beta coefficient of 0.083 and a standard error of 0.057. However, this relationship is not statistically significant **(**$t = 1.449$, $p = .148$**),** suggesting a limited predictive effect on Job Application Intention within the sample.

In summary, the regression analysis presented in Table 08 indicates that Interest Value ($\beta = 0.225$, $p < 0.05$)**,** Social Value ($\beta = 0.153$, $p < 0.05$), and Development Value ($\beta = 0.329$, $p < 0.05$) significantly influence the Job Application Intention of final-year management undergraduates undergoing industrial training in state universities in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. In contrast, Economic Value ($\beta = 0.069$, $p > 0.05$) and Value Cooperation ($\beta = 0.083$, $p > 0.05$) do not exhibit statistically significant effects in this context.

Hypothesis Testing

H1: There is a significant positive impact of Employer Branding on Job Application Intention among Final-Year Management Undergraduates Undergoing Industrial Training in State Universities in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.
As presented in Table 8, the regression analysis reveals that the significance level for Employer Branding in relation to Job Application Intention is 0.000, which is well below the threshold of 0.05 ($p < 0.05$). This statistically significant result provides robust evidence to reject the null hypothesis and confirm the alternative hypothesis, thereby affirming that Employer Branding exerts a meaningful and positive influence on the job application intentions of the target group.

H2: There is a significant positive impact of Interest Value on Job Application Intention among Final-Year Management Undergraduates Undergoing Industrial Training in State Universities in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.
According to the findings detailed in Table 8, the Interest Value variable registers a p-value of 0.000, which is statistically significant at the 0.05 level ($p < 0.05$). This outcome offers sufficient justification to reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis, suggesting a significant and positive association between Interest Value and Job Application Intention.

H3: There is a significant positive impact of Social Value on Job Application Intention among Final-Year Management Undergraduates Undergoing Industrial Training in State Universities in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.
The regression output in Table 8 indicates a p-value of 0.000 for Social Value, demonstrating a statistically significant relationship at the conventional 5% significance level ($p < 0.05$). Therefore, the evidence strongly supports the rejection of the null hypothesis in favor of the alternative hypothesis, confirming the positive impact of Social Value on Job Application Intention within the examined population.

H4: There is a significant positive impact of Economic Value on Job Application Intention among Final-Year Management Undergraduates Undergoing Industrial Training in State Universities in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.
As shown in Table 8, the significance value for Economic Value is reported as 0.123, which exceeds the standard threshold of 0.05 ($p > 0.05$). This finding indicates the absence of a statistically significant relationship. Accordingly, the null hypothesis is retained, and the alternative hypothesis is rejected,

suggesting that Economic Value does not have a significant impact on Job Application Intention in this context.

H5: There is a significant positive impact of Development Value on Job Application Intention among Final-Year Management Undergraduates Undergoing Industrial Training in State Universities in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.
The analysis in Table 8 presents a p-value of 0.000 for Development Value, signifying a statistically significant association at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$). Thus, there is compelling evidence to reject the null hypothesis and accept the alternative hypothesis, highlighting Development Value as a critical determinant of Job Application Intention among the study participants.

H6: There is a significant positive impact of Value Cooperation on Job Application Intention among Final-Year Management Undergraduates Undergoing Industrial Training in State Universities in the Western Province of Sri Lanka.
Based on the regression results shown in Table 8, the significance value for Value Cooperation is 0.148, which is greater than the acceptable level of 0.05 ($p > 0.05$). Therefore, the result is not statistically significant, and the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. Consequently, it is concluded that Value Cooperation does not significantly influence Job Application Intention in this particular sample.

Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to examine the impact of employer branding on the job application intention of final-year management undergraduates from state universities who are undergoing industrial training in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. The research design, including the formulation of hypotheses and development of the questionnaire, was informed by a comprehensive review of existing literature. Data collection targeted this specific cohort to gain insights into their perceptions and intentions regarding potential employment opportunities. The overall objective was addressed through multiple regression analysis, which assessed the influence of various dimensions of employer branding namely Interest Value, Social Value, Economic Value, Development Value, and Value Cooperation on the dependent variable, Job Application Intention. The following section summarizes the key findings of the analysis.

The multiple regression analysis demonstrated a significant positive relationship between employer branding and job application intention. This finding is consistent with prior studies such as Backhaus and Tikoo (2004), who emphasized that strong employer branding enhances an organization's attractiveness to potential recruits, thereby increasing the likelihood of applications from high-caliber candidates. Similarly, Lievens and Highhouse (2003) reported that a compelling employer brand strengthens organizational attractiveness and positively influences job application intentions. These converging lines of evidence strongly support the conclusion that employer branding is a meaningful predictor of job application intention in the studied context.

Hypothesis 2 tested the influence of Interest Value on job application intention. The regression analysis revealed a statistically significant positive effect ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$), providing robust evidence to reject the null hypothesis in favor of the alternative. These results align with Berthon et al. (2005), who found that positions perceived as interesting and stimulating are more likely to attract applicants. Chapman et al. (2005) also confirmed that companies offering engaging work environments tend to attract a higher number of candidates. Therefore, Interest Value emerges as a critical factor positively shaping job application intention among the target population.

The analysis also supported Hypothesis 3, showing that Social Value significantly and positively affects job application intention. This is consistent with Cable and Judge (1996), who identified perceived social value within the workplace as a key determinant of organizational attractiveness. Similarly, Turban and Keon (1993) emphasized the importance of social integration opportunities in influencing job seekers' application decisions. Hence, social value components, such as workplace relationships and social environment, play a meaningful role in driving job application intention.

Contrary to expectations, Hypothesis 4 was not supported, as Economic Value did not exhibit a statistically significant impact on job application intention ($p = 0.123 > 0.05$). While Ambler and Barrow (1996), as cited in Santiago (2019), highlight the role of economic benefits including competitive salary, job security, and benefits packages in attracting employees, other research suggests that factors such as organizational culture and career development may hold greater sway in application decisions (Chapman et al., 2005). The present study's findings corroborate this view, indicating that economic considerations alone do not significantly predict application intentions within this sample.

Hypothesis 5 was supported, with Development Value showing a significant positive effect on job application intention ($p = 0.000 < 0.05$). This aligns with prior research emphasizing that opportunities for professional growth and development reduce workplace stress and enhance job appeal (Schnake et al., 2007). Development Value is widely recognized as a key motivator influencing candidates' decisions to apply to organizations, functioning as an effective recruitment tool for attracting quality talent (Bodderas et al., 2011). The present study reinforces the critical role of development opportunities in shaping job application intention.

Finally, Hypothesis 6, which examined the effect of Value Cooperation, was not supported, as this variable showed an insignificant relationship with job application intention ($p = 0.148 > 0.05$). This suggests that cooperation-related values do not substantially influence the decision-making process for job applications among the respondents in this context.

Conclusion

This study examined the impact of employer branding on the job application intentions of final-year management undergraduates undergoing industrial training in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. Data collected from 318 respondents were analyzed using a range of statistical methods, including descriptive and inferential analyses, to extract meaningful insights aligned with the research objectives. The high response rate of 97% from the 327 distributed questionnaires strengthens the reliability and validity of the dataset. The sample reflects 24% of the target population, further supporting the robustness of the findings.

The rejection of Hypothesis H4 which proposed a significant positive impact of Economic Value on job application intentions can be attributed to several contextual factors. One primary reason identified is the perceived inadequacy of financial allowances provided to the trainees (Jerez, 2023). As per some discussions had with the participants, it was noted that many undergraduates consider the monetary compensation received during their industrial training insufficient to meet their expectations and basic needs, which adversely affects their perception of the economic value offered by the organization. This perception of financial inadequacy largely contributed to the hypothesis rejection.

Furthermore, individual attitudes toward economic value vary among undergraduates, as industrial training constitutes an initial exposure to the professional environment embedded within the academic curriculum. While some students prioritize economic benefits, others may place less emphasis on them during this early stage of their career (Alexander at al., 2012).

Organizational promotion policies also play a critical role. While promotions based on performance can motivate some trainees, perceived unfairness or limited opportunities for advancement may generate demotivation among others. A widespread belief that promotions are unattainable regardless of effort can diminish the perceived economic value of the organization.

Additionally, although opportunities for inter-departmental practical experience are available, not all trainees may perceive these as beneficial to their career progression or financial prospects, further weakening the perceived economic value.

Taken together, these factors suggest that the rejection of Hypothesis H4 reflects the complex interplay between the objective economic benefits offered and the subjective perceptions and experiences of the trainees. Although organizations may provide certain economic incentives, these may not align with the trainees' expectations, leading to the conclusion that economic value does not significantly influence job application intentions in this context.

Regarding Hypothesis H6, which examines the impact of Value Cooperation on job application intentions, the literature review initially suggested a significant positive relationship. However, empirical analysis of the collected data resulted in the hypothesis being rejected. While simple regression analysis indicated a statistically significant effect ($p = 0.000$), the multiple regression analysis yielded a non-significant result ($p = 0.148$). Several reasons may explain this discrepancy.

First, the opportunity to apply academic learning in a practical setting is undoubtedly important to undergraduates. Nevertheless, many may perceive such opportunities as standard across organizations, not unique to those emphasizing value cooperation. Consequently, this commonality may reduce the influence of value cooperation on their job application decisions. Moreover, when undergraduates find that they are unable to apply their knowledge effectively, their perception of the importance of value cooperation diminishes, leading to the rejection of the hypothesis.

Second, acceptance and belonging are critical considerations for job seekers. However, undergraduates may believe that a sense of inclusion can be found in diverse organizational cultures, not exclusively within those that promote value cooperation. If an employer fails to foster a welcoming environment, trainees may discount the significance of value cooperation, further contributing to the hypothesis rejection.

Implications

The findings of this study provide valuable insights for organizational leaders, human resource managers, and recruitment professionals aiming to enhance employer branding strategies and effectively attract management undergraduates, particularly those undergoing industrial training in Sri Lanka's Western Province.

Reevaluating Economic Value Offerings

The rejection of the hypothesis concerning economic value's impact highlights the need for organizations to critically assess the financial incentives and compensation packages extended to trainees. Managers should recognize that while economic benefits may traditionally serve as a motivator, undergraduates in industrial training often perceive the current monetary allowances as insufficient relative to their expectations and living expenses. To improve employer attractiveness, organizations could consider revising stipend levels, offering performance-based bonuses, or introducing other tangible rewards that resonate with trainees' needs. Transparent communication regarding financial policies and promotion opportunities can also mitigate perceptions of unfairness or stagnation.

Enhancing Perceived Career Development Opportunities
The findings emphasize the importance of development value as a key driver of job application intention. Managers should invest in structured development programs that provide clear pathways for learning, growth, and career advancement. Providing trainees with meaningful, varied work experiences—such as rotations across departments and exposure to real projects—can strengthen their perception of the organization's commitment to their professional growth. Furthermore, establishing mentorship schemes and regular feedback mechanisms can foster a supportive learning environment that enhances employer attractiveness.

Cultivating Genuine Value Cooperation

Although value cooperation did not show a significant influence in the multivariate analysis, it remains critical for organizations to cultivate workplaces where trainees feel they can apply their academic knowledge meaningfully and experience a strong sense of inclusion and belonging. Managers should create authentic opportunities for knowledge sharing, collaboration, and empowerment rather than treating such initiatives as mere formalities. Building a welcoming organizational culture that visibly values trainee contributions can enhance engagement and, ultimately, positive employer perceptions.

Addressing Diverse Candidate Expectations
The study underscores that management undergraduates hold varied attitudes toward economic rewards and workplace values. Therefore, organizations should tailor their employer branding messages to address these diverse priorities. Recruitment communications can highlight not only competitive compensation but also intangible benefits such as learning opportunities, innovative work environments, social connections, and organizational prestige. Personalizing

outreach efforts can improve alignment between employer offerings and candidate expectations, enhancing recruitment effectiveness.

Leveraging Employer Branding as a Strategic Recruitment Tool
Given that interest value, social value, and development value positively influenced job application intentions, HR professionals should prioritize these dimensions in employer branding campaigns. Emphasizing an organization's innovative practices, supportive social environment, and commitment to employee growth in promotional materials can differentiate the organization in a competitive talent market. Collaborations with universities to showcase real trainee success stories and development initiatives may further enhance employer appeal among final-year students.

Improving Transparency Around Promotions and Career Progression
Managers must address perceptions around promotion fairness and accessibility, which significantly impact the perceived economic value of the organization. Clear, transparent career progression frameworks that trainees understand and believe in can mitigate demotivation stemming from perceived promotional barriers. Periodic reviews of promotion criteria and involving trainees in feedback discussions can reinforce trust and motivation.

Limitation of the Study

The present research sought to examine the impact of employer branding on job application intentions among final-year management undergraduates undergoing industrial training in the Western Province of Sri Lanka. While the study yielded valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged to provide a comprehensive understanding of its constraints.

Firstly, the study's scope was confined to a specific geographic region and demographic group namely, final-year management undergraduates in the Western Province. This focused sample restricts the generalizability of the findings to other regions, academic disciplines, or broader populations. Future research would benefit from expanding the geographic coverage and incorporating participants from diverse academic backgrounds to enhance the applicability and external validity of the results across different contexts.

Secondly, the cross-sectional research design employed involved collecting data at a single point in time. Such a design limits the ability to observe temporal changes in job application intentions and precludes establishing causal relationships between employer branding and job application intentions. To address these limitations, longitudinal studies are recommended, as they would provide deeper insights into how employer branding influences job application intentions over time, capturing dynamic and potentially long-term effects.

Another limitation relates to the reliance on self-reported data gathered through structured questionnaires. Although efficient for collecting large datasets, this approach is vulnerable to common method biases, including social desirability and response biases, which may affect the accuracy and authenticity of the responses.

Additionally, this study focused exclusively on five dimensions of employer branding—interest value, social value, economic value, development value, and value cooperation. While these dimensions are significant, other potentially relevant facets of employer branding remain unexplored. Future studies could investigate additional variables to develop a more holistic understanding of employer branding's influence.

Finally, the data collection method, which utilized online surveys distributed via Google Forms, also presents certain limitations. Despite achieving a high response rate, this approach may inadvertently exclude individuals with limited internet access or lower digital literacy, thereby skewing the sample towards more technologically adept participants. Employing a mixed-method data collection strategy, combining online surveys with alternative methods such as paper-based questionnaires or telephone interviews, could help mitigate this sampling bias and improve the representativeness and inclusiveness of future research samples.

Directions for Future Research

The limitations inherent in this study provide multiple avenues and rich prospects for future research. Based on the current findings and constraints, several recommendations can guide subsequent investigations to further deepen understanding in this area.

Firstly, this study focused exclusively on final-year management undergraduates undergoing industrial training within the Western Province of Sri Lanka, specifically within the education sector. Future research could expand this scope by examining the impact of employer branding on job application intentions across diverse sectors and industries, allowing for broader sectoral comparisons and enhancing the generalizability of the results.

Secondly, this research concentrated on a defined set of independent variables, namely interest value, social value, economic value, development value, and value cooperation. Future studies could explore additional factors or variables that may influence job application intentions, such as organizational culture, employer reputation, or work-life balance, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of the determinants influencing potential applicants.

Thirdly, expanding the target population offers valuable prospects for future research. While this study focused on final-year management undergraduates currently in industrial training, subsequent studies could include fresh graduates, mid-level professionals, or employees at various career stages. Such comparative analyses would shed light on how employer branding influences job application intentions differently across career trajectories. Additionally, incorporating participants from diverse academic disciplines, industries, and hierarchical levels including executive-level employees would provide a more holistic perspective on employer branding's role across the broader workforce.

Regarding methodology, this study utilized a structured questionnaire distributed online via Google Forms, achieving a notable response rate of 97.24%. While online data collection offers convenience and efficiency, future research could benefit from adopting a mixed-method approach that combines online surveys with physical distribution. This strategy would help mitigate potential biases associated with digital-only surveys and enhance inclusivity by capturing responses from participants with limited internet access or digital literacy, thereby increasing the diversity and representativeness of the sample.

Moreover, this study did not incorporate potential moderating or mediating variables that could influence the relationship between employer branding and job application intention. Future investigations should consider examining such factors like organizational commitment, perceived organizational support, or personal values to uncover the mechanisms and boundary conditions affecting this relationship.

Finally, given the cross-sectional design of this research, future studies employing longitudinal designs are recommended. Longitudinal research would enable a more nuanced understanding of how employer branding impacts job application intentions over time and across changing economic or organizational contexts.

In sum, these directions offer substantial opportunities to extend the current knowledge base, improve theoretical models, and provide practical insights for organizations aiming to enhance their employer branding strategies and attract top talent effectively.

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