To "talk the walk" or to "walk the talk"? Employer branding and HRM synergies in small and medium-sized hotels

Irene Zografou and Eleanna Galanaki
Department of Marketing and Communication, HRM Laboratory,
Athens University of Economics and Business, Athens, Greece

Abstract

Purpose – Some firms excel at positively presenting their employer brand (talk), while others excel at effectively implementing human resource management (HRM) practices for the benefit of the employees (walk). Which approach is more effective? Focusing specifically on small and medium-sized hotels (SMHs), this study explores the relation of employer branding (EB) and HRM practices with organizational performance (OP).

Design/methodology/approach – Stratified sampling was used to identify 34 top management figures (owners, CEOs, and top HR managers) from SMHs across Greece. These individuals agreed to participate in in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, focusing on their hotels' HRM, EB, and organizational performance. The interviews were subjected to content analysis, further coupled with graphical exploration of the relations between the concepts under study.

Findings – The findings reveal a noteworthy pattern: high-performing SMHs tend to prioritize EB, particularly leveraging social media channels. This prioritization is further reinforced by the implementation of HRM practices, including extensive training and rewards. Clustering SMHs into four different levels based on their application of EB and HRM practices and the effect of these practices on OP, enables us to extend this study and gain valuable insights into the interplay of these factors.

Practical implications – This study highlights the need for practitioners to invest in HRM practices, especially in training and rewards, while giving due attention to EB, despite the potential resource limitations SMHs often face. Importantly, when basic levels of HRM are combined with high levels of EB, OP seems to be maximized.

Originality/value – Both HRM and EB deal with the employer – employee interaction, that's why EB in most companies is the responsibility of the HRM department. Surprisingly, academic research has treated them as distinct fields, in isolation, ignoring their combined effects. This paper is the first to conceptualize EB as communication ("talk") and HRM as practice ("walk") and to thus propose that a complementarity relationship between these two dynamics may facilitate OP. Additionally, this study is the first to combine content analysis with a quantitative exploration to gain more holistic and valuable insights on the topic.

Keywords Employer branding, HRM practices, Organizational performance, Interviews, Content analysis, Hotels

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

In today's highly competitive business environment, firms are increasingly using employer branding (EB) as a strategic tool for attracting and retaining top talent (Näppä, 2022). By

approaching EB from a cross-disciplinary perspective (Sparrow and Cooper, 2015), EB operates at the intersection of human resource management (HRM) and marketing fields, and it has gained recognition in management theory and practice since the 2000s (Lievens, 2007). Both practically and theoretically, EB and HRM are closely related and are seen as complementary tools that work in conjunction to achieve high organizational performance (OP). EB focuses on shaping perceptions of an employer, while HRM focuses on actual business practices.

This study underscores the symbiotic relationship between EB and HRM positioning them as both separate variables and complementary tools that synergistically improve OP. EB involves crafting and communicating a compelling employer value proposition that differentiates the organization from its competitors, thus representing the "talk" dimension, while HRM focuses on managing and developing human resources through actual HRM practices, thus representing the "walk" dimension. Therefore, as EB establishes narrative and image, HRM translates these conceptualizations into tangible actions, forming an integral link essential for cultivating a strong organizational identity and attracting and retaining talent. However, these two practices have not been examined in conjunction. Specifically, numerous scholars have delved into the examination of how HRM contributes to OP, as evidenced by works such as those by Boxall *et al.* (2011), Sheehan (2014), and Pahos *et al.* (2023). Furthermore, there is evidence for the link between EB and organizational outcomes, including enhancing employee retention, reducing turnover rates (Dineen and Allen, 2016), and mitigating firm risk (Delgado-Garcia *et al.*, 2013). However, only recently have studies empirically explored the link between EB and performance (Tumasjan *et al.*, 2020; Kucherov *et al.*, 2023). Surprisingly, despite the extensive body of literature scrutinizing the individual links of HRM practices and EB with several organizational outcomes, the intersection of these two crucial elements remains largely uncharted territory. Exploring the potential synergies between EB and HRM is not only a logical progression in HRM and EB research, but also holds strategic significance for firms seeking to optimize their human capital strategies.

This study thus employs a qualitative approach because it is the first to explore the interconnected role of HRM and EB and their link with OP. Qualitative research, with its intrinsic capacity for in-depth exploration and the generation of novel insights, emerges as the ideal approach for unraveling the complexities inherent in approaching a novel topic. Moreover, we decided to run the research among smaller organizations because in such cases, strategic decisions regarding both HRM and EB are expected to be made by one person positioned high in the business hierarchy (e.g. the owner or top manager).

The hotel industry, defined by challenges such as high employee turnover, and difficulties in attracting talent (Baum, 2008; Kravariti *et al.*, 2022), as well as gaps in the identification of the factors that make HRM effective in raising organizational performance (Kloutsiniotis and Mihail, 2020) serves as the focal point of our study. This sector holds significance as a major segment within the broader service industry. In this context, the products revolve around service experiences, which are predominantly intangible, and heavily reliant on direct face-to-face interactions between customers and the workforce (Baum, 2019). The unique dynamics of the hotel industry, characterized by its distinctive challenges and service-oriented nature, make it an ideal setting for exploring the intricacies of EB and HRM.

Moreover, although most EB research has focused on large firms (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2020), researchers have begun to acknowledge that all firms, regardless of their size, have an employer brand (Samo *et al.*, 2020). On this note, an employer consistently shapes a reputation among the current and potential workforce (Puncheva-Michelotti *et al.*, 2018). The present study therefore focuses on small and medium-sized hotels (SMHs); in these smaller establishments, where decision making may be quite centralized, researchers have begun to acknowledge that all firms, regardless of their size, have an employer brand (Samo *et al.*, 2020). On this note, an employer consistently shapes a reputation among the current and

potential workforce (Puncheva-Michelotti *et al.*, 2018). The present study therefore focuses on small and medium-sized hotels (SMHs); in these smaller establishments, where decision making may be quite centralized (Sheehan and Garavan, 2022), decisions on EB and HRM are likely to be made by the same individual while representatives of the same firm are typically knowledgeable about both EB and HRM strategies. Additionally, in the context of SMHs, whose resource dynamics differ from those of larger hotels, the integration of EB and HRM emerges as a critical factor for driving OP, offering insights into the intricacies of modern workplace dynamics.

We chose Greece as our research setting due to significant contribution of the tourism industry to the Greek GDP, which remains one of the highest in the European Union and exceeds 20% (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020). The hotel industry in Greece is primarily composed of SMHs, operating within a complex and fiercely competitive environment (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020). The dominance of SMHs is a defining feature of the Greek tourism landscape, emphasizing their crucial role in supporting the labor market. Despite their size, SMHs had an impressive pre-COVID impact on the country's GDP, exceeding 15 billion euros (Dimitropoulos, 2018). After a downturn in 2020 and beyond, the hotel industry and, more broadly, the tourism sector in Greece have rebounded from the setbacks of the pandemic. This recovery has played a key role in contributing to the resurgence of the GDP, which has now surpassed prepandemic levels (OECD, 2023).

Accordingly, as this study is the first to empirically examine the complementarity aspects of EB and HRM and their interplay in SMHs, it makes two contributions to the literature. First, this study adds to the hospitality literature by expanding the limited research on EB in smaller hotels. Second, by integrating signaling theory (Spence, 1973) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), we position EB as a tool for communicating and shaping perceptions, and HRM as the actual practice that supports employer brands. This reconceptualization thus contributes to the strategic management literature by emphasizing EB and HRM alignment as correlates of OP.

This article unfolds as follows: First, we develop a comprehensive review of the literature on EB, HRM, and OP in SMHs, exploring their interconnections through signaling and social change theories. Next, we outline our methodology and reveal the research findings. In the concluding sections, we discuss the study's outcomes, reflecting on their implications for both theory and practice, and portray potential avenues for future research.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

Both EB and HRM have been widely studied in the literature. HRM more so, as the concept is older and it has been applied for a longer time and examined more thoroughly. Additionally, the link between HRM and performance and the so-called black box (Boxall *et al.*, 2011; Jiang *et al.*, 2013) has been a key research stream in the HRM literature. On the other hand, EB has been studied in relation to employee retention, employee turnover (Dineen and Allen, 2016), and firm risk (Delgado-Garcia *et al.*, 2013). Only recently has a new surge of research on the link between EB and performance emerged, and some studies have explored this connection (e.g. Tumasjan *et al.*, 2020).

2.1 Employer branding

Brands are not solely associated with products; they extend to identity, image, and reputation in the corporate realm (Aldousari *et al.*, 2017). Brands are associated with identity, image, and reputation. In the minds of consumers, a brand is a collection of perceptions (Aldousari *et al.*, 2017). The convergence of HRM and marketing has led to the emergence of the EB literature,

emphasizing the application of branding principles to human resources (Russell and Brannan, 2016; Yu *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, brands, branding and reputation play critical roles in HRM and can significantly impact key HRM processes, practices, and outcomes (Theurer *et al.*, 2018).

Ambler and Barrow (1996) were the first to introduce EB as a means to build employee loyalty akin to customer loyalty (Yu *et al.*, 2022). This definition highlights the amalgamation of functional, economic, and psychological benefits associated with employment, mirroring the cross-disciplinary nature of EB (Sparrow and Cooper, 2015). Alternatively, Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) propose a three-step EB process involving the creation of an employer value proposition (EVP) and its external and internal marketing.

The purpose of EB is to position the employment experience as attractive and distinctive compared to that of other employers (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016). Therefore, the aim of EB is to communicate this message to both the external (labor market) and the internal (organization) audience to enhance HR outcomes and positively impact OP. Based on the literature, we redefine EB as the communication of a differentiated employment experience that encompasses functional, economic/tangible/instrumental elements and psychological/intangible/symbolic attributes ascribed to employees. The purpose is to create an appealing employer image, improve employer reputation, and positively shape employees' perceptions of their differentiated experience of working for a specific employer (Backhaus, 2016; Dineen *et al.*, 2019).

While most of the literature focuses on the effect of EB on several business outcomes from the employee perspective, the research on EB dynamics from the organizational perspective regarding its impact on business outcomes is limited, especially in the diverse context of smaller enterprises (Tumasjan *et al.*, 2020). Specifically, in the hotel industry, which faces a significant rate of employee turnover, talent shortages, and negative perceptions regarding employment practices (Kravariti *et al.*, 2022), EB has become increasingly vital in attracting and retaining prospective employees in a focused and effective way (Xiong and King, 2020).

2.2 Human resource management
While EB revolves around perceptions, HRM focuses on policies and practices. Recognized as a crucial driver of OP, effective HRM practices contribute to better management and sustainability as evidenced by works such as those by Boxall *et al.* (2011), Sheehan (2014), and Pahos *et al.* (2023). Previous research has also examined HRM practices, particularly in regards to high-performance work systems (HPWS) or high performance work practices (HPWP), which are positively associated with OP (Paauwe and Boselie, 2005; Ogbonnaya and Valizade, 2016; Vlachos, 2009).

In this study, we adopt certain HRM practices among the various HRM taxonomies that are promoted in the literature to fundamentally contribute to OP. These practices include selective staffing, comprehensive training, evidence-based performance appraisal, and generous rewards/compensation (Pahos *et al.*, 2021).

2.3 Organizational performance
Performance is viewed as a condition of good management and sustainability among smaller firms (Ates *et al.*, 2013). The OP of smaller firms has been extensively studied, yielding interesting results. OP is measured using financial or/and nonfinancial indicators or through quantitative approaches that utilize measures such as market share, productivity (Sheehan and Garavan, 2022), revenue dynamics, and liquidity (Gupta and Batra, 2016). Alternatively, some authors have used qualitative approaches, such as the assessment of product perceptions, process innovation, organizational and marketing innovation, the achievement of targets and the number of customers (Gopang *et al.*, 2017; Sheehan, 2014).

While previous research on smaller firms has explored various aspects of OP using multiple variables, this study elucidates SMH managers' perceptions of their own businesses' OP. We aim to assess profitability levels through the achievement of business targets in comparison to that of competitors.

2.4 Umbrella theories

Building upon signaling theory (Spence, 1973) and social exchange theory (Blau, 1964), we will explore the intricate relationship among EB, HRM practices, and superior OP in SMHs. As recently proposed in management scholarship, the combination of multiple theoretical lenses is critical for any science where phenomena change rapidly and new challenges emerge constantly (Okhuysen and Bonardi, 2011). In this study, we seek to study a novel theme by exploring two phenomena in tandem (HRM and EB), each of which has been notably examined in separate theoretical streams of study. Specifically, HRM's links to OP have been widely studied through the lens of social exchange theory (e.g. Marescaux *et al.*, 2019). On the other hand, in the EB literature, signaling theory has emerged as the most widely used theoretical framework (e.g. Brunner and Baum, 2020; Dauth *et al.*, 2023). The present study is exploratory, and its aim is to study two phenomena (HRM and EB) in conjunction. Even if in exploratory research hypothesis building is not necessary (Tharenou *et al.*, 2007), taking note of the theories that dominate the scientific explanation of each of the focal phenomena can be useful during the interpretation of the findings. In the next two paragraphs, the two theories dominating the research in the two fields that we study are therefore presented, followed by a paragraph predicting, theoretically, how and why HRM and EB can act synergistically.

2.4.1 Signaling theory. Signaling theory views HRM processes as complex communication systems involving multiple active participants that are characterized by information asymmetries and competing value systems and priorities. HRM information can influence employees' perceptions of firm reputation and credibility (Guest *et al.*, 2021). While the theory focuses primarily on the source of signals or the signaler (e.g. hotel management), it also suggests that signal receivers (e.g. current and potential employees) interpret various environmental factors, such as organizational characteristics or policies (Lievens, 2007) and recruitment activities (Celani and Singh, 2011), as signals from the organization, all of which contribute to the creation of a reputable employer image. Within this framework, building an authentic employer brand requires building robust signaling environments that facilitate efficient and effective communication between the organization and its employees while bridging information asymmetries (Bergh *et al.*, 2010).

2.4.2 Social exchange theory. Social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) focuses on the relationships and processes that occur between individuals within social structures. The theory posits HRM practices as investments by organizations in their employees that create feelings of obligation from the latter to reciprocate. Under SET, employees are expected to reciprocate to positively perceived firm actions (such as HRM) with heightened performance levels.

2.4.3 Integration of employer branding and human resource management. According to social exchange theory, positive HRM provisions can enhance OP by motivating employees to perform better through reciprocal exchanges. However, it is crucial that HRM practices ("walk") are effectively communicated ("talk"), so that they are appropriately valued and recognized, thus promoting reciprocity, and fostering high-quality relations with employees. Ultimately, this can contribute to increased OP.

The literature reveals that initial applicant attraction to an organization is influenced by the information provided, which includes instrumental attributes, such as compensation and benefits, working hours, training programs and growth opportunities, as well as symbolic attributes related to the organization's business characteristics, which are inferred by

applicants from the related organizational information (Celani and Singh, 2011; Myrden and Kelloway, 2015). Building on signaling theory, we suggest that an effective approach to positioning a firm in the labor market and enhancing employer attractiveness is to pursue EB with an emphasis on communication. However, it is essential for a strong signal to be supported by corresponding practices, as these practices substantiate the original signal. In this context, communication ("talk") needs to be supported by practice ("walk"), and practice ("walk") needs to leverage effective communication ("talk") to achieve business objectives. Therefore, when there is an alignment between HRM and EB, EB gains reliability, therefore maximizing the signaling effect, and HRM increases effectiveness as the value of the social exchange becomes more tangible and meaningful. In other words, by "talking/EB," the perceived value and consequently reciprocation of social exchanges are enhanced. By "walking/HRM," positive signals gain reliability, which increases their effects.

Therefore, aligning with the literature suggesting that a strong employer brand must be supported by corresponding practices, this study explores how an effective interplay between EB and HRM enhances brand reliability, maximizes signaling effects, and fosters high-quality relations with employees. On this note, the present study aims to yield rich data pertaining to HRM, EB, and OP, and to address the following research question:

RQ1. How do EB and HRM practices complement each other, and how are they linked to superior OP in SMHs?

3. Methodology
Given the exploratory nature of the research, this study employs a qualitative approach to explore the interplay between EB and HRM in the context of Greek SMHs. Through interviews, we seek to gather rich data and enhance understanding of this novel field. Analyzing the perceptions of managers not only offered insights into the complexity of considering EB and HRM in smaller firms (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2020), but also elucidated potential drivers for enhancing OP.

3.1 Sampling and participant description
We focused on one industry to avoid cross-sectoral effects. This approach enhances the internal validity of our findings by minimizing the potential influence of external factors that could vary across different industries. Also, all the organizations included in the study were SMHs and represented various sized SMEs, according to the Eurostat methodology (Di Bella *et al.*, 2023) i.e. micro (<10 employees), small (<50 employees), and medium (<250 employees) enterprises (Guerrero *et al.*, 2022; Perotti *et al.*, 2023; Scuotto *et al.*, 2017).

We strategically selected our sample by utilizing the website of the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels, where we found a comprehensive list of SMHs operating in Greece. From the total list we excluded hotels employing more than 250 employees to only account for SMHs (Di Bella *et al.*, 2023). Then, we attempted to contact representative to the population strata, particularly (1) micro, small, and medium hotels, (2) family-owned and non-family-owned ones, (3) start-ups and long-standing SMHs, and (4) by geographical dispersion (in the capital and the periphery). We started conducting the interviews with a conscious effort for all the above strata to be represented in our sample.

We considered our analysis complete when no additional information was received. The degree of knowledge saturation was detected from the 29th hotel onwards (Bertaux and Kohli, 1984; Patton, 1990). This means that the five final interviews did not produce any new information compared to the previous interviews, thus confirming the claim of previous literature that when data saturation is complete, there is no difficulty in linking data words or

items to each other; however, when data saturation is incomplete, the results may include concepts or categories that do not cancel each other out (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). This left us with 34 interviews with SMH owners, general directors, and top human resource managers.

Table 1 breaks down the basic demographic characteristics of each participant in our sample along with those of each corresponding hotel establishment.

A summary of the demographic characteristics of the interviewees is depicted in Table 2. Management was categorized in two ways: (1) in terms of ownership status, as owners or professional managers and (2) in terms of functional area, as general managers or HR managers.

3.2 Data collection

The interview process took place between August 2019 and September 2020. Given that many interviews were conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic eruption (March 2020),

	Owner				Hotel		
ID	Position	Gender	Number of employees	Size category	Year of establishment	Family business
CEO 1	Owner	Male	25	Small	2000	Yes
CEO 2	Owner	Female	10	Micro	2016	Yes
MAN 3	Manager	Male	56	Medium	1991	Yes
MAN 4	Manager	Female	52	Medium	1991	Yes
CEO 5	Owner	Male	35	Small	1987	Yes
MAN 6	Manager	Male	40	Small	1994	Yes
CEO 7	Owner	Male	10	Micro	1996	Yes
MAN 8	Manager	Male	40	Small	1998	No
CEO 9	Owner	Female	18	Small	2001	Yes
CEO 10	Owner	Male	5	Micro	1999	Yes
CEO 11	Owner	Female	15	Small	1967	Yes
CEO 12	Owner	Male	5	Micro	2013	Yes
CEO 13	Owner	Male	45	Small	1978	Yes
CEO 14	Owner	Male	25	Small	1968	Yes
CEO 15	Owner	Male	52	Medium	1970	Yes
CEO 16	Owner	Female	5	Micro	1985	Yes
MAN 17	Manager	Female	114	Medium	1979	No
MAN 18	Manager	Male	100	Medium	1972	Yes
HRM 19	HR Manager	Female	230	Medium	2015	Yes
HRM 20	HR Manager	Male	220	Medium	1965	No
CEO 21	Owner	Female	7	Micro	1995	Yes
CEO 22	Owner	Female	15	Small	2008	Yes
CEO 23	Owner	Male	30	Small	1984	Yes
CEO 24	Owner	Female	6	Micro	1980	Yes
CEO 25	Owner	Female	19	Small	2017	Yes
CEO 26	Owner	Male	30	Small	1980	Yes
CEO 27	Owner	Male	22	Small	1960	Yes
CEO 28	Owner	Female	10	Micro	1987	Yes
CEO 29	Owner	Female	6	Micro	2012	Yes
HRM 30	HR Manager	Female	200	Medium	1974	No
MAN 31	Manager	Male	85	Medium	1983	Yes
CEO 32	Owner	Female	22	Small	2007	Yes
CEO 33	Owner	Female	12	Small	1981	Yes
CEO 34	Owner	Male	10	Micro	1992	Yes

Table 1.
Key traits of the interviewees and hotels

Note(s): CEO = Owner, MAN = Professional/General Manager, HRM = HR Manager
Source(s): Created by authors

Descriptives		Valid percent	Nr
Interviewee status	Owner	70.6%	24
	Professional Manager	29.4%	10
	General Manager	91.2%	31
	HR Manager	8.8%	3
Interviewee gender	Male	52.90%	18
	Female	47.10%	16
Size of firm	Micro (<10 employees)	29.40%	10
(By number of employees)	Small (<50 employees)	44.10%	15
	Medium (<250 employees)	26.50%	9
Family business	No	11.80%	4
	One generation has run the business	38.20%	13
	Two generations have run the business	47.10%	16
	Three generations have run the business	2.90%	1
Source(s): Created by authors			

Table 2.
Analytical profile of the
interviewees

participants thereof were asked to respond based on the business conditions faced, as if the interviews were conducted before the pandemic. For the interviews, we approached the owners, general managers, or HRM managers of SMHs by telephone and through the professional networking platform LinkedIn. In cases where we could not establish contact with the owners or if there was not a designated HRM official in the organization, we conducted an interview with the general manager.

All interviews began with a briefing to introduce the purpose of the interview and clarify the ethical considerations, such as anonymity and confidentiality. In the first 17 questions, interviewees were asked to share their views regarding their hotel's functions and main challenges. In the following 33 questions, participants were asked to share information and examples related to their own applications of EB and HRM. Despite the use of an interview guide, the structure of the interviews was dynamic and thus adapted to the interests and issues that the interviewees raised during their interviews. During the interviews, the participants were encouraged to speak openly and develop their responses regarding issues that they found most interesting. While 10 interviews were conducted one-on-one and face-to-face on hotel premises, 24 interviews were conducted one-on-one over the phone or through videoconferencing, mostly due to COVID-19 restrictions.

The interviews lasted for 30–50 min, with an average interview length of 40 min. All interviews were recorded and transcribed.

3.3 Research robustness assurance measures
To safeguard the reliability, validity (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995), and trustworthiness, (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) of our data analysis procedures, we adhered to a meticulous approach throughout our study. We initiated this process by conducting an exhaustive literature review, supplemented by the expertise of four distinguished academics specializing in HRM and marketing, who rigorously reviewed and pretested all questions within our interview guide.

During the interviews, thorough attention was given to avoid leading questions and to steer clear of any biases that could compromise the integrity of our data (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995). Each response was transcribed verbatim, without any subjective interpretation, ensuring an accurate representation of the participants' perspectives (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995; Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

To maximize objectivity and minimize subjectivity, we ensured intercoder reliability (Campbell *et al.*, 2013) with two researchers independently conducting data coding as well as interpretation analyses. The data were initially organized in word documents. The first researcher gave her coding categories and definitions to an independent researcher who was not involved in the data collection. The second individual independently coded all the transcripts. In instances where substantial disagreement arose between the coders, a third member of the research team was consulted to validate the final codes or ratings (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995), securing intercoder agreement (Manoharan *et al.*, 2021). Throughout this process, the two coders agreed in 96% of the coded segments and the intervention of a third rater was deemed necessary only in three cases.

Finally, the interviewer prioritized the cultivation of rapport and trust with the interviewees, fostering an environment conducive to open and honest dialogue. This approach aimed to evoke responses that were as genuine, accurate, and detailed as possible from the participants (Minichiello *et al.*, 1995).

3.4 Data coding and analysis

The interview findings were coded using the content analysis method (Neuendorf, 2002). In addition to using a text editor (MS Word), for the analysis, we utilized the data management software NVivo, which is a useful tool for managing and coordinating different projects with a large amount of data stemming from several sources and supports a systematic approach towards coding (Sotiriadou *et al.*, 2014). In this study, we utilized a conceptual content analysis approach, which is used to determine the existence and frequencies of words and concepts in a text (Sabharwal *et al.*, 2016). In this sense, we selected the deductive content analysis process[1] (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008) to test our conceptual framework. Specifically, we used a combination of words, themes, and concepts as units of analysis. While a word is the smallest element in content analysis and its use typically results in a frequency distribution of specified words or terms, a theme may be a more useful unit of measurement (Berg and Lune, 2017). A theme can constitute a simple sentence, which is a string of words that has a subject and a predicate. Concepts refer to "words grouped together into conceptual clusters (ideas) that constitute, in some instances, variables in a typical research hypothesis" (Berg and Lune, 2017). For instance, a conceptual cluster may form around the concept of OP, where words such as "productivity," "profitability" or "sales" constitute the cluster.

Our coding technique involved the creation of specific code lists, aligning with intercoder agreement principles (Manoharan *et al.*, 2021). Three parent codes were created with the thematic concepts of "HRM practices," "EB," and "OP." Then, we manually coded all the information from the interviews related to these three concepts. Specifically, under EB, we assigned words such as "fame" or "image." Similarly, words such as "productivity" and "profitability" were clustered around the concept of OP. Under the thematic concept of HRM practices, we searched for the subconcepts of recruitment, selection, training, appraisal, compensation, and benefits, in addition to specific words, as there are many ways in which a practice may be described, and we built an exhaustive list of words beyond our scope. For EB and OP, we searched for several relevant words throughout the text of each interview. By assigning parent codes to these concepts, we were able to locate and retrieve the relevant coded passages effectively from our documents, thus facilitating data analysis and interpretation. Following the work of Kim *et al.* (2020) and Elo and Kyngäs (2008), we develop a conceptual matrix (see Table 3) reflecting the rationale behind the coding process.

3.5 Additional measures

After examining management's perceptions of EB and HRM, we took our research one step further by combining the two variables to explore their combination outcomes. Specifically,

Thematic concepts	HRM practices	Employer branding	Business performance
Parent codes Related coded information	HRMP Recruitment (Rec) Selection (Sel) Training (Tra) Development (Dev) Appraisal (App) Compensation (Com) and Wages (Wag)	EBR "Image" (Ima) "Fame" (Fam) "Corporate image" (Coi) "Perception" (Per) "Character" (Car) "Reputation" (Rep) "Prestige" (Pre) "Signal" (Sig) "Communication" (Com) "Marketing" (Mar)	BPR "Productivity" (Pro) "Profitability" (Prf) "Achievement of targets" (Act) "Efficiency" (Eff) "Performance" (Per) "Results" (Res) "Turnover" (Tuo) "Sales" (Sal) "Customer "satisfaction" (Cus) "Customer numbers" (Cun) "Customer Reservations" (Cur)

Source(s): Created by authors

Table 3. Conceptual matrix – codification of the variables under study

we completed the analysis with a quantitative analysis twist to add data richness and depth to the inquiry (Denzin, 2012). To this end, we used SPSS 25 to extensively explore the relationship between EB and HRM practices in SMHs and their relationship with OP. Specifically, to establish the volume of each HRM practice and each EB practice and evaluate their level, we summed the values of each coded variable per interview. This is a widely used practice when managing data expressing the occurrence of multiple practices in HRM and evaluating the magnitude of application for clustered HRM practices (e.g. Galanaki *et al.*, 2019; Szierbowski-Seibel and Kabst, 2018; Ligthart *et al.*, 2021).

Four variables were used to represent *HRM practices* (Paauwe and Boselie, 2005), namely, staffing, training and development, performance appraisal, and compensation. The measure of each variable was established based on the coding and evaluation of the interview transcriptions as conducted by two independent readers. (1) *Staffing* consisted of two 1–5 ordinal subscales, namely, recruitment and selection. Recruitment was measured by the sum of all references to any of the following: word-of-mouth, paid advertisement, announcement of job description details, job postings at the company's offices, recruitment on a website or social media (Cesaroni and Consoli, 2015), referrals, or walk-ins. Selection was measured by the sum of all references to any of the following: cv screening, selection interviews, selection tests, selection through social media, reference checks, or internships. Therefore, staffing was a scale variable that took a value between 2 and 13. (2) *Training and Development* was the sum of 6 categorical (1 = yes and 0 = no) variables. These were on-the-job training, subsidized formation programs, seminars, induction training, training for new tasks, and training for performance variables, as well as a 0–2 training frequency variable (0 = when necessary, 1 = regularly, and 2 = both). Therefore, T&D was a variable that could take values from 0 to 8. (3) *Performance management* was also the sum of 5 categorical (0 = no, and 1 = yes) variables, namely, formal appraisal, reference to regular appraisal, reference to performance-related pay and reference to performance-based training, as well as a 0–3 variable for source of appraisal (0 = not mentioned, 1 = direct supervisor, 2 = direct supervisor + 1 more evaluator and 3 = more appraisers and 360 appraisal). (4) *Compensation* was the sum of 3 categorical (0 = no and 1 = yes) variables, namely, salary in excess of the minimum wage, reference to fixed plus variable compensation, and performance-related pay.

As the aim of EB is to communicate employment experiences and shape perceptions (Lievens and Slaughter, 2016), we measured EB as a sum of 4 aspects (0 = no and 1 = yes).

The use of social media for EB (Cesaroni and Consoli, 2015), collaboration with educational institutions, and employees as ambassadors (advocacy) (Styvén *et al.*, 2022) were considered the first three tools/aspects used to communicate and increase the brand awareness of hotels. The fourth tool acts supplementarily to the first three and involves the existence (or lack) of concrete value(s) that highlight distinct part(s) of a firm's corporate identity. Therefore, hotel managers who mentioned all 4 tools were clustered in the high-EB category, those who scored 3 or 2 were clustered in the medium-EB category, and those who scored 1 or 0 were placed in the low EB category.

The outcome variable *OP* was measured with a 1–5 Likert scale. In the interview guide, there were several questions on profits, market share, and economic robustness, and on the comparison of all of these with the focal firm's competition. Two researchers independently read the interviews and evaluated each interviewer's expression of feelings of satisfaction with their level of business success, i.e. how much the interviewee expressed that the company had good economic performance compared to its competition (1 = not at all, 2 = slightly, 3 = enough, 4 = much, and 5 = very much). Hotels that received a score of 5 were clustered in the high-performance category; those with a score of 4 were placed in the medium-performance category; and those with scores of 1, 2 and 3 were grouped in the low-performance category. In case of substantial disagreement between the two raters, a third member of the research team gave her rating, and the final rating used in the analysis was the average of all three raters. Finally, we standardized the data for all the variables to ensure that they were transformed into a common format for further analysis.

4. Results
In this section, we present the interview findings regarding hotel managers' perspectives on the adopted HRM practices, EB, and their impact on OP.

4.1 Views on basic human resource management practices
At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked about the HRM practices that were implemented in their hotel. Using Word and NVivo software, we conducted a text search query to analyze participant responses concerning HRM practices. With respect to the text search criteria tab of the NVivo software, we initially entered the titles of the HRM sub concepts to search for interviewee responses.

Regarding recruitment and selection, twenty-eight of the thirty-four participants (82.4%) reported using combined methods, such as job websites, social media, and references, to communicate job vacancies. Furthermore, twelve (38.7%) participants stated that they utilized a short internship period to assess the suitability of candidates before offering an employment contract.

In training and development, thirty hotels (88.2%) reported using on-the-job training for their employees, with twenty-two (64.7%) training their employees during induction. Most of the hotels (64.7%) provide training to their workforce only when necessary. Eight managers reported conducting systematic training sessions once or twice a year. However, thirteen (38.2%) managers, many of whom were from medium-sized hotels, found it imperative to provide professional seminars to their employees.

Regarding performance appraisals, most employers do not appraise their employees. More specifically, twenty-two (64.7%) did not adopt formal appraisals for employee performance evaluations. Instead, they follow informal techniques, such as oral feedback sessions and face-to-face discussions. In contrast, twelve hotels implement formal appraisals

in specific forms, and the direct supervisor is responsible for conducting the appraisals. More rarely, the hotel owner also participates in the process.

Concerning compensation, all hotels (100%) abide by fixed sectorial collective agreements that are higher than the minimum wage in Greece. While in twenty-two hotels (64.7%), compensation is provided in the form of solely a fixed wage, twelve employers (35.3%) provide bonuses on top of that wage. Bonuses are based on performance, especially for those in high-level positions.

4.2 Views on employer branding

Considering the resource constraints of SMHs, combined with the temporary nature of operations due to touristic seasonality in Greece, one could expect that EB is not a major concern, as it is in larger hotels. However, the results showed that more than two-thirds of the hotels under study were investing in EB efforts.

Specifically, after searching for related words in the search text criteria tab, we found that twenty-three (67.6%) owners claimed to be actively engaged in EB efforts with the aim of enhancing their hotel's legitimacy and improving their employer image. Except for micro hotels, SMHs appear to invest significantly in EB. Many interviewees emphasized the extensive use of social media, particularly LinkedIn, as a means of promoting their business initiatives. The use of social media was frequently mentioned as an important form of digital marketing. For example, HRM 19 reported that all their posts on social media refer to the delivery of high-quality customer service. CEO 28 stated that, "*Social media should be used to communicate that our family culture and teamwork are parts of our organizational culture. In this case, we can recruit candidates with similar values to our hotel. I am thinking of taking pictures of our operations team while they are on duty and uploading them on social media to communicate the family atmosphere in our business. I believe that this will make employees feel involved and perform better*" (CEO 28). Finally, CEO 26 and MAN 31 mentioned that they utilize social media as a tool to promote excursions or annual parties for their employees.

Collaboration with educational institutions emerged as the second most popular means of pursuing EB efforts. More specifically, five interviewees (MAN 18, HRM 19, HRM 30, MAN 31, CEO 34) claimed that they cooperate with educational institutions to recruit high-quality individuals. There were also managers who stated that they regularly conduct seminars on business, innovation, and branding in educational institutions.

Four micro-owners mentioned that they aim to cultivate a positive professional image by turning employees into brand ambassadors. These owners rely on advocacy, as they argue that happy employees reinforce positive word-of-mouth and contribute to an increase in brand awareness among potential employees.

Finally, ten interviewees—representing five medium-sized, three small-sized, and two micro sized hotels—emphasized the significance of the content of the messages that they communicated. Specifically, hotel managers stressed the importance of corporate culture and values when communicating their brand using EB tools. Employees need to feel that they work in a family and affective environment with strong interpersonal relationships, in which they actively participate in their employers' decisions and undertake challenging tasks to reciprocate and contribute to business growth. Indicatively, a manager reported, "*We are very close to our staff. They share our enthusiasm in promoting our brand, and this brings only positive results* (MAN 31). Similarly, an owner stated, "*We place strong emphasis on retaining our staff for a long period; thus, we make them feel involved. We should not forget that one of the reasons why loyal customers keep returning is because of the interpersonal relationship they had with the front-line employee or the individual they interacted with during their first stay*" (CEO 23).

4.3 Views on organizational performance

Hotel managers were asked to express their opinions regarding their hotel's OP. In the interview guide, several questions referred to the achievement of business targets and profitability, notably in comparison to those of their competition. Twenty-nine participants (85.3%) reported that their profitability had increased over the last year (just before the outbreak of the pandemic). The interviewees emphasized that their profitability was influenced by their collaboration with tour operators in international tourism markets due to the high competition among hotels within and outside Greece. In addition to the importance of cross-border relations, personal efforts and family identity were also mentioned as factors that contributed to an increased OP. Finally, a few owners mentioned that service differentiation was also essential in achieving high levels of OP.

4.4 Views on the relationship between human resource management and organizational performance

All the interviewees (100%) expressed their conviction that effective HRM leads to increased levels of OP. Ten hotels provided specific examples from their own experience. The results showed that this link can be realized in diverse ways.

Employees are encouraged and motivated to apply their skills and capabilities in a creative manner through the provision of rewards and incentives. For instance, "*HRM is critical to organizational success. I believe that keeping your staff motivated through the provision of bonuses is the ideal scenario in this direction*" (CEO 9); "*Employers need to prioritize rewarding their employees. Recruiting and selecting several employees is not enough for achieving high organizational performance*" (MAN 3); "*In addition to their monthly wage, employees sometimes also get bonuses. This kind of reward helps them perform better* (CEO 16); "*Employees are the heart of every business. Offering your employees high rewards and incentives, as well as giving them the opportunity to undertake new or additional tasks, boosts individual and organizational performance*" (HRM 30); and "*Keeping your team happy and motivated to work is the only recipe for bringing high profits to your organization*" (MAN 31).

The link between HRM and OP was also attributed to the enhancement of employee skills and knowledge through training initiatives. Indicatively, "*We provide professional seminars to our staff for several days and a specific number of hours. In the end, all the participants receive a relevant certification. We seek certified professionals in our business even if this procedure may cost. We are sure that the initiative will pay off in the end*" (MAN 4); "*The better and more efficient the training is, the easier for the employee to accommodate the needs of the customer*" (MAN 17). In addition, "*Employees are the heart of our business. When we refer to organizations offering higher quality of services, we must always think that well-trained employees are a prerequisite for achieving business goals* (MAN 18). An HR manager added that, "*Training is fundamental for increasing the performance of any firm. However, we need to understand what return on investment that training will have for performance. Measuring HR outcomes is not an easy task* (HRM 19).

Table 4 provides an overview of the key qualitative data.

4.5 Combination of variables

At this stage, we engage to a graphical exploration as a supplementary analysis to further elucidate the qualitative data extracted from the interviews. This graphical exploration aims to provide a visual representation of the findings, enhancing their clarity. Specifically, we aim to observe the interplay between the variables of EB and HRM, discerning their collective impact on OP.

To examine the combination of EB and HRM, we conducted a graphical exploration using a 2-axis, 4-quartile graph to represent four different configurations. Each hotel is represented by a sphere. The size of each sphere represents the performance level of the hotel, while its

| Views on	Most important findings
Basic HRM running practices	
Staffing	Job ads on career websites and social media, and the use of references. Shortage of qualified employees
Training	Prevalence of on-the-job training
Performance appraisals	High use of oral evaluations
Compensation	Fixed temporary agreements, minimum wage, with a minority using bonuses
EB activities	
Technology	Brand awareness through the use of social networks and the creation and maintenance of a corporate website
Collaborations	Collaboration with educational institutions
Advocacy	Employees as brand ambassadors
Culture	Internal cultivation and external promotion of an affective, "family" organizational culture, focusing on strong interpersonal relationships
Multiple avenues to high business performance	
Collaborations	Collaboration with partners/international tour operators
Climate	Family climate
Differentiation	Service differentiation (e.g. an eco-friendly establishment)
HRM practices leading to increased performance	
Compensation and rewards	High rewards
Training and development	Extensive training
Source(s): Created by authors	

Table 4.
An analytical view of
the most important
findings

position represents the level of HRM practices (on the horizontal axis) and the level of EB (on the vertical axis). For the data analysis, the three variables (EB, HRM, and OP) were standardized to ensure consistency and uniformity among the variables. The results revealed four dominant combinations of EB and HRM in relation to OP (see Figure 1).

Specifically, there are 4 clusters of EB with HRM combinations:

(1) High EB-High HRM (circled in the top right corner, with 5/34 hotels, mainly medium-sized, all scoring high on OP)

(2) Medium EB-High HRM (circled in the middle right, with 4/34 hotels, mostly small-sized, with medium OP)

(3) Low EB-Low HRM (circled at the bottom-left, with 12/34 hotels, mainly micro and small-sized hotels, only one of which has high OP, five with medium OP, and six with low OP)

(4) Medium EB-Medium HRM (loose bubbles, more than one-third of the hotels examined-13/34; most of them are small and medium-sized, as only one has high OP, nine medium OP, and three low OP).

In summary, our findings displayed in graph 1 indicate that EB is high only when HRM is high, and high OP is mostly observed when both HRM and EB are high (Cluster i). Likewise, a large investment in HRM does not necessarily link with high OP (Cluster ii) unless it is coupled with high EB. Thus, we can conclude that EB and HRM should be aligned, preferably at high levels, although aligning the highest levels of HRM may not be necessary to achieve high OP. Clusters with low levels of both EB and HRM typically linked with low OP (Cluster iii), while clusters with medium levels of both EB and HRM were associated with medium OP
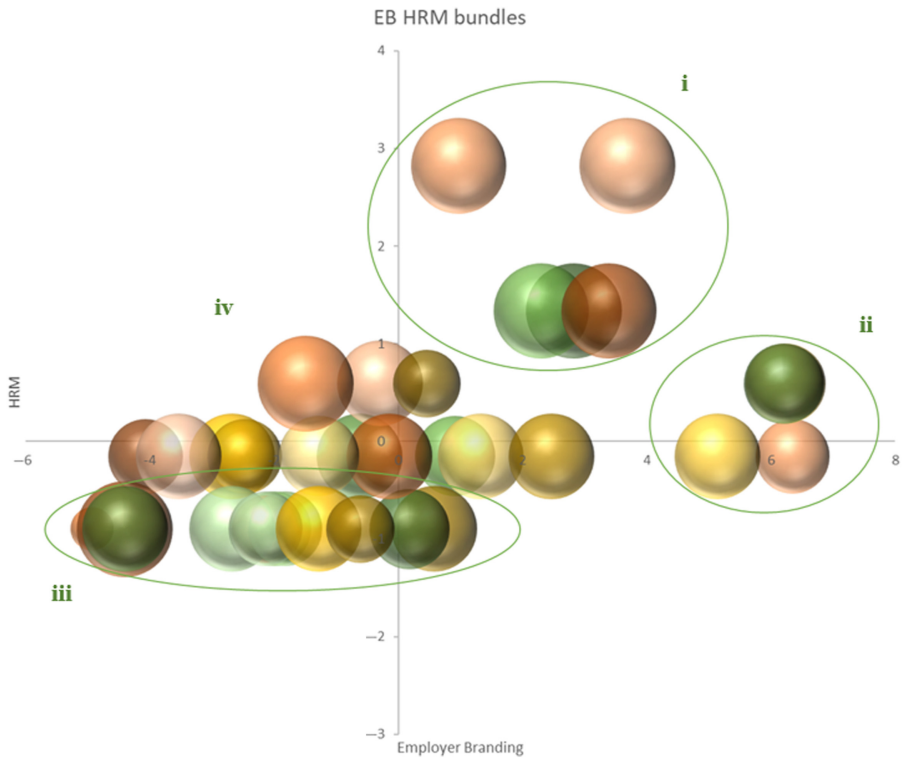
Figure 1.
Interplay between EB
and HRM: impact
on OP

Note(s): Combinations of EB with HRM. The size of the bubbles represents the height of
the OP
Source(s): Created by authors

(Cluster iv). However, it is worth noting that two hotels (one in each cluster) achieved high
OPs despite having low or medium levels of EB and HRM.

Table 5 presents the distribution of participating hotels across the four clusters along with
their corresponding OP scores.

5. Discussion
Building on the limited literature of EB in SMEs (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2020), this study
intended to make an empirical contribution to the role of HRM and EB in evoking SMH

	C1	C2	C3	C4
Total number of hotels	5	4	12	13
High OP	*5*	–	1	1
Medium OP	–	*4*	5	*9*
Low OP	–	–	6	3

Table 5.
Hotel distribution
across the four clusters
along with their
corresponding OP
levels

Note(s): Italics indicate the highest number of hotels within each cluster across all performance levels. When
combined with the number of hotels from other performance levels, it sums up to the total number of hotels
Source(s): Created by authors

performance. In this sense, this study investigates the interplay between EB and HRM practices in enhancing performance in SMHs.

While all hotel owners/managers agreed on the importance of the HRM practices, there was a massive informality aspect in the application of such practices (in agreement to Knox and Walsh, 2005), such as workforce assessment in the form of oral discussions. According to the owners/managers, training and compensation/rewards are the two most significant HRM practices for high-performance in their hotel. Training is typically ad hoc or based on manager discretion, and rewards are also inconsistent and informal. Our findings echo previous research on informal training (e.g. Kotey and Slade, 2005) and staffing processes in SMEs (e.g. Harney and Dundon, 2006). Confirming the positive and the strategic nature of informality in HRM (Harney and Alkhalaf, 2020), our findings suggest that a stronger emphasis on training and compensation/rewards, contributes to higher levels of organizational performance in smaller hotels. Conversely, formal and sophisticated HRM practices, such as prioritization in learning and development and provision of bonuses (Ružić, 2015), can be implemented more extensively by medium-sized hotels (Paauwe and Boselie, 2005).

In terms of EB, most owners/managers invest in such initiatives to bolster legitimacy, improve employer image, and enhance overall performance. More specifically, the high use of social media confirms its cost-effective role in raising employer brand-awareness and attracting talent through the creation of engaging content (Cesaroni and Consoli, 2015; Nicoli *et al.*, 2022). In addition, SMH managers highlighted the significance of partner collaboration for business success, aligning with the literature emphasizing network partners' role in mitigating liabilities, organizational stability (Williamson *et al.*, 2002), and the overall success of SMEs (Sefiani *et al.*, 2018). In this sense, strategic investments in EB, particularly through social media and business collaborations, play a crucial role in enhancing the legitimacy and employer image of SMHs, ultimately leading to improved performance. Also, participants emphasized the importance of cultivating a supportive, family organizational culture to attract and retain talent, fostering engagement and improved performance (Saha and Kumar, 2018). Thus, the cultivation of a supportive culture has the potential to positively impact employee engagement and performance, suggesting that organizational culture serves as a critical determinant of success in SMHs.

Reflecting most of the participants reports that together HRM and EB may contribute to high OP, this study underscores the complementary relationship between HRM and EB in driving hotel performance, reflecting on the synergistic effects of social exchange (Blau, 1964) and signaling theories (Spence, 1973). As hotel employees receive positive treatment through the implementation of HRM, they seem to repay their employer by performing well (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2007). Positioning EB as a communication imperative, highlights the significance of communication and perceptions in HRM. There were signals sent by hotels to retain current employees and to attract suitable candidates. Employees' perceptions and attributions of the applied HRM practices are likely to be widely shared and should agree with the HRM practices that the managers claim implementing. Thus, adding to the discussion on actual and perceived HRM (Jiang *et al.*, 2013), specifically relevant in the hotel industry as previous research has established (Kanwal and Van Hoye, 2020), our findings support that there should be significant EB efforts for HRM practices to lead to superior results. If a communication effort is missing, HRM practices will pay off mediocrely, and vice versa.

To measure the extent to which one variable influences the other, we examined the effects of the HRM-EB synergy on hotel performance under the lens of both social exchange and signaling theories. Our graphical analysis confirmed that increased performance occurs when these two factors are aligned. More specifically, when high EB and high HRM are combined, they lead to high performance, mostly in small or medium, not micro hotels.

Specifically, out of 5 hotels in the first high EB-high HRM cluster achieving high organizational performance, 3 are medium-sized and 2 small-sized. Importantly, the common characteristic of the two smaller hotels achieving high organizational performance is that they have differentiated their service. In this sense, 1 eco-friendly hotel, and 1 boutique hotel turned their liabilities of smallness to a competitive advantage.

The second cluster, when EB is medium and HRM is high (even higher than the HRM of the first cluster), results indicated medium performance levels in all hotels. Hence, the first and second clusters suggest that SMHs can efficiently manage their resource limitations and achieve medium and high levels of performance by investing less in expensive HRM practices and more in EB, to reinforce HRM outcomes. In contrast, medium EB with medium HRM and low EB with low HRM seem to be associated with mostly medium and low levels of organizational performance, respectively. Subsequently, we may argue that SMHs can efficiently manage resource limitations and achieve medium to high levels of performance by prioritizing investment in EB over expensive HRM practices.

However, there are outliers in both the medium EB-HRM and low EB-HRM clusters, with 1 hotel in the medium EB-HRM cluster and 1 hotel in the low EB-HRM cluster achieving high organizational performance. In the medium EB-HRM cluster, the high-performing hotel (CEO 28) focused on gamifying the customer experience (Worimegbe *et al.*, 2020) by adding new services, such as integrating an escape room in the hotel's premises. In the low EB-HRM cluster, the high-performing hotel (CEO 7) attributed its success to cultivating a "feels like home" atmosphere that attracts returning customers (Lv *et al.*, 2021). In both "outlier"/ exception cases, the success seems to be related to factors unrelated to EB or HRM. The findings of the exception cases, stemming from our quantitative cluster approach, seem to converge with managers' original statements on using specific alternative avenues to improve organizational performance. The findings from these exception cases align with managers' original statements on utilizing specific alternative strategies to improve organizational performance, such as extending their network through partnerships (Partanen *et al.*, 2008), service differentiation, and fostering a family culture that nurtures personal relationships (Cunningham, 2010; Li and Rees, 2021). These cases highlight the importance of exploring alternative avenues when smallness is a key operational characteristic.

6. Theoretical contributions

The study findings agree with social exchange theory, emphasizing how positive HRM encourages better employee performance (Takeuchi *et al.*, 2007). Effective communication of HRM practices through EB is crucial, as EB alone may not yield substantial results. If a communication effort is insufficient, HRM practices will result in mediocre outcomes. In turn, a minimum level of investment in HRM is necessary for EB to occur at substantial levels, and only hotels that have both adequate HRM and strong EB are more likely to achieve high OP.

Our findings also align with signaling theory (Spence, 1973), as they highlight the significance of clear and consistent communication regarding HRM to attract and retain employees who align with the perceived organizational culture (Nishii and Wright, 2008). Most of our participants emphasized the importance of cultivating and signaling a family-oriented organizational culture that promotes work-life balance. Thus, suitable employees are generally attracted by corresponding perceived signals, prompted to feel involved and inspired to be loyal to their employer and thus to perform better (Kim and Sturman, 2012).

Finally, adding to the discourse on actual and perceived HRM (Jiang *et al.*, 2013), our findings imply that substantial efforts in EB (perceived) are imperative for HRM practices (actual) to yield superior outcomes.

7. Practical implications

The current study offers valuable insights for SMH managers, emphasizing the potential of their employer brand to effectively compete in the labor market and to cultivate employee loyalty through engagement and retention strategies.

While it is acknowledged that HRM in hotels faces significant challenges in dynamic and uncertain environments (He *et al.*, 2021), our findings indicate that hotels employing informal training and providing generous compensation/rewards, tend to achieve high OP. Therefore, SMH managers should prioritize enhancing employee competence and autonomy and providing incentivized rewards to foster engagement and positive social exchange dynamics. Recognizing the resource limitations faced by smaller firms (Harney and Nolan, 2022), such as micro- and SMHs, as well as constrained compensation budgets, SMH managers are advised to consider alternatives, such as performance-related pay or "low-cost" compensation benefits (e.g. flexible schedules, expanded health benefits, and/or commuting assistance) to attract and retain talent. In addition, the study underscores the importance of combining effective EB ("talk") with tangible HRM practices ("walk") to achieve superior OP.

Even if the study revealed that HRM practices in SMHs have informal characteristics, managers are encouraged to invest in EB. In this sense, practitioners are encouraged to engage in using social media platforms as a cost-effective means for SMHs to enhance employer brand awareness (Cesaroni and Consoli, 2015). SMH managers are advised to leverage partnerships with educational institutions and other organizations to strengthen their employer image and attract top talent (Styvén *et al.*, 2022). Additionally, managers could explore innovative EB strategies tailored to the unique characteristics of SMHs. For example, they can emphasize the personal stories of employees through social media storytelling (Kemp *et al.*, 2023) or highlight the hotel's commitment to sustainability to attract socially-conscious guests and environmentally-friendly talent. Therefore, management is advised to leverage EB to augment the effectiveness of HRM investments, even when HRM budgets are limited. In essence, EB amplifies the benefits of HRM investments in SMHs. Additionally, management should focus on cultivating an affective organizational culture that promotes employee engagement and fosters a sense of belonging, ultimately contributing to improved performance and competitiveness in the hotel industry.

8. Limitations and suggestions for future research

While this paper makes significant contributions, it is important to acknowledge its limitations and consider potential avenues for future research.

First, the data were collected from August 2019 to September 2020, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic. This global crisis had severe implications for the hotel industry in Greece, as many hotels were unable to operate during the summer period, which is traditionally the time of the highest tourist activity in Greece. Therefore, it is possible that participants' perceptions may have been implicitly biased by this situation. Future research could delve into how COVID-19 has transformed HRM in the hotel industry, giving rise to a post-COVID-19 EB landscape (e.g. offering and promoting teleworking opportunities) and examining its impact on OP.

Second, the study's focus was on the Greek hospitality industry, and its findings may not be universally applicable to all industries. Expanding the research to encompass a more diverse range of sectors and national cultures could provide valuable insights. For instance, the high seasonality of the Greek hospitality sector plays a significant role in shaping HRM practices and policies, such as short-term employment contracts (Williamson and Harris, 2019). Similarly, the hotel industry's lower profit margins compared to those of other sectors

may limit HRM investments. Moreover, given that our interviews were based on a limited pool of only 34 SMHs, it is advisable to confirm the present findings with a large-scale survey and quantitative research design (Klein *et al.*, 2018).

Finally, as EB is a topic that primarily concerns employees, their perspectives are critical for drawing conclusions at both the individual and organizational levels (Tumasjan *et al.*, 2020). Given that this study relies on management perceptions of EB and HRM practices, future research could expand the present findings by conducting a multilevel quantitative analysis with a larger sample size and incorporating employee viewpoints to provide a well-rounded perspective (Pahos *et al.*, 2023).

Note

1. Deductive content analysis is used when the analytical structure is operationalized on the basis of previous knowledge or when the general aim is to test existing theories in different situations (Catanzaro, 1988). It is often used in cases when the researcher needs to retest existing data in a new context This may involve testing concepts, categories, models or even hypotheses (Marshall and Rossman, 1995).

References

Aldousari, A.A., Robertson, A., Yajid, M.S.A. and Ahmed, Z.U. (2017), "Impact of employer branding on organization's performance", *Journal of Transnational Management*, Vol. 22 No. 3, pp. 153-170, doi: 10.1080/15475778.2017.1335125.

Ambler, T. and Barrow, S. (1996), "The employer brand", *Journal of Brand Management*, Vol. 4 No. 3, pp. 185-206, doi: 10.1057/bm.1996.42.

Ates, A., Garengo, P., Cocca, P. and Bititci, U. (2013), "The development of SME managerial practice for effective performance management", *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 28-54, doi: 10.1108/14626001311298402.

Backhaus, K. (2016), "Employer branding revisited", *Organization Management Journal*, Vol. 13 No. 4, pp. 193-201, doi: 10.1080/15416518.2016.1245128.

Backhaus, K. and Tikoo, S. (2004), "Conceptualizing and researching employer branding", *Career Development International*, Vol. 9 No. 5, pp. 501-517, doi: 10.1108/13620430410550754.

Baum, T. (2008), "Implications of hospitality and tourism labour markets for talent management strategies", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 20 No. 7, pp. 720-729, doi: 10.1108/09596110810897574.

Baum, T. (2019), "Does the hospitality industry need or deserve talent?", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 31 No. 10, pp. 3823-3837, doi: 10.1108/ijchm-10-2018-0805.

Berg, B.L. and Lune, H. (2017), *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, Pearson, Essex.

Bergh, D.D., Ketchen, D.J., Boyd, B.K. and Bergh, J. (2010), "New frontiers of the reputation – performance relationship: insights from multiple theories", *Journal of Management*, Vol. 36 No. 3, pp. 620-632, doi: 10.1177/0149206309355320.

Bertaux, D. and Kohli, M. (1984), "The life story approach: a continental view", *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 10 No. 1, pp. 215-237, doi: 10.1146/ANNUREV.SO.10.080184.001243.

Blau, P.M. (1964), *Exchange and Power in Social Life*, John Wiley & Sons, New York.

Boxall, P., Ang, S.H. and Bartram, T. (2011), "Analysing the 'black box' of HRM: uncovering HR goals, mediators, and outcomes in a standardized service environment", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 48 No. 7, pp. 1504-1532, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6486.2010.00973.x.

Brunner, C.B. and Baum, M. (2020), "The impact of brand portfolios on organizational attractiveness", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 106, pp. 182-195, doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2019.09.014.

Campbell, J.L., Quincy, C., Osserman, J. and Pedersen, O.K. (2013), "Coding in-depth semistructured interviews: problems of unitization and intercoder reliability and agreement", *Sociological Methods and Research*, Vol. 42 No. 3, pp. 294-320, doi: 10.1177/0049124113500475.

Catanzaro, M. (1988), "Using qualitative analytical techniques", in Woods, P. and Catanzaro, M. (Eds), *Nursing Research; Theory and Practice*, Mosby, New York.

Celani, A. and Singh, P. (2011), "Signaling theory and applicant attraction outcomes", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 40 No. 2, pp. 222-238, doi: 10.1108/00483481111106093.

Cesaroni, F.M. and Consoli, D. (2015), "Are small businesses really able to take advantage of social media?", *Electronic Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 13, pp. 257-268, doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-07905-9_15.

Cunningham, L.X. (2010), "Managing human resources in SMEs in a transition economy: evidence from China", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 21 No. 12, pp. 2120-2141, doi: 10.1080/09585192.2010.509620.

Dauth, T., Schmid, S., Baldermann, S. and Orban, F. (2023), "Attracting talent through diversity at the top: the impact of TMT diversity and firms' efforts to promote diversity on employer attractiveness", *European Management Journal*, Vol. 41 No. 1, pp. 9-20, doi: 10.1016/j.emj.2021.10.007.

Delgado-Garcia, J.B., De Quevedo-Puente, E. and Diez-Esteban, J.M. (2013), "The impact of corporate reputation on firm risk: a panel data analysis of Spanish quoted firms", *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 24, pp. 1-20, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8551.2011.00782.x.

Denzin, N.K. (2012), "Triangulation 2.0", *Journal of Mixed Methods Research*, Vol. 6 No. 2, pp. 80-88, doi: 10.1177/1558689812437186.

Di Bella, L., Katsinis, A., Lagüera-González, J., Odenthal, L., Hell, M. and Lozar, B. (2023), *Annual Report on European SMEs 2022/2023*, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxemburg.

Dimitropoulos, P.E. (2018), "Profitability determinants of the Greek hospitality industry: the crisis effect", in Katsoni, V. and Velander, K. (Eds), *Innovative Approaches to Tourism and Leisure*, Springer International Publishing.

Dineen, B.R. and Allen, D.G. (2016), "Third party employment branding: human capital inflows and outflows following 'best places to work' certifications", *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 59 No. 1, pp. 90-112, doi: 10.5465/amj.2013.1091.

Dineen, B., Van Hoye, G., Lievens, F. and Rosokha, L. (2019), "Third party employment branding: what are its signaling dimensions, mechanisms, and sources?", in Greet, V.H., Buck-Ley, M.R., Anthony, R.W., John, E.B. and Jonathon, R.B.H. (Eds), *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management*, Emerald Publishing.

Elo, S. and Kyngäs, H. (2008), "The qualitative content analysis process", *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, Vol. 62 No. 1, pp. 107-115, doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.x.

Galanaki, E., Lazazzara, A. and Parry, E. (2019), "A cross-national analysis of E-HRM configurations: integrating the information technology and HRM perspectives", *Organizing for Digital Innovation*, pp. 261-276, doi: 10.1007/978-3-319-90500-6_20.

Gopang, M.A., Nebhwani, M., Khatri, A. and Marri, H.B. (2017), "An assessment of occupational health and safety measures and performance of SMEs: an empirical investigation", *Safety Science*, Vol. 93, pp. 127-133, doi: 10.1016/j.ssci.2016.11.024.

Guerrero, S., Cayrat, C. and Cossette, M. (2022), "Human resource professionals' human and social capital in SMEs: small firm, big impact", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 33 No. 16, pp. 3252-3274, doi: 10.1080/09585192.2021.1919739.

Guest, D.E., Sanders, K., Rodrigues, R. and Oliveira, T. (2021), "Signaling theory as a framework for analysing human resource management processes and integrating human resource attribution theories: a conceptual analysis and empirical exploration", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 31 No. 3, pp. 796-818, doi: 10.1111/1748-8583.12326.

Gupta, V.K. and Batra, S. (2016), "Entrepreneurial orientation and firm performance in Indian SMEs: universal and contingency perspectives", *International Small Business Journal*, Vol. 34 No. 5, pp. 660-682, doi: 10.1177/0266242615577708.

Harney, B. and Alkhalaf, H. (2020), "A quarter-century review of HRM in small and medium-sized enterprises: capturing what we know, exploring where we need to go", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 60 No. 1, pp. 5-29, doi: 10.1002/hrm.22010.

Harney, B. and Dundon, T. (2006), "Capturing complexity: developing an integrated approach to analysing HRM in SMEs", *Human Resources Management*, Vol. 16 No. 1, pp. 48-73, doi: 10.1111/j.1748-8583.2006.00004.x.

Harney, B. and Nolan, C. (2022), *Human Resource Management in Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises*, Emerald Publishing, Leeds.

He, J., Morrison, A.M. and Zhang, H. (2021), "How high-performance HR practices and LMX affect employee engagement and creativity in hospitality", *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, Vol. 45 No. 8, pp. 1360-1382, doi: 10.1177/1096348021996800.

Jiang, K., Takeuchi, R. and Lepak, D.P. (2013), "Where do we go from here? New perspectives on the black box in strategic human resource management research", *Journal of Management Studies*, Vol. 50 No. 8, pp. 1448-1480, doi: 10.1111/joms.12057.

Kanwal, H. and Van Hoye, G. (2020), "Inconsistent organizational images of luxury hotels: exploring employees' perceptions and dealing strategies", *Tourism Management Perspectives*, Vol. 36, 100738, doi: 10.1016/j.tmp.2020.100738.

Kemp, A., Gravois, R., Syrdal, H. and Mcdougal, E. (2023), "Storytelling is not just for marketing: cultivating a storytelling culture throughout the organization", *Business Horizons*, Vol. 66 No. 3, pp. 313-324, doi: 10.1016/j.bushor.2023.01.008.

Kim, Y., Rahman, I. and Bernard, S. (2020), "Comparing online reviews of hyper-local restaurants using deductive content analysis", *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 86, 102445, doi: 10.1016/j.ijhm.2019.102445.

Kim, D. and Sturman, M.C. (2012), "HR branding: how human resources can learn from product and service branding to improve attraction, selection, and retention action, selection, and retention", Center of Hospitality Research, Cornell University.

Klein, M.M., Biehl, S.S. and Friedli, T. (2018), "Barriers to smart services for manufacturing companies – an exploratory study in the capital goods industry", *Journal of Business and Industrial Marketing*, Vol. 33 No. 6, pp. 846-856, doi: 10.1108/JBIM-10-2015-0204.

Kloutsiniotis, P.V. and Mihail, D.M. (2020), "High performance work systems in the tourism and hospitality industry: a critical review", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 32 No. 7, pp. 2365-2395, doi: 10.1108/ijchm-10-2019-0864.

Knox, A. and Walsh, J. (2005), "Organizational flexibility and HRM in the hotel industry: evidence from Australia", *Human Resource Management Journal*, Vol. 15 No. 1, pp. 57-75, doi: 10.1111/j.1748-8583.2005.tb00140.x.

Kotey, B. and Slade, P. (2005), "Formal human resource management practices in small growing firms", *Journal of Small Business Management*, Vol. 43 No. 1, pp. 16-40, doi: 10.1111/j.1540-627X.2004.00123.x.

Kravariti, F., Voutsina, K., Tasoulis, K., Dibia, C. and Johnston, K. (2022), "Talent management in hospitality and tourism: a systematic literature review and research agenda", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 34 No. 1, pp. 321-360, doi: 10.1108/IJCHM-03-2021-0365.

Kucherov, D.G., Alkanova, O.N., Lisovskaia, A.Y. and Tsybova, V.S. (2023), "Employer branding orientation: effects on recruitment performance under COVID-19", *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 34 No. 10, pp. 2107-2135, doi: 10.1080/09585192.2022.2063065.

Li, S. and Rees, C.J. (2021), "Determinants of the formalization of human resource management practices: an empirical study in SMEs in eastern and western China", *Journal of Small Business Management*, Vol. 59 No. 4, pp. 735-755, doi: 10.1080/00472778.2019.1705663.

Lievens, F. (2007), "Employer branding in the Belgian Army: the importance of instrumental and symbolic beliefs for potential applicants, actual applicants, and military employees", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 46 No. 1, pp. 51-69, doi: 10.1002/hrm.20145.

Lievens, F. and Slaughter, J.E. (2016), "Employer image and employer branding: what we know and what we need to know", *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, Vol. 3 No. 1, pp. 407-440, doi: 10.1146/annurev-orgpsych-041015-062501.

Ligthart, P., Poutsma, E. and Brewster, C. (2021), "The development of financial participation in Europe", *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, Vol. 60 No. 3, pp. 479-510, doi: 10.1111/bjir.12629.

Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G. (1985), *Naturalistic Inquiry*, Sage, Beverly Hills, CA.

Lv, X., Liu, Y., Xu, S. and Li, Q. (2021), "Welcoming host, cozy house? The impact of service attitude on sensory experience", *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 95, 102949, doi: 10.1016/j.ijhm.2021.102949.

Manoharan, A., Gross, M.J. and Sardeshmukh, S.R. (2021), "Antecedents and outcomes of a culturally diverse workforce in hotels", *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, Vol. 45 No. 8, pp. 1383-1416, doi: 10.1177/1096348020986906.

Marescaux, E., De Winne, S. and Forrier, A. (2019), "Developmental HRM, employee well-being and performance: the moderating role of developing leadership", *European Management Review*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 317-331, doi: 10.1111/emre.12168.

Marshall, C. and Rossman, G.B. (1995), *Designing Qualitative Research*, Sage Publications, London.

Minichiello, V., Aroni, R., Timewell, E. and Alexander, L. (1995), *Depth Interviewing: Principles, Techniques, Analysis*, 2nd ed., Longman, Melbourne.

Myrden, S.E. and Kelloway, K. (2015), "Young workers' perception of brand image: main and moderating effects", *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, Vol. 2 No. 3, pp. 267-281, doi: 10.1108/JOEPP-09-2014-0055.

Näppä, A. (2022), "Co-created employer brands: theinterplay of strategy and identity", *European Journal of Training and Development*, Vol. 47 No. 10, pp. 37-52, doi: 10.1108/EJTD-05-2021-0065.

Neuendorf, K.A. (2002), *The Content Analysis Guidebook*, Sage publications, London.

Nicoli, N., Henriksen, K., Komodromos, M. and Tsagalas, D. (2022), "Investigating digital storytelling for the creation of positively engaging digital content", *EuroMed Journal of Business*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 157-173, doi: 10.1108/EMJB-03-2021-0036.

Nishii, L.H. and Wright, P.M. (2008), "Variability within organizations: implications for strategic human resources management", *The People Make the Place: Dynamic Linkages Between Individuals and Organizations*, Taylor & Francis Group/Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New York, NY.

Oecd (2023), *Economic Survey of Greece*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

Ogbonnaya, C. and Valizade, D. (2016), "High performance work practices, employee outcomes and organizational performance: a 2-1-2 multilevel mediation analysis", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 29 No. 2, pp. 239-259, doi: 10.1080/09585192.2016.1146320.

Okhuysen, G. and Bonardi, J.-P. (2011), "The challenges of building theory by combining lenses", *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 36 No. 1, pp. 6-11, doi: 10.5465/amr.36.1.zok006.

Paauwe, J. and Boselie, P. (2005), "'Best practices . . . in spite of performance': just a matter of imitation?", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 16 No. 6, pp. 987-1003, doi: 10.1080/09585190500120798.

Pahos, N., Galanaki, E., Van Der Heijden, B. and De Jong, J. (2021), "The moderating effect of age on the association between high-performance work systems and employee performance in different work roles", *Work, Aging and Retirement*, Vol. 7 No. 3, pp. 214-228, doi: 10.1093/workar/waaa032.

Pahos, N., Galanaki, E. and Van Der Heijden, B.I.J.M. (2023), "Multi-level effects of human resource bundles on the performance of aging employees", *Human Resource Development Quarterly*, n/a, doi: 10.1002/hrdq.21501.

Partanen, J., Möller, K., Westerlund, M., Rajala, R. and Rajala, A. (2008), "Social capital in the growth of science-and-technology-based SMEs", *Industrial Marketing Management*, Vol. 37 No. 5, pp. 513-522, doi: 10.1016/j.indmarman.2007.09.012.

Patton, M.Q. (1990), *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods*, Sage Publications, Newbury Park.

Perotti, F.A., Dhir, A., Ferraris, A. and Kliestik, T. (2023), "Investigating digital technologies' implementation in circular businesses: evidence from the going circular path", *Journal of Management and Organization*, pp. 1-31, doi: 10.1017/jmo.2023.60.

Puncheva-Michelotti, P., Vocino, A., Michelotti, M. and Gahan, P. (2018), "Employees or Consumers? The role of competing identities in individuals' evaluations of corporate reputation", *Personnel Review*, Vol. 47 No. 6, pp. 1261-1284, doi: 10.1108/pr-04-2017-0116.

Russell, S. and Brannan, M.J. (2016), "'Getting the right people on the bus': recruitment, selection and integration for the branded organization", *European Management Journal*, Vol. 34 No. 2, pp. 114-124, doi: 10.1016/j.emj.2016.01.001.

Ružić, M.D. (2015), "Direct and indirect contribution of HRM practice to hotel company performance", *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, Vol. 49, pp. 56-65, doi: 10.1016/j.ijhm.2015.05.008.

Sabharwal, M., Levine, H. and D'agostino, M. (2016), "A conceptual content analysis of 75 Years of diversity research in public administration", *Review of Public Personnel Administration*, Vol. 38 No. 2, pp. 248-267, doi: 10.1177/0734371x16671368.

Saha, S. and Kumar, S.P. (2018), "Organizational culture as a moderator between affective commitment and job satisfaction", *International Journal of Public Sector Management*, Vol. 31 No. 2, pp. 184-206, doi: 10.1108/ijpsm-03-2017-0078.

Samo, A.H., Talreja, S., Bhatti, A.A., Asad, S.A. and Hussain, L. (2020), "Branding yields better harvest: explaining the mediating role of employee engagement in employer branding and organizational outcomes", *ETIKONOMI*, Vol. 19 No. 1, pp. 77-94, doi: 10.15408/etk.v19i1.12320.

Scuotto, V., Santoro, G., Bresciani, S. and Del Giudice, M. (2017), "Shifting intra- and inter-organizational innovation processes towards digital business: an empirical analysis of SMEs", *Creativity and Innovation Management*, Vol. 26 No. 3, pp. 247-255, doi: 10.1111/caim.12221.

Sefiani, Y., Davies, B.J., Bown, R. and Kite, N. (2018), "Performance of SMEs in Tangier: the interface of networking and wasta", *EuroMed Journal of Business*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 20-43, doi: 10.1108/emjb-06-2016-0016.

Sheehan, M. (2014), "Human resource management and performance: evidence from small and medium-sized firms", *International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship*, Vol. 32 No. 5, pp. 545-570, doi: 10.1177/0266242612465454.

Sheehan, M. and Garavan, T. (2022), "High-performance work practices and labour productivity: a six wave longitudinal study of UK manufacturing and service SMEs", *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 33 No. 16, pp. 3353-3386, doi: 10.1080/09585192.2021.2005658.

Sotiriadou, P., Brouwers, J. and Le, T.-A. (2014), "Choosing a qualitative data analysis tool: a comparison of NVivo and Leximancer", *Annals of Leisure Research*, Vol. 17 No. 2, pp. 218-234, doi: 10.1080/11745398.2014.902292.

Sparrow, P. and Cooper, C. (2015), "Editorial", *Journal of Organizational Effectiveness: People and Performance*, Vol. 2 No. 1, doi: 10.1108/JOEPP-01-2015-0003.

Spence, M. (1973), "Job market signaling", *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, Vol. 87 No. 3, pp. 355-374, doi: 10.2307/1882010.

Styvén, M.E., Näppä, A., Mariani, M. and Nataraajan, R. (2022), "Employee perceptions of employers' creativity and innovation: implications for employer attractiveness and branding in tourism and hospitality", *Journal of Business Research*, Vol. 141, pp. 290-298, doi: 10.1016/j.jbusres.2021.12.038.

Szierbowski-Seibel, K. and Kabst, R. (2018), "The impact of HR outsourcing and strategic HR integration on the HR-to-employee ratio", *International Journal of Manpower*, Vol. 39 No. 2, pp. 283-300, doi: 10.1108/ijm-06-2016-0129.

Takeuchi, R., Lepak, D.P., Wang, H. and Takeuchi, K. (2007), "An empirical examination of the mechanisms mediating between high-performance work systems and the performance of Japanese organizations", *The Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 92 No. 4, pp. 1069-1083, doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.92.4.1069.

Tharenou, P., Donohue, R. and Cooper, B. (2007), *Management Research Methods*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Theurer, C.P., Tumasjan, A., Welpe, I.M. and Lievens, F. (2018), "Employer branding: a brand equity-based literature review and research agenda", *International Journal of Management Reviews*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 155-179, doi: 10.1111/ijmr.12121.

Tumasjan, A., Kunze, F., Bruch, H. and Welpe, I.M. (2020), "Linking employer branding orientation and firm performance: testing a dual mediation route of recruitment efficiency and positive affective climate", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 59 No. 1, pp. 83-99, doi: 10.1002/hrm.21980.

Vlachos, I.P. (2009), "High-performance workplace practices for Greek companies", *EuroMed Journal of Business*, Vol. 4 No. 1, pp. 21-39, doi: 10.1108/14502190910956675.

Williamson, D. and Harris, C. (2019), "Talent management and unions", *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, Vol. 31 No. 10, pp. 3838-3854, doi: 10.1108/ijchm-10-2018-0877.

Williamson, I.O., Cable, D.M. and Aldrich, H.E. (2002), "Smaller but not necessarily weaker: how small businesses can overcome barriers to recruitment", in Katz, A.J. and Welbourne, M.T. (Eds), *Managing People in Entrepreneurial Organizations*, Emerald Group Publishing.

Worimegbe, P.M., Worimegbe, T.M. and Abiola-Oke, E. (2020), "Gamification and customers experience in the hospitality industry", *Journal of Tourism and Services*, Vol. 11 No. 21, pp. 71-87, doi: 10.29036/jots.v11i21.165.

World Travel and Tourism Council (2020), *Travel and Tourism: Global Economic Impact and Trends 2020*, WTTC, London.

Xiong, L. and King, C. (2020), "Exploring how employee sense of brand community affects their attitudes and behavior", *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Research*, Vol. 44 No. 4, pp. 567-596, doi: 10.1177/1096348020905360.

Yu, K.Y.T., Dineen, B.R., Allen, D.G. and Klotz, A.C. (2022), "Winning applicants and influencing job seekers: an introduction to the special issue on employer branding and talent acquisition", *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 61 No. 5, pp. 515-524, doi: 10.1002/hrm.22140.

139

About the authors

Irene Zografou is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB). She holds a Ph.D. from the Department of Marketing and Communication at the AUEB, an international MBA from the Department of Management Science and Technology at the same University, and an M.Sc. from the Department of Business Administration at the University of the Aegean. Her research revolves around strategic HRM, employer branding, and firm performance. She has worked in tourism firms, educational institutions, and governmental organizations. Irene has also been exposed to international business environments, having worked for the United Arab Emirates' public sector, where she trained hundreds of new hires in customer-facing roles. Irene Zografou is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: irinizografou@aueb.gr

Eleanna Galanaki is an Associate Professor and Director of the HRM Laboratory at the Department of Marketing and Communication of the Athens University of Economics and Business. Her research largely revolves around Strategic and International Human Resource Management. She is intrigued by the discourse on how the HRM practice links with performance at different levels of analysis and settings. Lately, she is involved in research on HRM and performance in SMEs, HRM and performance for an aging workforce and HRM and performance internationally. For her work she has received various awards and distinctions.