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Enhancing Employer Branding through ESG Practices: A Study on Malaysian Micro Enterprises

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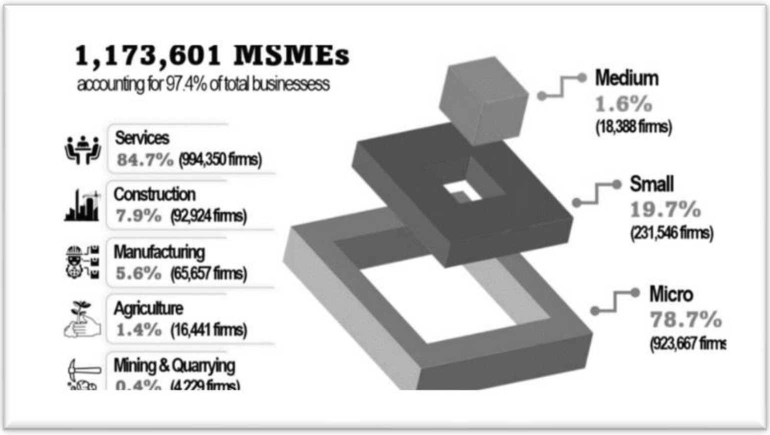
Abstract

Purpose - This conceptual paper aims to investigate the influence of environmental, social and governance (ESG) practices on employer branding of Malaysian micro enterprises. The authors posit that organization's ESG practices have a positive influence on employer branding. **Design/methodology/approach** – This paper establishes a conceptual framework by thoroughly reviewing existing literature on ESG practices and employer branding. It builds upon existing research while adding unique insights to deepen the understanding of the subject. **Findings -** The proposed conceptual framework highlights the importance of ESG practices in enhancing employer branding of Malaysian micro enterprises. The framework emphasizes the role of environmental, social and governance practices in shaping employees' perception of employer branding. **Research limitations/implications** - This paper offers a conceptual framework founded upon Social Identity Theory. As the framework is not empirically tested, further research is necessary to test, validate and refine the framework. **Practical implications** – Micro enterprises should undertake more ESG practices to enhance employer branding by recognizing the importance of ESG practices in shaping positive employee behaviours and contributing to organizational performance. **Originality/value** - This study presents a novel approach to examine the influence of individual ESG practices on employer branding. It enriches the current body of literature on micro enterprises which is scarcely studied as a target population in extant literature and provides fresh insights for academics and practitioners in the field of organizational behaviour and brand management.

Keywords - ESG Practices, Employer Branding, Micro Enterprises, Social Identity Theory

Introduction

Micro enterprises are defined as organizations with less than RM300,000 in annual sales turnover or less than 5 employees (SME, 2022). In the end of 2022, micro, small and medium enterprises constituted more than 97.4% (1,173,601) of the total business establishments in Malaysia (SME, 2022), of which 78.7% (923,667) are micro enterprises (refer to Figure 1.1).



Source: Department of Statistics, Malaysia
(https://smecorp.gov.my/index.php/en/policies/2020-02-11-08-01-24/sme-definition)
Figure 1.1 Micro Enterprises

The acute onset of covid-19 in 2019 (Tripathi et al., 2023a) and the recent Ukraine War have severely disrupted the global supply chain (Bednarski et al., 2023; El Bilali & Ben Hassen, 2024; Tsang et al., 2024). World businesses were unprepared for such major disruptions. The call for ESG compliance has become even more critical for smaller businesses who are strapped for resources. As the tentacles of global businesses reach almost every corner of the world, SME are compelled to comply with global ESG initiatives (Ahmad et al., 2024; Garrido-Ruso et al., 2024; Oliver Yébenes, 2024; Ortiz-Martínez et al., 2023; Setyaningsih et al., 2024). Their smallest counterpart, micro enterprises, is also inadvertently caught in the wave, especially those who supply goods and services to export-oriented SME or directly to multinational enterprises (Ahmad et al., 2024; Garrido-Ruso et al., 2024; Oliver Yébenes, 2024; Ortiz-Martínez et al., 2023; Setyaningsih et al., 2024). Alliance Bank (2023) reported that the need to engage with sustainability issues is a matter of survival for SME, who often survive at the mercy of big multinational corporations (Chen et al., 2022).

The sudden need for Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) compliance has put many micro enterprises in a tight spot. Many of them are still grappling with the foreign concept of ESG, let alone be prepared for such responsibilities (Alliance Bank, 2023). Even national governments are struggling with formulating new ESG standards or legislating new statutory ESG framework (Naeem et al., 2022; Shastry, 2023).

Apart from ESG compliance, micro enterprises are plagued by talent management issues. According to a survey conducted by PwC (2023), talent attraction and retention remains one of the top challenges for SME. They found that 28% of employees working in Malaysia are likely to change their job in the next 12 months compared to 16% last year. This statistical trend is alarming for micro enterprises as they are likely to be the biggest loser in the global talent war because smaller enterprises are more likely to fall into human resources and financing problems such as high employee turnover, negative cash flow, financing difficulties and high financing costs (Rao et al., 2023; Setyaningsih et al., 2024)

As micro enterprises continue to combat mounting pressures on their cash flow and decreasing profit margin, they will concentrate their limited resources in the core areas of their businesses which are cash flow inducive in the shorter term, rather than bigger sustainability issues which only affect them in the long run (Chen et al., 2022). Micro enterprises also suffer from low publicity (Chen et al., 2022). They fail to see any benefits in engaging in ESG practices in the absence of any tangible financial rewards (Chen et al., 2022). Due to the above concerns, micro enterprises often find themselves prioritizing other profit-oriented objectives over ESG compliance practices (Dartey-Baah & Amoako, 2021). Similar findings were also recorded in the survey commissioned by World Economic Forum (2022). According to the survey, sustainability issues remained an overlooked topic as only 7% of decision-makers surveyed citing sustainability as a challenge. The survey indicated that SME tend to underestimate the challenges or impacts of ESG practices on their employees.

Hence, this conceptual paper will argue that the benefits of ESG practices engagement are two-fold. First, it allows micro enterprises to continue or enhance their participation in the global value chain (Setyaningsih et al., 2024). Secondly, micro enterprises will experience enhancement in their employer branding as a result of practicing ESG. The enhancement in employer branding will help micro enterprises to reduce their employee turnover rate (Chopra et al., 2023; Salameh et al., 2023).

It is noteworthy that extant literature scarcely explored the relationship between ESG practices and employer branding. Many previous studies explored tangible impacts of ESG practices such as financial or environmental performance (Abdullah et al., 2023; Almaqtari et al., 2023; Dash & Mohanty, 2023; Kapil & Kumar, 2023; Khatri & Kjærland, 2023; Uyar et al., 2023; Yorke et al., 2023). Intangible impacts, such as employer branding, as a result of ESG practices was scarcely researched. ESG practices in their individual strand also seldom became the subject of study as most extant studies used ESG as a unidimensional construct. There are very limited studies in the literature that focus on micro enterprises, notwithstanding that they consist of the bulk of businesses in Malaysia. It is important that more research interest is dedicated to this research field so that more empirical evidence can be collected and analyzed for the benefit of business practitioners.

The results of the proposed research will also be significant to institutional ESG regulators in understanding how micro enterprises respond to global calls for ESG compliance. A positive relationship in the proposed hypothesis between ESG practices and employer branding will serve as empirical evidence for ESG regulators to convince the micro enterprises in their countries to adopt ESG practices. No longer should ESG practices be viewed as the playing field reserved solely for bigger enterprises, micro enterprises have equally much to gain from practicing ESG, especially in securing and retaining their precious talent in a fiercely competitive labour market.

Literature Review

Theoretical Framework

The phenomenon of employer branding enhancement as a result of ESG practices can be explained by Social Identity Theory (SIT). SIT was originally developed as a result of the discrepancies observed in the realistic group conflict theory, the work of Muzafer Sherif and his associates (Grant, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to the realistic group conflict theory, intergroup competition takes place when two different groups are competing for the same limited resources such as power, prestige, or wealth. The competition generates ethnocentrism and antagonism between the two groups. Conflicting interests are developed as a result of this competition and culminate into open social conflict. However, it was observed that not all intergroup competition developed into social conflict. According to Tajfel & Turner (1979), intergroup competition will only turn into social conflict if and only if the inferior group "rejects its previously accepted and consensually negative self-image". The inferior group must first resent the status quo and starts rejecting their existing identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). On the other hand, the superior group will endeavour to preserve the status quo and do all they can to differentiate themselves from the inferior group.

According to SIT, the perception of oneness in terms of values and ethics between the employees as an individual and the employer as an organization are the reasons why people categorize themselves into distinctive groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Conventionally, people group themselves differently according to social parameters such as religion, gender and organizational memberships (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). These socially exclusive groups believe in distinctive organizational values and ethics, making one group different from another. Some extant literature described high employer branding as an 'organizational prestige' portrayed by the employer and this association with prestige resulted in high employee loyalty (Alcover, 2018; Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004).

When employees participate or observe ESG activities undertaken by their employers, they feel that they are contributing to greater societal good and they experience positive emotions towards their employers as these activities resonate with their personal values and ethics (Loor-Zambrano et al., 2022). The employees who experience positive emotions are more satisfied with their employers (Miethlich et al., 2023) and, as a result of which, the employers gain trust and compliments from its employees and enjoy enhancement in their employer branding (Miethlich et al., 2023). This personal identification process through which the employees align their personal values and ethics with their employers is the fundamental foundation of Social Identity Theory.

Employer Branding

Global talent war and digitalization have culminated in the concept of employer branding (Ahmad et al., 2020). Employers must not take the relationship with their employees for granted. Employees nowadays view their employers as partners in their business venture and employers need to cater to their employees' needs and requirements over and beyond what traditional employment can offer (Adecco, 2016). Employees, especially the younger generations, have different priorities and personal values as compared with their predecessors (Adecco, 2016).

The concept of employer branding originates from corporate branding. The latter views branding from the perspectives of shareholders and external stakeholders (Balmer, 2001; Hatch & Schultz, 2009). The former, however, is concerned with existing and potential employees of the organizations (Biswas & Suar, 2016). Most extant literature in employer branding focused on the recruitment of potential employees (Hoppe, 2018; Theurer et al., 2018) and very limited studies were focused on retention of existing employees (Tanwar & Prasad, 2016).

Employer branding distinguishes one enterprise from their peers who compete for the same pool of talent (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). "Employer Brand" was first coined by Ambler & Barrow (1996) as a package of benefits provided by employer to the employee, such benefits can be functional, economic, or psychological. It was subsequently defined as "the benefits, an organization offer their employees which further helps in building a positive attitude of the employees toward the firm" (Bellou et al., 2015). Employer branding was also explained as a group of distinctive associations experienced by the employees with the firms, they work with Biswas & Suar, 2013; Davies, 2008). There are three (3) aspects of employer branding: (1) Employer brand equity, (2) brand loyalty and employee engagement and (3) attraction and retention of talents (Aaker & Equity, 1991).

'Brand equity is a set of assets and liabilities linked to a brand that add to or subtract from the value provided by the branded product or service to the company and its customers' (Aaker & Equity, 1991). Employer brand equity refers to employer brand association and employer brand awareness, both of which jointly produce differential advantage to the employer brand (Biswas & Suar, 2016). Employer brand association contributes to the positive employer image in the mind of the employees and increases the employer's attractiveness to the employee (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). Ritson (2002), argued that enterprises with high employer branding benefited from reduced lower employee attraction cost, improved employee relations and increased employee retention (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Berthon et al., 2005). Employee brand loyalty describes the employee commitment to their employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Highly committed employees remain loyal with their employer for a long time.

Employer branding is also related to attraction and retention of talents. Extant literature regarded employees as internal customers of the employer making the former's employment experience paramount in maintaining and promoting employees' satisfaction (Tkalac Verčič, 2021). If the employees' employment experience is highly attractive, it will reflect very strongly on the employer branding of the employer (Chopra et al., 2023; Saini & Jawahar, 2019). Extant studies have shown a significant positive relationship between employer branding and employee retention (Ahmad et al., 2020; Bharadwaj et al., 2022; Salameh et al., 2023). Organizational characteristics that can contribute positively to employment experience are: (1) employment itself, (2) company's success, (3) construed external image, and (4) product/service characteristics (Maxwell & Knox, 2009).

Environmental, Social and Governance Practices

ESG as a global concept was first introduced in the "Who Cares Wins" report released by the United Nation in 2004 (Bukreeva & Grishunin, 2023). According to the report, ESG initiatives are vital for a sustainable societal development and the capital market. Prior to the introduction of the notion of ESG, corporate social responsibility was a popular concept emphasizing on enterprises' responsibility to the society beyond what they owe to their shareholders. Pressing matters such as environmental protection and employees' health and well-beings increasingly take global stage and contribute to social changes (Surana et al., 2020). With the increasing global call for ESG compliance, studies on ESG started to gain traction and a massive scholarly interest ensued. Many of these studies focused on the impacts of ESG on financial performance (Lee & Isa, 2023; Nirino et al., 2021; Saygili et al., 2022) and other valuable organizational-level outcomes such as innovation, corporate reputation and employee-level outcomes such as employee commitment, employee satisfaction and employees' perception of brand reputation (Ghouri et al., 2019; Inigo & Albareda, 2019; Liu et al., 2014; Rettab et al., 2009; Sánchez-Infante Hernández et al., 2020; Vuong & Bui, 2023). Some of these studies focus on ESG as a whole and very few in respect of individual ESG practices (Han et al., 2016; Lee & Isa, 2023; Li et al., 2018; Nollet et al., 2016; Saygili et al., 2022).

Environmental Practices

Four main types of environmental practices were identified in Janet Ranganathan (1998), there are (1) material use; (2) energy consumption; (3) non-product output; (4) pollutant release. Micro enterprises can undertake many environmental practices relating to safe and healthy working environment, commitment to reduce toxic emissions, treating and recycling waste and managing greenhouse gases (Lee & Isa, 2023). Studies conducted in extant literature also evolved with time and now include research on resource use efficiency, waste management, emission control, regulatory compliance, environmental impact assessment, carbon footprint reduction, biodiversity conservation, product life cycle & stakeholder engagement. (Asiaei et al., 2022; Fu et al., 2023; Reverte et al., 2016)

Social Practices

Social practices are practices employed by enterprises in dealing with its internal and external stakeholders in terms of (1) employment; (2) community relations; (3) ethical sourcing; and (4) social impact of product (Asiaei et al., 2022; Janet Ranganathan, 1998; Reverte et al., 2016). There are two (2) dimensions to social practices, one internal and the other external. The internal dimension concerns the well-being of the workforce such as employment package and work life balance. The external dimension refers to the impacts on the well-being of local communities and the company's external stakeholders such as customers, vendors, suppliers, society, NGOs and governments (Lee & Isa, 2023).

Governance Practices

Governance practices are internal regulations and procedures to guarantee the efficiency, accountability, and openness of company management, decision-making, and implementations (Sultana et al., 2017). According to Sultana et al (2017), some of the key aspects or factors pertaining to governance practices are gender equality, anti-corruption, ethical conduct and integrity, risk management, compliance and legal, performance management and reporting, corporate social responsibility policy, and succession planning. Numerous important governance practices are board-related such as board composition, board leadership, board independence, risk management and business ethics (Lee & Isa, 2023). Generally, a company with good governance will be able to foster a sustainable and responsible organizational culture.

Research Gaps

This conceptual paper attempts to address four (4) research gaps as synthesized from the extant literature. (1) There appears to be a theoretical gap in the extant literature. Many studies on ESG practices were grounded on theories such as RBV theory, Agency Theory or Stakeholder Theory, whereas ESG studies that are grounded on Social Identity Theory are limited. (2) Extant literatures focused primarily on corporate social responsibility in examining CSR's impacts on sustainability performance (Bukreeva & Grishunin, 2023; Han et al., 2016;

Lee & Raschke, 2023; Lee & Isa, 2023; Li et al., 2018; Naeem et al., 2022; Nirino et al., 2021; Nollet et al., 2016; Rettab et al., 2009; Sánchez-Infante Hernández et al., 2020; Saygili et al., 2022). Our study focuses on the impact of each and every ESG practices, as opposed to ESG as a unidimensional construct, therefore enriching the interface literature on ESG and its effect on employer branding. Our study also attempts to examine which of the ESG practices has the most significant impact on employer branding. As micro enterprises have limited resources, it is important that they engage in ESG practices that give rise to the most impact on employer branding. (3) The target population of this research is also another novelty as extant literature focused mainly on SME in general and our study focuses on micro enterprises. (4) There is scant ESG research that explore employer branding. Most ESG research studies tend to focus on sustainability performance of the organizations with financial outcome as the primary consideration.

Conceptual Framework

Based on the above discussions, this conceptual paper proposes the following conceptual framework. The conceptual framework proposed in Figure 2.1 is the result of the research gaps identified in the earlier sections. The study aims to analyze the influence of ESG practices on employer branding in Malaysian micro enterprises.

The conceptual framework is grounded theoretically on Social Identity Theory to explain the interactions between the independent variables and the dependent variable. The focus of this proposed study is the dependent variable which is employer branding of micro enterprises in Malaysia. The independent variables are the three respective ESG practices (environment, social and governance).

Furthermore, because the conceptual framework aims to investigate the impact of each and every ESG practices on employer branding, it differs from traditional ESG research that saw ESG as a single dimensional variable. This study is among the first to apply Social Identity Theory to ESG research to explain whether ESG practices affect employer branding by providing a theoretical basis and rationale for the relationships under investigation. It also contributes to the research field of organizational behaviour as it seeks to uncover the attitudinal responses of micro enterprises' employees in Malaysia in response to organizational ESG practices.

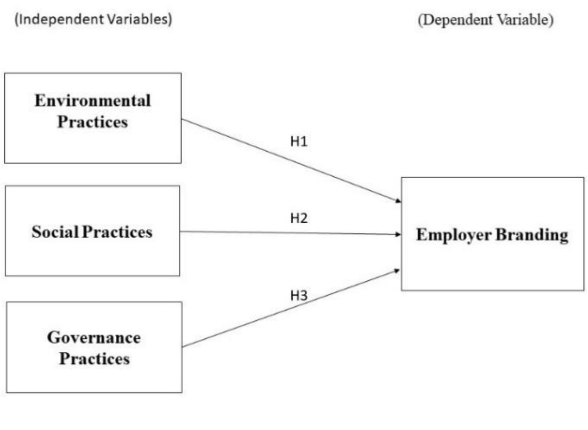


Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework

Hypothesis Development

The opinions and perceptions of the company's current workforce serve as the foundation for employer branding, which is shaped over time by a wide range of variables including financial performance, competitive advantage, organizational culture, social identity, marketing communication, customer relations, and product cost and quality products (Beneke et al., 2015). A positive brand reputation enables enterprises to recruit, train, and retain staff more effectively, as claimed in (Jeffrey et al., 2019).

According to Social Identity Theory, the interplay between individuals and groups contributes to personal identification of the individual with the group when the individual's personal values are in line with the group. This personal identification with the group falls within one of the five dimensions of employer attractiveness used in extant literature to measure employer branding (Alnıaçık & Alnıaçık, 2012), namely application value. Among the various questions asked in a typical employer branding measurement tool is whether or not the respondent agrees that their employer is a humanitarian organization giving back to society (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Berthon et al., 2005). This study posits that ESG practices undertaken by company will enhance employer branding as it resonates with their employees' personal value in ethical and sustainable issues. The Social Identity Theory's perception of 'oneness' between the employee and the employer will result in high employer attractiveness and positively impacts the employer branding (Bharadwaj, 2023).

Participation in, or observation of, genuine ESG practices by the employees allow them to experience positive emotions as they believe that these practices are contributing to societal improvement (Loor-Zambrano et al., 2022). Loor-Zambrano et al (2022), argued that CSR initiatives and employee attitudes, such as trust and intrinsic motivation, were significantly and positively correlated. Organizations will benefit from improved organizational performance if their employees are satisfied with their jobs as employee satisfaction is reflected in their motivation and performance (Miethlich et al., 2023). As the employer gains trust and compliments from its employees, it becomes a more attractive employer and enjoys enhanced employer branding (Miethlich et al., 2023).

According to Bharadwaj (2023), employer branding and corporate social responsibility are positively correlated. He clarified that employees are happy to work for companies that engage in genuine corporate social responsibility (CSR) and that CSR could be used as an effective instrument for strategic employer branding that will help businesses retain their employees.

Therefore, in view of the above, this study proposes the following hypotheses:-

H1 *Organization's Environmental practices positively influence employer branding.*
H2 *Organization's Social practices positively influence employer branding.*
H3 *Organization's Governance practices positively influence employer branding.*

Methodology

This conceptual paper aims to develop a conceptual framework examining the influence of ESG practices on employer branding of Malaysian micro enterprises. The framework is developed based on Social Identity Theory which examines the relationship between the two constructs. The target population will be the employees working in

Malaysian micro enterprises. The proposed data collection method will be online survey, which is cost-effective and efficient.

Discussion

Micro enterprises face major obstacle in attracting and retaining talent as most of them have low employer branding due to limited public exposure and constrained financial resources to engage in any sorts of meaningful brand management activities (PwC, 2023). As compared with their stronger peers ie. SME, they tend to suffer from chronic talent management problem as they are prone to losing talented employees to bigger enterprises (PwC, 2023; Rodrigues & Sousa, 2024; Yao et al., 2019; Zhou et al., 2024). Enhancing their employer branding is one of the strategies micro enterprises can undertake in order to mitigate against such talent management issue (Ahmad et al., 2020; Azhar et al., 2024; Bharadwaj et al., 2022; Chopra et al., 2023; Elbendary et al., 2023; Salameh et al., 2023).

Many micro enterprises providing services directly or indirectly to foreign companies will eventually be required to provide evidence of their ESG compliance (Ahmad et al., 2024; Garrido-Ruso et al., 2024; Oliver Yébenes, 2024; Ortiz-Martínez et al., 2023; Setyaningsih et al., 2024). The pressure for ESG compliance exerted on micro enterprises and SME from their foreign customers is increasingly being felt across the entire supply chain of all industries, forcing some SME and micro enterprises to adopt quick fixes such as superficial ESG reporting or greenwashing of their corporate branding (Lee & Raschke, 2023). Such easy and quick fixes are a dangerous trend as they not only erode the hard-earned trust our Malaysian SME and micro enterprises have earned from their foreign customers, such rogue practices also prevent them from taking advantage of the opportunities presented by the global ESG wave (Dash & Mohanty, 2023; Naeem et al., 2022). Micro enterprises who are able to comply with ESG requirements ahead of their competitors will be in a better position to capture a bigger market share in their domestic market and play a bigger role on the global stage (Setyaningsih et al., 2024).

The challenges presented by the current global outlook require micro enterprises to innovate their business process by adopting ESG practices in order to stay competitive for long term business sustainability. The National Industry Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) framework (i-ESG framework) published by the Ministry of Investment, Trade and Industry in October 2023 is an encouraging move for Malaysian SME (MITI, 2023) . Although the i-ESG framework is meant for organizations in the manufacturing industry, it is nevertheless a good sign that the Malaysian government is taking a pro-active ESG stance. It will be interesting to anticipate if a similar framework will also be designed for the services industry in the immediate future. It is undoubted that these initiatives were created with SME in mind. Whether or not the same initiatives are suitable for micro enterprises are yet to be known. In any case, the authors of this paper intend to prove that benefits of ESG practices in terms of enhancing employer branding apply equally to micro enterprises as well as SME. Micro enterprises should join the global ESG movement and embrace the i-ESG framework with an open heart.

Therefore, the present study proposes a conceptual model of understanding the influence of ESG practices on employer branding of Malaysian micro enterprises. This conceptual model can be useful in examining the impact of ESG practices across different industries from the perspective of Social Identity Theory. The results of such studies may vary between industries as well as from one country to another. The proposed conceptual framework hypothesizes a positive relationship between ESG practices and employer branding. The practical implications of this conceptual framework help micro enterprises to understand the important role of ESG practices in enhancing their employer branding. In addition, the results of this study may be used as supporting evidence for ESG regulators to convince and incentivize micro enterprises to adopt ESG practices.

Conclusion

The conceptual model included in this paper examines the influence of ESG practices on employer branding of Malaysian micro enterprises. Based on the proposed conceptual framework, hypotheses are developed. Future research could empirically test the proposed model in order to draw conclusions about the explanatory power of the proposed conceptual framework. Further variables may be added to the conceptual models to examine whether demographic properties such as age, gender or education background have an impact on the relationship. The conceptual model may also be expanded to examine non-financial outcomes resulting from enhanced employer branding.

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