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Green buys more than gold: Pollution, pay, and attractiveness of small and medium-sized enterprise employer brand

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The objective is to examine how signals about the environmental pollution of a Small and Medium-sized Enterprise affect its perceived attractiveness as an employer, and whether higher pay can offset the negative effect of such signals.

Research Design & Methods: To test our hypotheses, which required investigation of causal relationships, we used an experimental research design. The participants were Gen Z business students (N = 125). We operationalised employer attractiveness as the intention to recommend the firm as an employer. To analyse data, we used one-way ANOVA with Tukey HSD post-hoc tests after verifying normality and homogeneity of variance.

Findings: As expected, pollution information significantly lowered the intention to recommend (ANOVA: $F(3, 121) = 11.433$, $p < 0.001$). All three 'polluting' conditions scored significantly below the non-polluting control. Even a +50% wage premium did not restore attractiveness to control levels, and pay differences among polluting conditions were not statistically significant.

Implications & Recommendations: Environmental harm is a strong negative labour-market signal that compensation alone cannot neutralise. Managers should prioritise real, measurable pollution reductions in employer branding, align HR policies with sustainability and operations to avoid 'mixed signals', and account for a hidden 'recruitment tax' when environmental performance is poor.

Contribution & Value Added: The study extends signalling theory and employer branding research by documenting the 'dark side' of environmental signals: negative environmental impact depresses employer attractiveness, and higher pay, even substantial premiums, cannot compensate for this impact. The article offers causal, experimental evidence that clarifies the magnitude of these effects among young job seekers'.

Article type:	research article
Keywords:	environmental sustainability; pollution; employer attractiveness; employer brand; signalling theory; quantitative research; experimental research;
JEL codes:	M30, M52, Q52

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INTRODUCTION

Firms perceived as environmentally sustainable are more attractive to potential employees. That effect boasts ample evidence in the literature, as scholars have explored the phenomenon for a long time. For instance, the work of Turban and Greening (1997) and Duarte *et al*. (2014) alongside a recent extensive study by Deloitte (2025) confirms this positive effect. The listed studies highlight that organisations with strong environmental sustainability practices often gain a favourable view from job seekers, who are increasingly prioritising ecological considerations in their employment. This trend seems particularly pronounced among younger generations, who are more likely to seek employment at organisations that align with their values regarding environmental stewardship (Hinson *et al*., 2018).

However, while numerous studies confirmed that environmental sustainability ameliorates the attractiveness of employer brand (Aiman-Smith *et al*., 2001; Huber & Hirsch, 2017), prior research focused on the positive side of environmental sustainability, resulting in a dearth of works exploring the role of the firm's negative impact on the natural environment in its employer branding. Unfortunately, many firms, including those essential for everyday functioning of the modern society, such as power plants or farms, are environmental polluters. Such firms need to build their employer brands to attract qualified workforce, but prior research has provided them with little advice. However, we know that payment is the most important factor affecting employer attractiveness (Dassler *et al*., 2022), and that firms operating in areas suffering from environmental pollution do offer significantly higher salaries (Zhang *et al*., 2021; Yang *et al*., 2022). Still, to the best of our knowledge, prior research did not determine whether high salary is able to offset the negative impact of corporate pollution on the polluting firm's attractiveness as a prospective employer. Addressing this gap, this article explores the relationship between negative environmental performance and the attractiveness of the employer brand for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) through the lens of signalling theory (Spence, 1973). We focus on SMEs, since they globally represent around 90% of all businesses and more than 50% of employment worldwide (World Bank, 2025). In the European Union, SMEs employ 65% of the workforce (European Commission, 2025).

In the next section, we will review relevant literature and formulate hypotheses. Then, we will elaborate on the experimental quantitative methodology we used. Finally, we will present and discuss the results, indicating our implications for future research and for business practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

Signalling Theory

As the theoretical lenses guiding this study, we employ signalling theory, which suggests that information asymmetry and uncertainty require organisations to utilise a wide range of personal data related to observable attributes to make informed decisions within the marketplace (Spence, 1973). Similarly, on the labour market, job seekers exert considerable effort to acquire knowledge about potential employers through relevant cues, inferring whether the organisation is a desirable place to work (Turban, 2001). To attract desired prospective employees, firms can use their employer brand to send intended signals, thus emphasising their strengths and advantages as an employer (Celani & Singh, 2011). Following Spence (1973) and his transplantation of the terms used by Jervis (1970), and adapting that definition to the firm, signals are observable characteristics attached to the firm that undergo manipulation by that firm.

Environmental Sustainability and Employer Attractiveness

Abundant studies highlight the significant role of corporate social responsibility (CSR) in predicting employer attractiveness. For instance, Turban and Greening (1997), Greening and Turban (2000), Albinger and Freeman (2000), Evans and Davis (2011), Biswas and Suar (2016), and Klimkiewicz and Oltra (2017) all report that a firm's corporate social performance (CSP) influences applicants' perceptions of employer brand and attractiveness. Backhaus *et al*. (2002) found that CSP has a similar predictive power, while noting that environmental factors, social relations, and diversity have the most significant impact on employer attractiveness. Onkila (2015) posits that the beneficial effects of CSR may relate to employees viewing their organisations differently when environmental sustainability is high, as it evokes positive emotions and organisational satisfaction.

Extensive past research explored how companies' sustainability affects their attractiveness as employers and found positive associations (Pfister, 2020). Research by Coelho *et al*. (2022) demonstrates that including pro-environmental messages in job advertisements enhances applicants' intentions to apply. Similarly, Guillot-Soulez *et al*. (2022) found that green certification positively influences perceptions of organisational attractiveness. In their study of business students, Presley *et al*. (2018) investigated the influence of a company's sustainability practices on perceived employer attractiveness. Find-

ings revealed that both the overarching concept of sustainability and its individual components significantly affected a company's attractiveness to potential employees. Chaudhary (2019) found that to generate perceived organisational attractiveness, the organisation should communicate ecological values and green practices to pro-environmental job seekers. Gintale *et al*. (2024) found that environmental CSR significantly improves employer attractiveness, while ethical CSR shows a less substantial impact. Considering the negative signals about employer brand, Ambec and Lanoie (2008) claim that 'no one wants to work for a dodgy company'. Bauer *et al*. (2012) also assert that 'negative images will threaten the individual image, may bring unfavorable comments from friends and family, and may depress the person'. Thus, reasoning by analogy, we expected that companies that exhibit a negative impact on the natural environment would appear as less attractive as employers.

Organisations that engage in environmentally harmful practices may send mixed signals regarding their commitment to sustainability. Pernkopf *et al*. (2020) discuss how incongruent signals, such as promoting green initiatives while engaging in polluting activities, can negatively impact employer attractiveness. This inconsistency can lead to scepticism among potential applicants, particularly among younger generations who prioritise environmental sustainability in their employment choices. Therefore, organisations need to align their branding efforts with their actual practices to avoid damaging their employer image.

Negative publicity surrounding environmental practices can significantly affect an organisation's attractiveness to potential employees. Ouyang *et al*. (2020) found that exposure to negative information about an organisation, such as its involvement in environmental scandals, may diminish the applicants' intentions to pursue employment opportunities within that organisation. This highlights the need for organisations to manage their public relations effectively, particularly in the face of environmental controversies, to maintain their attractiveness as employers.

Therefore, we formulated the first hypothesis:

H1: Signals about environmental pollution lower the propensity to recommend a job with the polluting company.

The Moderating Role of Payment

Higher salaries often seem a significant factor in attracting talent, particularly on competitive job markets. As organisations increasingly face scrutiny regarding their environmental practices, the question arises whether higher salaries can effectively compensate for the negative impacts associated with environmental pollution.

Montgomery and Ramus (2011) claim that, as an objective and tangible indicator, salary often serves as a baseline for applicants in their compensatory decision-making. Aiman-Smith *et al*. (2001) found that a company's environmental rating had the greatest impact on perceived attractiveness. However, the compensation still came as the factor most significant to affect the decision whether to apply. Simpson and Aprim (2018) came to a similar conclusion: although social and environmental factors attracted graduates to a company, economic factors ultimately determined to which company they applied. Bustamante *et al*. (2021) obtained similar findings, indicating financial benefits are the most important factor for students' perception of employer attractiveness. Further, research by Tanwar and Kumar (2019) indicates that employer branding and compensation are crucial in shaping perceptions of organisational attractiveness. However, while attractive compensation packages can draw candidates, they may not fully mitigate concerns regarding environmental practices. Employees increasingly seek alignment between their values and those of their employers, particularly concerning sustainability (Younis & Hammad, 2020). This suggests that while higher pay can attract talent, it may not compensate for adverse environmental impacts if candidates perceive those practices as misaligned with their values. Therefore, the second hypothesis reads:

H2: A higher pay moderates the negative effect of environmental pollution signals, increasing the propensity to recommend a job with the polluting company.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Research Process

To test our hypotheses, which required investigation of causal relationships, we used an experimental research design. In management research, experimental research design is particularly valuable for understanding causal relationships and the effects of specific interventions on organisational outcomes, particularly when testing hypotheses regarding behavioural changes or the efficacy of managerial practices. The experimental research design allowed us to control extraneous variables effectively, isolating the independent variable to observe its impact on the dependent variable. Such an approach proved beneficial in our study as we set out to analyse the impact of specific company characteristics on the behaviour of prospective job applicants. Ercan *et al*. (2025) emphasise that this method's strength lies in its ability to yield insights into causality, which observational studies often miss.

We randomly assigned the subjects to one of four groups: one control (baseline) group and three experimental (treatment) groups to test the effect of the stimuli. To minimise the potential effect of unobserved conditions that could bias the results, we selected participants to ensure homogeneity of the sample, i.e., participants who shared the same characteristic of interest, and assigned them randomly to one of the groups, each presented with a different stimulus.

Stimuli

Since the primary purpose was to test the effect of signals concerning environmental pollution on the propensity to recommend the presented SME as an employer, we manipulated the variable 'environmental pollution'. The control group received a vignette description of an SME presented as a firm that employed 100 people, was currently recruiting, and did not pollute the environment. Moreover, the three treatment groups read a description of an environmental polluter. Further, since we intended to determine the effect of higher payment, the three treatment groups received the same company description but with various information about the salary: the industry average level, 20% above the industry average, and 50% above the industry average. Following this, we asked a series of questions about pro-environmental values, control questions, and socio-demographic questions, included at the end of each version.

Measures

Employer Attractiveness

Attractiveness of the employer is a complex construct. When building our hypotheses on previous studies, we indicated two dimensions: application intentions, namely a respondent's likelihood to apply for a job with a company, and their likelihood to recommend the company as an employer, for example to family or friends looking for a job.

We measured the intention to recommend with a five-point Likert-type scale of Styvén *et al*. (2022). The measurement results appear in Table 1 below. We point out that both scales showed high Cronbach's alpha scores, 94% and 84% respectively, and as such, they constituted appropriate instruments to measure our variables of interest.

Table 1. Reliability analysis for measures of employer attractiveness

Construct	Items	Cronbach's alpha if item omitted	Cronbach's alpha
Intention to recommend	I would recommend this company to a friend looking for a job.	0.752	0.84
	I would post job ads from this company on my social media to encourage others to apply here.	0.846	
	I would recommend the company's products/services to friends and acquaintances.	0.705	

Source: own study.

Control Questions

We included a socio-demographic question about age to determine if the respondent qualified as Generation Z, which was the target demographic in this study. To check whether the respondents belonged to the target group, we asked the control questions 'What is your highest educational degree?' and 'When will you graduate?' to check whether the respondent was a student. Additional questions about job search activities served to check if the respondent qualified as a job seeker and therefore considered applying for jobs.

Participants and Procedure

To study potential job applicants, we selected students at a large business school as respondents. First, in a pre-test study, 10 students received a link to the questionnaire, which requested them to test its functionality and comment on the clarity of the questions and tasks. After reviewing their comments and suggestions, we distributed the final version via the online mailing list of university students who agreed to receive contact for participation in online studies. Additional invitations were sent through social media. The invitation to participate included a briefing about the purpose of the study and a research ethics statement, which guaranteed anonymity of responses. The invitation message included a link to the questionnaire, stored on the university portal, which does not collect IP addresses or any personal data of respondents. The questionnaire included a randomiser. Therefore, clicking the invitation link randomly assigned the participant to one of the four scenarios describing one firm and then asked them to answer questions measuring the variables described above.

Out of 133 respondents who started the study, 125 completed the questionnaire. For experimental designs, a sample size of at least 30 participants per condition is an established requirement (Daniel, 2011; Memon *et al*., 2020) Given that our study included four conditions, namely the baseline scenario and three treatment conditions, the required sample size was 120. We met that condition as 125 participants provided usable responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Descriptive Statistics

Our sample consisted of 125 participants, of whom 74 (59%) were female and 51 (41%) were male. All respondents were born between 1995 and 2004, which places them within Generation Z. Ages ranged from 19 to 28 years, with a mean age of 24.64 years (SD = 1.88). At the time of the survey, all were students at WU Vienna University of Economics and Business. All participants expected to graduate between 2023 and 2026, with over a half (56%) planning to graduate in 2025. A substantial proportion (82.40%) reported plans to begin their first full-time position either in 2025 or 2026. Consequently, 67% of respondents were job hunting, and 73.60% had applied for at least one job within the past 12 months. We summarise the descriptive statistics in Table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the sample

Research sample	Number and percentage	Mean (SD)
Gender Female Male	 74 (59.20%) 51 (40.80%)	
Age		24.64 (SD = 1.88)
Total	N = 125	

Source: own study.

For the experimental study, we randomly assigned the participants to one of four groups. Group 1 served as the control group, while Groups 2, 3, and 4 constituted experimental groups, in which we manipulated the independent variable. The characteristics of these groups and scenarios appear in Table 3.

Table 3. Characteristics of the experimental groups

Group 1 (n = 32)	Group 2 (n = 32)	Group 3 (n = 27)	Group 4 (n = 34)
No manipulation.	Company has a negative environmental record.	Company has a negative environmental record but pays salaries 20% higher than the average.	Company has a negative environmental record but pays salaries 50% higher than the average.

Source: own study.

The data reveal that Group 1, in which we manipulated no information about the company's environmental impact, obtained the highest mean scores for recommendation intention. While a higher salary increased employer attractiveness, it did not reach the control group's level, even with a 50% salary premium. We summarise the descriptive statistics for group comparison in Table 4.

Table 4. Descriptive statistics for group comparison

Group	N	Intention to recommend		
		M	***SD***	**95% CI**
1	32	3.302	1.085	[2.911, 3.693]
2	32	2.146	0.610	[1.926, 2.366]
3	27	2.247	0.771	[1.942, 2.552]
4	34	2.647	0.914	[2.328, 2.966]

Source: own study.

These results also appear in Figure 1, to illustrate the level of organisational attractiveness measured as the intention to recommend the company as an employer. Group 1 represents the neutral scenario, while Groups 2-4 demonstrate the organisational attractiveness of environmental polluters with three levels of pay: no extra pay, 20% above market, and 50% above market. As mentioned above, higher pay increases organisational attractiveness, but even a 50% increase in salary does not elevate organisational attractiveness to the non-polluter's level.

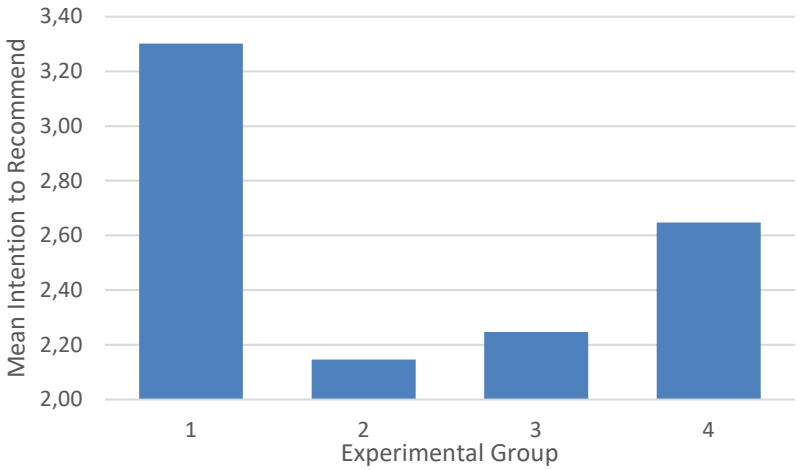

Figure 1. Average scores for the inter-group comparison
Source: own elaboration.

Hypotheses Testing

We tested the hypotheses using a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine whether significant differences existed in the dependent variable of 'intention to recommend' across the groups. Prior to conducting the ANOVA, we assessed the assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variance to ensure the appropriateness of the parametric test. To assess the assumption of normality, we conducted Shapiro-Wilk tests on the residuals for each group and a visual inspection of normal Q–Q plots. The Shapiro-Wilk test for normality was not significant for any group (Group 1: W = 0.940, p = 0.076;

Group 2: W = 0.939, p = 0.072; Group 3: W = 0.958, p = 0.326; Group 4: W = 0.965, p = 0.332), indicating normal distribution of the data for 'intention to recommend' within each group. The following graphs display the normality for each group.

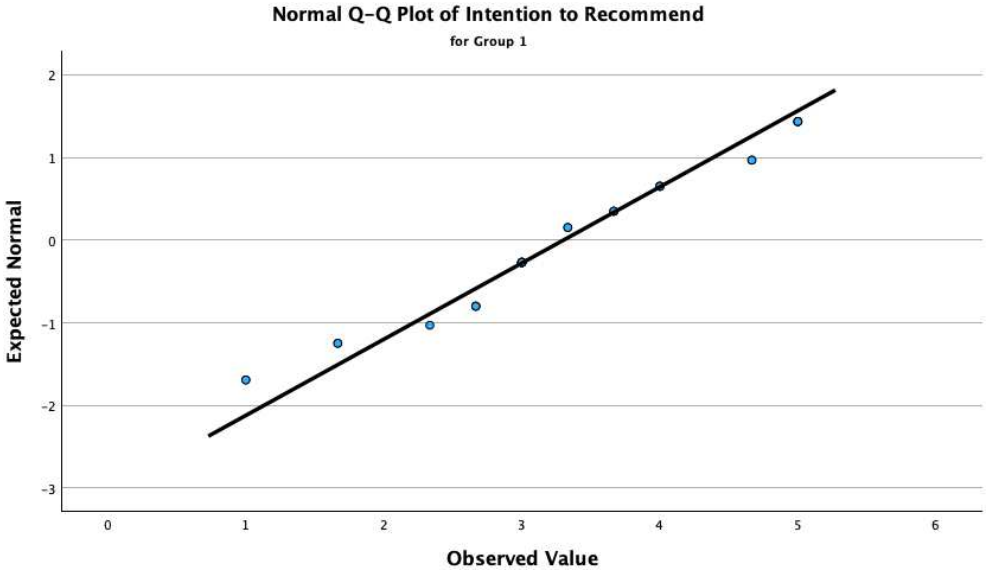

Figure 2. Normality test for Group 1
Source: own elaboration.

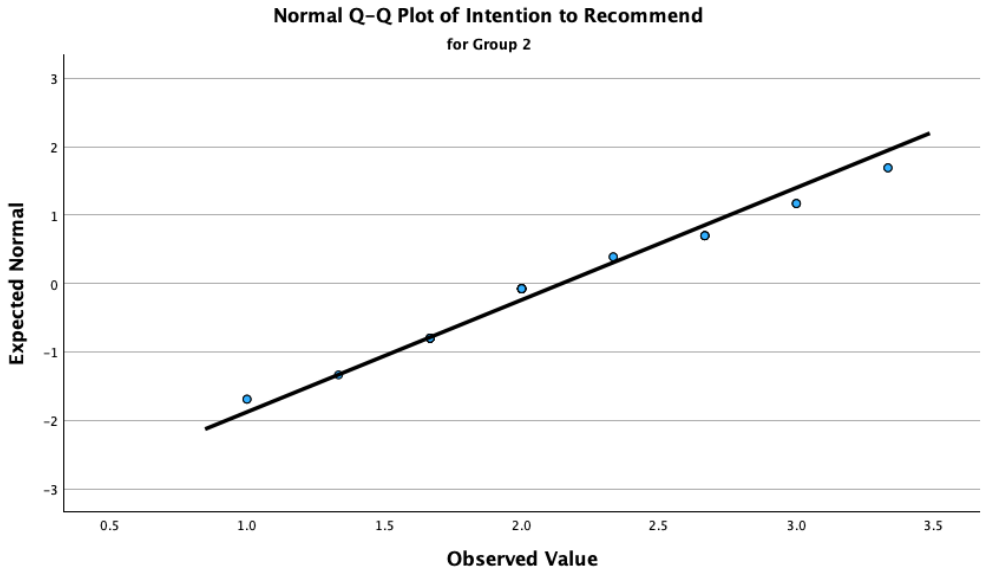

Figure 3. Normality test for Group 2
Source: own elaboration.

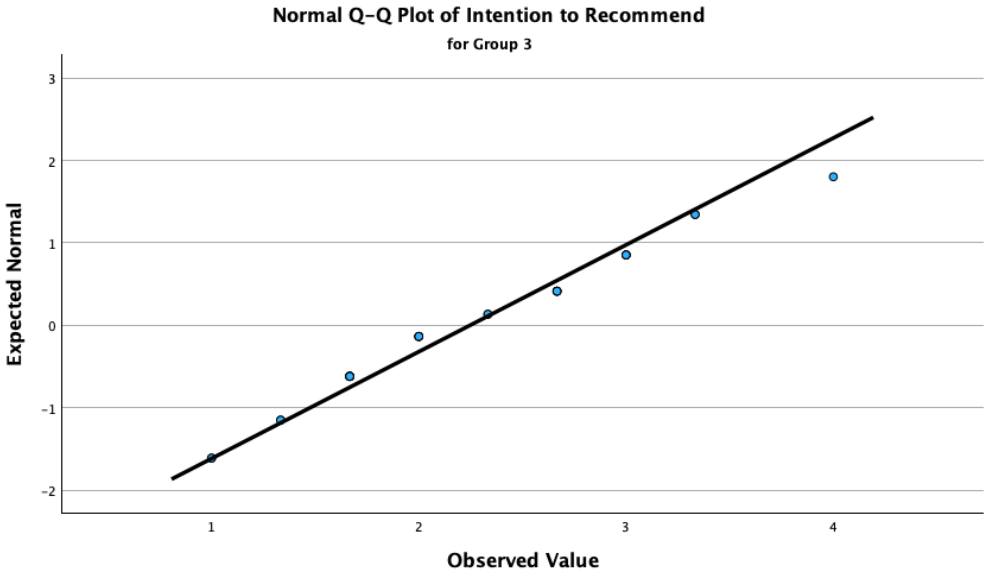

Figure 4. Normality test for Group 3
Source: own elaboration.

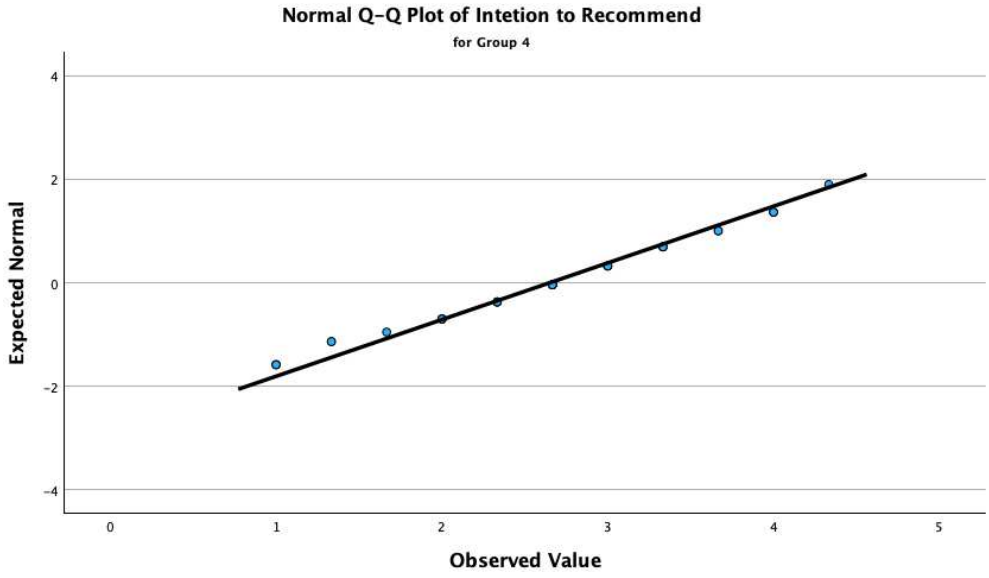

Figure 5. Normality test for Group 4
Source: own elaboration.

A Levene's test for homogeneity of variance yielded a p-value of 0.052, exceeding the 5% significance level, which indicated no significant violations of the homogeneity assumption, F (3, 121) = 7.660, p = 0.052. Therefore, we report the results of the standard one-way ANOVA. The Levene's test results appear in Table 5.

Table 5. Levene's test for the homogeneity of variance for 'intention to recommend'

Group	Levene – statistic	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Intention to recommend	2.649	11.433	3	121	0.052

Source: own study.

The dependent variable 'intention to recommend' also exhibited a normal distribution, supported by the sufficient sample size within each group.

Meeting both assumptions – normality and homogeneity of variance – meant that we fulfilled the requirements for conducting ANOVAs. Therefore, we performed one-way ANOVA to examine whether significant differences existed across the four experimental groups in the dependent variable of 'intention to recommend'. Together, the groups reflect employer attractiveness.

As indicated by the descriptive statistics, differences in mean values of the dependent variables appeared across the experimental groups. The one-way ANOVA revealed a significant effect for the 'intention to recommend', with an F-value of 11.433, $p < 0.001$ (Table 6). Therefore, a statistically significant difference existed between the groups. The effect size, expressed as Cohen's $d = 0.533$, reflected a medium effect, suggesting that the observed differences are not only statistically significant, but also meaningful, and potentially relevant in practical terms.

Table 6. Exploring group differences in dependent variables with ANOVA

Variables		Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Intention to recommend	Between the groups	25.815	3	8.605	11.433	< 0.001
	Within groups	91.073	121	0.753		
	Total	116.889	124			

Source: own study.

The ANOVA indicates that at least one significant difference existed between the groups, yet it did not specify which groups differed from each other. Therefore, we conducted a Tukey honestly significant difference (HSD) post-hoc test to identify which group differences were statistically significant. The results appear in Table 7.

Table 7. Post-hoc Tukey test

Variable	(I) QuestNR	(J) QuestNR	Mean difference (I-J)	Std. error	Sig.
Intention to recommend	1	2	1.156*	0.217	<0.001
		3	1.055*	0.227	<0.001
		4	0.655*	0.214	0.014
	2	1	-1.156*	0.217	<0.001
		3	-0.101	0.227	0.97
		4	-0.501	0.214	0.094
	3	1	-1.055*	0.227	<0.001
		2	0.101	0.227	0.97
		4	-0.400	0.224	0.284
	4	1	-0.655*	0.214	0.014
		2	0.501	0.214	0.094
		3	0.400	0.224	0.284

Source: own study.

We compared the values of Group 1 with those of the experimental groups to examine whether a significant difference existed in the 'intention to recommend' when a company polluted the environment (Table 7). The results indicate a significant difference in the recommendation intention between Group 1 and Group 2 ($M = 1.156$, $p < 0.001$), Group 1 and Group 3 ($M = 1.055$, $p < 0.001$), as well as Group 1 and Group 4 ($M = 0.655$, $p = 0.014$), with all the experimental groups showing a significantly lower recommendation intention compared to the control group. These findings suggest that environmental pollution significantly and negatively affected the intention to make recommendations. When the company polluted the environment, the intention to recommend was significantly lower across all the experimental conditions. Even offering a substantially higher salary – 50% above market – did not mitigate this effect. Therefore, the results support hypothesis H1.

To investigate whether a higher salary caused a greater intention to recommend the company, we compared Groups 3 and 4, namely those with elevated salary levels, with Group 2, which entailed no salary increase. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that there was no significant difference in the recommendation intention, with all the p values higher than > 0.05. Thus,

an increasing trend in salary levels did not necessarily generate the intention to recommend the company to other job seekers overall. Therefore, we rejected hypothesis H2. Let us now proceed with the interpretation of the results obtained.

Discussion

Summary of Findings

Whereas previous studies showed that companies demonstrating environmental sustainability are more attractive to younger job candidates, our research complements those findings by logically extending to the opposite corporate behaviour, namely a direct negative impact on the natural environment. It provides empirical proof of the damage caused by environmental pollution. These results are consistent with the findings of Aiman-Smith *et al*. (2001), Carballo-Penela (2019), Huber and Hirsch (2017), as well as Setó-Pamies and Papaoikonomou (2016), who argue that younger job applicants prefer sustainable companies as employers. However, we add an important extension to the research on the dark side of the impact that business exerts on the environment. In other words, previous research established that efforts to make a positive impact or reduce a negative impact on the environment also exert a positive impact on organisational attractiveness, and we show evidence that damaging the environment also damages organisational attractiveness.

The information about environmental pollution has a more substantial effect on men than on women. This finding adds an interesting insight to the literature on the sustainable behaviour of individuals. Most studies report that women score higher on personal ecological values than men. Our findings suggest that while women appreciate and adopt positive environmental measures, men react stronger to signals about pollution and distance themselves from those who make a negative impact on the natural environment, showing more sensitivity to signals about the negative environmental impact of business.

Furthermore, we investigated whether a higher salary could compensate for the perceived employer attractiveness if the firm pollutes the environment. Since we used an experimental research design, we were also able to show the extent of this effect. Most importantly, we demonstrate that environmental polluters can increase their attractiveness by paying higher salaries, but higher pay, even by 50% above the market level, does not balance the effect of environmental pollution. These findings stand in opposition to the results of a few other studies. For instance, Duarte *et al*. (2014) and Bustamante *et al*. (2021) found that pay is more important to job applicants than the firm's sustainability practices.

We now proceed to discuss the practical implications of these findings, and next we will address the limitations and the directions for future research.

CONCLUSIONS

This study contributes to signalling theory by integrating insights from the literature on employer branding and environmental sustainability, demonstrating that job applicants rely on environmental sustainability signals in employer branding when choosing employers. In doing so, we contribute a distinct employer brand signal of environmental sustainability to the signalling theory.

For practitioners, this article provides empirical evidence that environmental sustainability affects talent's perception of employers. Thus, it is an important attribute of the employer brand. Meanwhile, payment cannot compensate for corporate negative environmental activities, such as pollution, which further emphasises the importance of environmental sustainability. The study contributes to a better understanding of the interface between sustainability and employer attractiveness and shows how firms can increase their competitiveness on the labour market by aligning themselves with the values of the young generation of employees.

Managerial Implications

The evidence indicates that environmental harm functions as a strong negative labour-market signal that materially depresses employer attractiveness among business school students. At the same time, even sizable wage premiums fail to restore perceptions to the level of non-polluting firms. For managers, this

implies that companies must position environmental sustainability as a core element of the employer value brand embedded in operations rather than treat it as a peripheral communication theme.

In practical terms, credibility should precede communication. Investments that measurably reduce pollution such as emissions, waste, and local externalities ought to anchor employer branding and campus recruiting. Conceptualising the incremental spend required to attract candidates despite environmental controversies as a 'recruitment tax' helps internalise the hidden cost of pollution and strengthens the financial case for operational improvements. While many business school curricula and professional trainings educate managers to appreciate that strong social and environmental performance enhances organisational attractiveness, our findings suggest that managers should also realise the asymmetric risk of negative signals that compensation alone does not offset.

Consistency across signals is likewise pivotal. Discrepancies between day-to-day practices and public claims – mixed signals – invite scepticism and reduce attractiveness, particularly among younger cohorts sensitive to environmental integrity. Managers should therefore align HR, sustainability, and operations behind an evidence-based narrative. Specifically, they need to disclose quantified goals and progress, clarify the scope and limits of certifications, and foreground concrete operational changes rather than generic slogans.

Reframing total rewards around the impact and the income offers an additional lever. Because higher pay did not erase pollution penalties in our experiment, early-career roles should connect to projects with measurable environmental outcomes; managerial bonuses can include modifiers tied to environmental milestones; and employees should have transparent pathways to contribute to green initiatives, such as internal carbon-reduction sprints or supplier sustainability audits.

Limitations and Future Research

Like all empirical research, this study also has limitations, which one can address in future investigations. Therefore, in this final section, we identify what we perceive as key limitations of our work, suggest ideas for addressing them, and outline the most important avenues for future research.

The use of a manufacturing SME in our description of the protagonist employer is a natural choice to illustrate environmental pollution. However, some respondents may have been interested in careers in different industries and firms of different size, for example in large banks, small non-governmental organisations (NGOs), or various governmental institutions. Therefore, replication studies using vignettes of employers from other industries could provide better insight into how different negative effects of businesses on the natural environment affect perceptions of their attractiveness as employers. For example, the impact of logistics and transport firms on the environment primarily lies in air pollution from emissions. Companies in the construction industry harm the environment with noise and soil degradation, while the real estate industry is responsible for significant deforestation. Such studies would enable comparisons of the impact of different pollution types. For instance, people may be more sensitive to air pollution than to the pollution of water or soil, and these perceptions of various pollution types may affect the perceived attractiveness of firms from various industries.

Concerning the sample, we surveyed 125 young students in Austria – a very specific demographic group in a region with relatively few problems regarding environmental pollution. Therefore, it would be important to conduct studies based on larger and diverse samples, to compare the attitudes of people who witness severe environmental pollution daily, for instance those living in regions that struggle with such pollution. Similar studies could reveal whether personal experience with environmental pollution increases or decreases the perceived attractiveness of companies as employers. Furthermore, our respondents come from one generation. We made this choice to shed light on the attitudes within the demographic group of our interest: young people entering the job market. Nevertheless, considering the generational changes in both public attitudes and regulation concerning environmental pollution, attitudes towards environmental polluters may vary between generations. Among others, people who lived in a heavily polluted environment and now enjoy cleaner surroundings may be more sensitive to environmental pollution.

In this study, we found men to be more sensitive to environmental pollution signals than women. Future research should determine whether this finding is specific to our chosen region and the young

generation or is a universal pattern. Furthermore, all our respondents declared being either female or male, even though we listed three choices for the profiling question about gender. Given that many governments allow the registration of persons under more than two gender options, and companies increasingly use non-binary profiling in their job advertisements, we call for research to address gender differences concerning perceptions of employer attractiveness. Individuals who identify as non-binary only recently received the permission to indicate their identity in job applications. At the same time, most of the literature on perceptions of sustainability distinguishes only between two genders. Consequently, such research is particularly necessary.

Finally, we call for longitudinal studies, which could trace the temporal development of attitudes towards employers who have a damaging effect on the environment. Such studies can provide novel and valuable insights, as the results allow for the identification of factors that change job seekers' attitudes towards environmental polluters. For example, external events, like scandals discussed in popular media, could magnify the negative effect of environmental pollution on perceived employer attractiveness. Job market conditions can also influence attitudes. In times of high unemployment, even environmental polluters might appear as attractive employers, or high salaries could make them attractive again.

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Use of Artificial Intelligence

The authors used the AI tools Consensus (consensus.app) and Litmaps (www.litmaps.com) to find relevant literature. The Grammarly (www.grammarly.com) version with AI functionality served for proofreading, including grammar and spelling checks, and for suggesting paraphrasing. The authors reviewed the changes suggested by these tools and the final responsibility for the manuscript rests with the authors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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