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The Role of Employer Brand Reputation on Talent Acquisition and Retention in Fast-Food Small and Medium Enterprises in Maseru Urban

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A B S T R A C T

Employer branding has drawn attention from all over the world yet little is known about the role played by SME managers in implementing and assessing brand reputation. This study examined the role of brand reputation on talent acquisition and retention in fast-food Small and Medium Enterprises in Maseru Urban. A quantitative approach was used, where structured questionnaires were distributed to 36 managers and owners. The findings revealed that most managers inconsistently apply brand monitoring, employee-aligned culture, and internal brand communication. Results also showed a weak and statistically insignificant relationship between brand reputation practices and recruitment efficiency. The current study highlights the importance of enhanced strategic training, continuous brand alignment, and the consistent use of brand messaging during recruitment processes.

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INTRODUCTION

In today's fast changing business environment, fast-food Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) face challenges in attracting and retaining top talent (Immerschitt and Stump, 2020). According to Kaoud and Mostafa (2022), employer branding image is a key strategy to address these issues as it aims to improve the organisation's reputation. Employer branding image also fosters employee commitment and loyalty especially in SMEs where resources may be scarcer than in bigger companies. Rana and Jane (2023) stated that fast-food SMEs can enhance their employer branding image by highlighting distinctive organizational characteristics including a family oriented culture, flexibility, and chances for personal development. Sharma and Leekha (2022) also recommended that SMEs should encourage current employees to act as brand ambassadors through positive testimonials. Fast-food SMEs in Maseru Urban play a role in local economy by making talent acquisition a critical factor in maintaining their growth and competitiveness. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating the role of brand reputation on talent acquisition and retention in small and medium-sized enterprises operating in Maseru Urban. While existing literature offers valuable insights into brand reputation and employer branding, much of it focuses on large organisations in developed countries. There remains limited empirical evidence on how SMEs, particularly those in Africa, apply brand reputation strategies to influence recruitment and retention outcomes. Moreover, the fast-food sector, despite being highly labor-intensive, is often overlooked in academic discussions on branding and talent management. Therefore, the current study aims to fill that gap by investigating the role of employer brand reputation on talent acquisition and retention among fast-food SMEs operating in Maseru Urban.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fernandes, Sousa, Fonseca and Oliveria (2023) stated that in today's competitive business environment, the ability to attract and retain top talent is crucial for the success of SMEs in fast-food sector. This is particularly true in urban areas like Maseru, where small and medium enterprises face challenges that hinder their growth and competitiveness. According to Hossein (2022), employer branding image is a strategic approach that harmonizes an orgnisation's external messaging with its internal culture and values with the goal of establishing a productive workplace that encourages workers' satisfaction and engagement. Bendaraviciene and Vitkauskas (2023) stated that employer branding image represents the identity and reputation that organizations cultivate among job seekers, current employees, and stakeholders. It highlights how effective employer branding image can shape perceptions of a company's culture and values, distinguishing it in a competitive talented market place. Brand reputation relates to how SMEs are perceived by potential employees, impacting their attractiveness as employers. Talent acquisition is also crucial in organisations as it ensures that SMEs are able to secure a skilled workforce needed for operational success. According to Dhamagadda (2024), talent acquisition involves the comprehensive process of identifying, attracting, and retaining skilled employees who align with organisation's values and objectives.

Effective talent acquisition strategies do not only focus on long-term employee engagement and retention, ensuring that the right is nurtured within the company culture, (Bonifacio, 2024). In this study, it is explained through these metrics, recruitment effectiveness and talent retention. Recruitment effectiveness refers to assessing an organisation's capability to attract qualified candidates who aligns with its culture and values, focusing on how well fast-food SMEs can engage potential hires for long-term success. Talent retention refers to examining the ability of fast-food SMEs to sustain a stable workforce by cultivating a supportive and engaging work environment that encourages employee loyalty. By focusing on these metrics, the study aims to reveal how a strong employer branding image can enhance the talent acquisition and retention strategies of fast-food SMEs in Maseru Urban, promoting sustainable growth and competitive advantage.

Theoretical framework

The Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) theory describes how organizations cultivate their cultures by attracting, selecting, and retaining individuals aligned with their values. This theory consists of three phases which are attraction, selection and attrition. With attraction, this is where candidates are drawn to organisations that resonate with their values while selection is where organizations choose candidates they believe fit their culture. Lastly, attrition is where misaligned employees tend to leave organisations they work for. For fast food SMEs in Urban areas like Maseru, ASA theory emphasizes the significance of employer branding in recruitment and retention strategies that reflect organizational culture. According to Nunez (2022), effective employer branding is crucial for attracting candidates who align with the culture and values of fast-food SMEs. By promoting a family-oriented and team-focused environment, these organizations can appeal to individuals seeking such workplaces. This strategic approach not only enhances recruitment efforts but also fosters a sense of belonging among employees, ultimately contributing to retention and engagement. SMEs should prioritize selecting candidates whose skills and values align with their organizational objectives. This alignment is crucial for fostering a cohesive work environment and achieving business goals (Schneider, 1987). According to Leong and Said (2024), SMEs should focus on both the competencies and cultural fit of potential hires, as that will help to enhance employee satisfaction and retention.

Furthermore, Garg (2023) mentioned that employees who do not align with the organization's values are likely to leave, underscoring the necessity of maintaining a consistent employer brand that accurately reflects the company's reality. A strong and authentic employer brand fosters a sense of belonging among employees, which is crucial for retention when the brand image aligns with employee experiences. It minimizes turnover and enhances overall organizational stability. ASA theory focuses on large organizations with resources and good human resource strategies, therefore it presents limitations which include resource constraints and homogeneity and diversity when applied to fast-food SMEs. With resource constraints, the theory assumes that organizations have ample resources to implement comprehensive attraction and selection processes. In reality, SMEs often lack the resources to implement comprehensive attraction and selection processes, limiting their employer branding efforts. In the case of homogeneity and diversity the ASA theory requires organisations to be consistent in recruiting employees of certain values. While homogeneity can strengthen culture, it may hinder diversity, which is essential for innovation. The ASA framework does not adequately address balancing cultural fit with diversity benefits. ASA Theory ignores external labor market challenges. The theory assumes that seekers are self-selected into organisations based on perceived fit. However, in Maseru Urban's fast-food SMEs, labor markets conditions, economic instability and wage competition may force job seekers to accept roles that do not fit with their values.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a quantitative research design using structured questionnaires to assess the impact of employer branding on talent acquisition and retention in fast-food SMEs in Maseru Urban. Data was collected from 36 business owners and managers of fast-food businesses in Maseru Urban who were selected through simple random sampling. This was applied to ensure that every eligible participant had an equal probability of selection. These managers and owners completed the survey, which is consistent with sample size recommendations for exploratory studies involving regression analysis in small populations, (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2020). Data analysis involved descriptive statistics and regression analysis using SPSS. Descriptive statistics included frequency tables and charts while multiple regression analysis was employed to assess the impact of brand reputation on recruitment effectiveness and employee retention. Interpretation of results relied on standard statistical metrics including R-squared values, p-values, and regression coefficients. The results were aimed to assess the role of brand reputation on talent acquisition and retention in fast food Small and Medium Enterprises in Maseru Urban.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The demographics discussed in this study include age, gender, educational background and work experience.

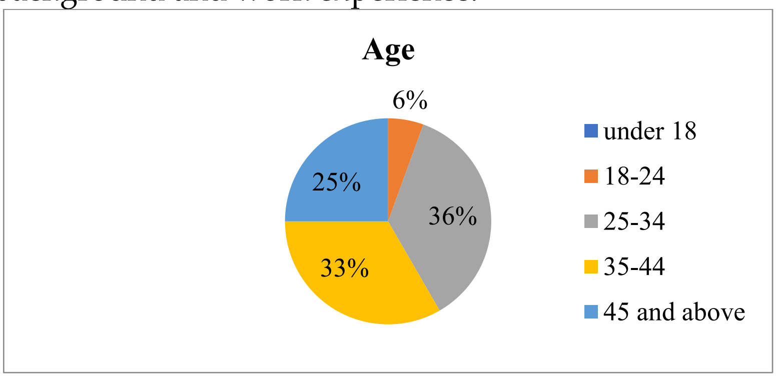

Figure 1. Age

The majority of manager respondents were between the ages of 25 and 44, reflecting a workforce in the mid-career phase. This age profile suggests that fast-food SMEs in Maseru rely on relatively experienced personnel to lead operations. This trend is consistent with findings from Amadasun and Mutezo (2025), who reported that SMEs in Lesotho often employ managers who possess not only relevant experience but also local knowledge and adaptability, which are critical in managing high-turnover service industries. Having managers in this age range also supports employer branding efforts, as these individuals are more likely to understand both the operational demands of the fast-food sector and the expectations of younger employees whom they supervise.

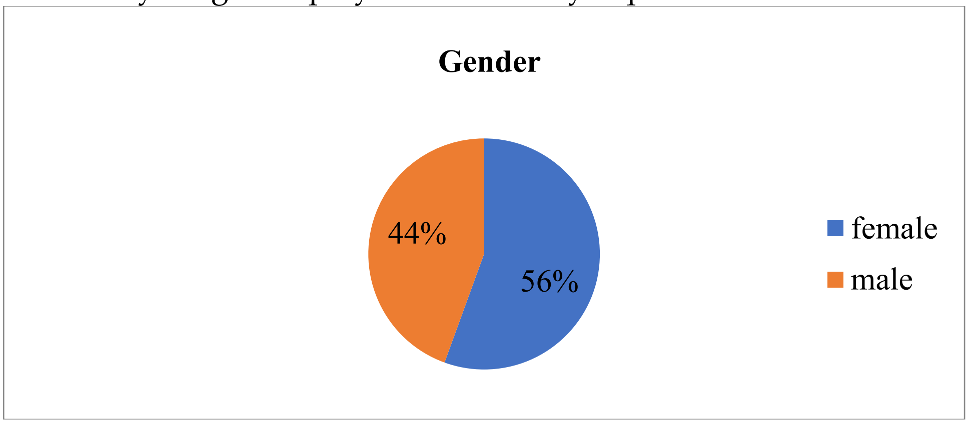

Figure 2. Gender

The gender distribution among managers was relatively balanced, with both male and female respondents equally represented. This balance is noteworthy, given that gender representation at leadership levels in many African SMEs tends to be male-dominated. Gender-inclusive leadership in SMEs contributes to more diverse decision-making and better alignment with a mixed-gender workforce. In the context of fast-food SMEs in Maseru, balanced gender representation may enhance employer branding by signaling a commitment to inclusivity, fairness, and equal opportunity, which can be attractive to both potential employees and customers.

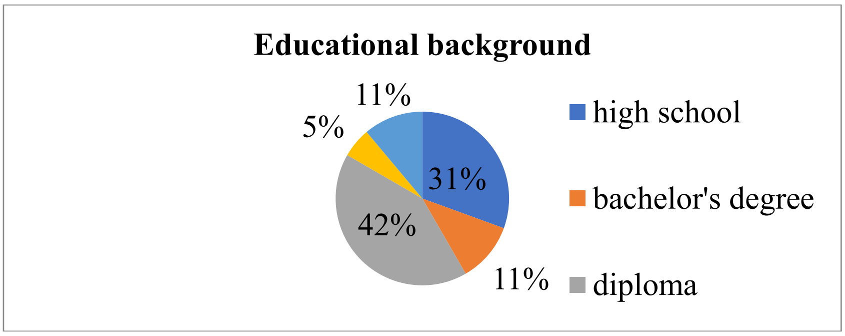

Figure 3. Educational background

Most manager respondents reported holding post-secondary qualifications such as diplomas (42%) or high school (31%). This level of educational attainment is consistent with the qualifications expected of SME leaders who must oversee operations, manage employees, and align business strategies with market trends. In a study conducted in Botswana by Nathan, Molefhe, Mupimpila, Nkuba and Okurut (2015) found that SME performance and staff retention were positively influenced by managerial education. For fast-food SMEs in Maseru, well-educated managers are better positioned to implement effective employer branding strategies, including structured recruitment, employee engagement, and development programs.

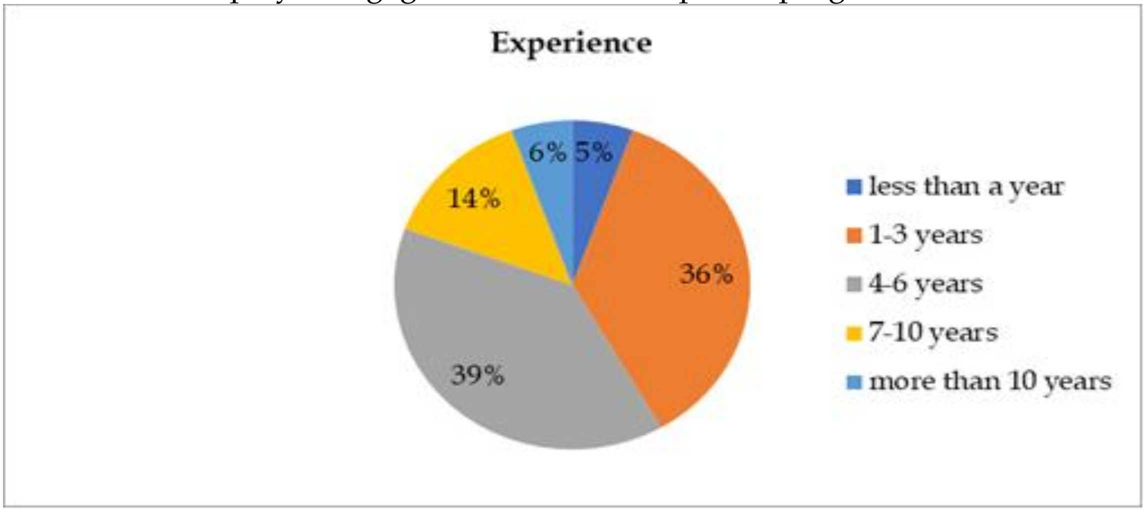

Figure 4. Years of experience

The findings revealed that most managers had between 4-6 years and 1-3 years of experience in their current roles or in the industry. Such tenure suggests a relatively stable leadership structure within the SMEs surveyed. This level of experience is significant in shaping organizational culture and in executing employer branding strategies that are aligned with both employee expectations and market realities. According to Amadasun and Mutezo (2022), SMEs in Lesotho benefit from managers with mid-level experience as they combine operational insights with flexibility. Such managers are also better positioned to translate internal culture into employer branding strategies that resonate both existing staff and potential recruits.

Table 1. Brand reputation results

Variable	**Mean**	**Standard deviation**
We monitor and manage our brand reputation to maintain a competitive advantage.	4.31	0.99
Our company brand reputation significantly influences our ability to attract qualified candidates	4.33	0.67
Our brand reputation contributes to higher employee retention	4.11	0.70

Table 1 assessed whether managers perceive the impact of brand reputation on organizational performance. The measure "We monitor and manage our brand reputation to gain a competitive advantage" was determined to have the highest mean score of 4.31 (SD = 0.99) since most managers agreed or strongly agreed with the measure. This indicates a deliberate effort by Maseru fast-food SMEs to manage their public reputation, high on the agenda in high-turnover labor markets. Brand monitoring helps to maintain congruence between internal communication and employee experience, reducing mismatches in expectations upon hiring, as observed by Masupha, Beharry-Ramraj, and Amolo (2017).

Similarly, the statement "our company brand reputation significantly influences our ability to attract qualified candidates" was on a mean of 4.33 (SD = 0.67), also supporting the importance of employer image when employing skilled workers. This is in alignment with research conducted by Amadasun and Mutezo (2022), who determined that African SME job applicants are increasingly motivated by non-monetary employer qualities such as trust and consistency. The final entry, "Our brand reputation results in higher employee retention," had a mean of 4.11 (SD = 0.70). This indicates that employees do tend to remain with employers who are viewed positively. Amadasun and Mutezo (2022) also noted that brand identity in Lesotho SMEs is a factor in long-term employee commitment, especially where there is open communication and practice of values.

Table 2. Employee value proposition

Variable	Mean	Standard deviation
The organisation provides clear pathways for career advancement and professional development	3.67	1.18
The organization’s compensation packages are competitive within the fast-food industry	3.97	0.60
The organization’s culture makes it a great place to work.	4.50	0.60

Table 2 evaluated EVP competitiveness and supportiveness from the perspective of SME managers. The item "The organization's culture makes it a great place to work" achieved the highest mean score of 4.50 (SD = 0.60), reflecting a strong internal culture. Organizational culture is typically a core pillar of employer branding because it dictates how employees co-mingle and feel valued. This supports research by Montiero, Santos, and Reis (2020), who pointed out that strong internal cultures form the basis of successful employer branding in SMEs. The statement on pay — "The organization's compensation packages are competitive in the fast-food industry" — scored 3.97 (SD = 0.60). While high, it shows mild divergence in perception, perhaps from differences in remuneration or benefits. Montiero, Santos, and Reis (2020) found that fair and transparent pay improves employer reputation and helps with retention and brand reputation. The lowest mean score of 3.67, SD = 1.18, was discovered for "The organisation provides clear pathways for career advancement and professional development." This may reflect poor long-term employee planning, which can lower perceived value. Motlokoa, Sekatle and Tsikoane (2018) said that SMEs with unclear chances of advancement lose good employees, particularly the young and ambitious seeking advancement.

Table 3. Retention Effectiveness

Variable	**Mean**	**Standard deviation**
Our organisation has a low turnover rate compared to other SMEs.	3.83	0.80
Competitive compensation is the most component of employee value proposition that influence employees to stay in this company.	4.11	0.84
Retention strategies are reviewed and updated periodically based on employee feedback.	3.28	1.07
Limited career growth opportunities are one of primary reason employees leave our company.	3.47	1.17

In this case, table 3 addressed the internal retention strategy effectiveness. Firstly the statement "Our organisation has a low turnover rate compared to other SMEs" scored 3.83 (SD = 0.80), which is indicative of moderate managers' confidence at holding on to employees. This indicates that even where brand is excellent, retention performance is divergent.

"Competitive compensation is the most significant component of EVP that motivates workers to stay" had a rating of 4.11 (SD = 0.84), again highlighting the influence of fair remuneration in employee decision-making. This follows earlier EVP studies and corroborates research like Tsheole and Ngulube (2024) that highlighted remuneration as the top Southern African SME retention factor.

"Few career advance opportunities are one of the core reasons people leave" had a relatively high mean rating of 3.47 (SD = 1.17), also indicating prior EVP gaps. This indicates the importance of career mobility as an element of internal branding.

The assertion "Retention policies are reviewed and revised in light of employees' views" was rated lower at 3.28 (SD = 1.07), which reflects that such policies may not be necessarily responsive or structured. Amadasun and Mutezo (2022) reported in their study that Lesotho SMEs usually do not have formal HR planning, which weakens strategic consistency between employees' needs and such policies.

Table 5. Regression Model Summary

Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.357	0.127	0.045	0.495

The regression analysis for managers showed that brand retention had a negative beta value (–0.402), suggesting that stronger brand-related retention efforts may reduce the time it takes to fill vacancies. While this result was not statistically significant ($p \approx 0.076$), it still provides meaningful trend. It indicates that when an organization retains employees effectively, it often creates positive work environment that appeals to potential job seekers, thereby shortening recruitment timelines. Ugwuoke (2023) noted similar dynamics in Nigerian SMEs, where strong internal branding was associated with quicker and higher-quality hires. For fast-food SMEs in Maseru, strengthening internal brand consistency could yield both direct and indirect recruitment benefits.

Table 6. Regression coefficients

Coefficients[a]

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	2.742	0.597		4.591	0.0
	Brand monitoring	0.133	0.118	0.220	1.121	0.27
	Brand attraction	0.001	0.173	0.002	0.009	0.993
	Brand retention	-0.282	0.154	-0.402	-1.836	0.076

The regression analysis for managers produced a lower R value of 0.357, which suggests a weaker correlation between brand retention, career growth pathways, and compensation competitiveness with the dependent variable, time to fill vacancies. The R-squared value of 0.127 indicates that only 12.7% of the variance in the time it takes to fill positions can be explained by the included predictors. The adjusted R-squared value of 0.080 suggests that this explanatory power decreases slightly when adjusted for the number of predictors. None of the variables were statistically significant at the 0.05 level, although brand retention showed a marginal relationship ($\beta = -0.402$, $p \approx 0.076$). This may imply that stronger employer retention practices could be associated with faster recruitment, though the evidence is not definitive. These findings echo trends in the SME sector identified by Monchuk, Dulvy, Malik Franz (2024), who found that retention strategies can indirectly improve recruitment efficiency in resource-constrained settings. Nonetheless, the weak model fit suggests the need for further exploration of additional factors influencing recruitment timelines in fast-food SMEs.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the role of brand reputation on talent acquisition and retention in Small and Medium Enterprises in Maseru Urban. The study revealed that employer branding does indeed influence talent acquisition within fast-food SMEs in Maseru Urban. However, regression results showed that the relationship between brand reputation and recruitment satisfaction was not statistically significant. Among managers, compensation satisfaction, brand reputation and career growth opportunities showed positive but statistically insignificant influence on recruitment satisfaction. While these do not confirm a strong predictive power they suggest that these EVP components may still shape manager's perceptions of what attracts and retains talent. Brand retention showed a marginally significant influence on reducing the time it takes to fill a vacancy, suggesting that strong internal brand loyalty may streamline recruitment. Other variables such as brand monitoring and brand attraction had weaker effects. These findings support the idea that employer branding remains relevant for SMEs seeking to improve workforce outcomes in high-turnover industries like fast-food.

The study's conclusions have led to specific recommendations to improve employer branding and talent acquisition among Maseru Urban's fast-food SMEs. First of all, SMEs should improve the competitiveness and transparency of remuneration. Clear and equitable compensation is highly valued by potential employees, as evidenced by the fact that it was the biggest predictor of recruitment satisfaction. To recruit competent people, employers should clearly explain pay structures and benefits and benchmark wages against industry standards. Secondly, opportunities for career growth must to be continuously offered and explained. Opportunities for career advancement were often cited by employees in descriptive comments so managers need to make sure internal growth paths are clear and accessible in order to improve employee retention. Thirdly, manager and employee opinions of the brand were found to differ, indicating the need for honest reflection. Building credibility and trust with prospective candidates requires that branding messaging appropriately reflect the employee experience. Lastly, in order to match EVP messaging with the realities of the workplace, managers should seek employee feedback. Regular surveys, suggestion boxes, or casual conversations can all help achieve this. Employee engagement is higher when they feel heard, and branding initiatives are more likely to attract outside talent.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study was limited in a number of ways: firstly, the sample was restricted to Maseru Urban only. This limited the generalizability of the findings applicability to other regions and countries with different economic and cultural contexts. Therefore, future studies can be conducted in other districts of Lesotho and other countries. Also, the sample size was modest, especially for regression analysis, which would have hindered the discovery of smaller effects even though it complied with statistical standards. Future studies can use bigger sample sizes to accommodate the regression analysis complied with statistical standards.

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N. Mok'hena conducted this study as part of her research project in pursuing the bachelor of human resources management. She was responsible for the data collection, data analysis and interpretation as well as the writing of the

thesis. M. Motsomotso is a senior lecturer and main supervisor of the study. She was responsible for conceptualizing the study, data analysis and interpretation and assisting with writing up of the article for publication purposes.

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