

Employer Branding, Organizational Attractiveness, and Generation Z’s Intention to Apply in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study examined whether employer branding influences Generation Z job seekers’ intention to apply directly or through organizational attractiveness, responding to inconsistent evidence on the direct link between employer branding and application intention. Drawing on signaling theory and the instrumental–symbolic framework, a cross-sectional online survey was conducted in Indonesia among 300 active job seekers born between 1997 and 2000, who were selected through purposive sampling. The data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling. Employer branding had a strong positive effect on organizational attractiveness ($\beta = 0.772$), and organizational attractiveness had a positive effect on intention to apply ($\beta = 0.547$). The direct effect of employer branding on intention to apply was small and not significant ($\beta = 0.118$), whereas the indirect effect through organizational attractiveness was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.422$), indicating indirect-only (full) mediation. These results showed that employer signals shaped application decisions mainly when job seekers translated them into a favorable evaluation of the organization as a place to work. Theoretically, the study positions organizational attractiveness as the evaluative mechanism that links employer signals to behavioral intention; practically, it suggests that employers should invest in credible, experience-based value propositions rather than in visibility alone. The study is original in testing this mediation among older Generation Z active job seekers in Indonesia, a segment largely overlooked by prior student-based studies.

Keywords: *Employer Branding; Organizational Attractiveness; Intention to Apply; Generation Z; Signaling Theory*

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1. Introduction

Attracting qualified employees has become one of the most persistent challenges in human resource management. Human resources (HR) are a strategic asset because their knowledge, skills, and capabilities shape productivity, innovation, and the execution of organizational strategy, which makes the ability to attract suitable applicants a precondition for sustained organizational performance (Farooq et al., 2024; Reis et al., 2021). In tight labor markets, organizations compete not only for customers but also for prospective employees, and they increasingly do so by presenting themselves as distinctive places to work (Saini et al., 2022). Employer branding, defined as the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits that an organization offers and communicates as an employer (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004), has therefore become a core element of recruitment strategy.

The question of how employer branding works is particularly relevant for Generation Z, the cohort now entering and moving within the labor market. In Indonesia, the 2020 Population Census recorded 74.93 million people born between 1997 and 2012, or 27.94% of the population, making Generation Z the country's largest generational group (Badan Pusat Statistik [BPS], 2021). Members of this cohort are described as digitally fluent and as valuing learning opportunities, meaningful work, flexibility, supportive work environments, and value congruence when they evaluate employers (Pandita, 2022; Schroth, 2019). Because they gather employer information from corporate websites, social media, and online reviews before contacting an organization, the employer-related cues they encounter are abundant and easy to compare (Carpentier et al., 2019; Magdalenic & Lusic, 2025). In this study, the digital information environment is treated as the background context in which employer cues are received, rather than as a variable in the model.

Prior research has established several links among the constructs examined here. Studies among Generation Z and young job seekers have shown that organizational attractiveness predicts intention to apply (El-Menawy & Saleh, 2023; Rani et al., 2022; Sheren & Situmorang, 2026) and that employer branding shapes perceptions of the organization as an employer (Tanni & Arief, 2026; Thang & Trang, 2024). Evidence on how employer branding affects application intention, however, is inconsistent. Verma et al. (2024) reported that employer brand perceptions directly influenced the application intentions of MBA graduates in India, and Soeling et al. (2022) found a direct effect of employer brand attractiveness on intention to apply among young Indonesians, while organizational reputation did not mediate this relationship. In contrast, Thang and Trang (2024) found that the effect of employer branding among Vietnamese Generation Z ran through organizational image and reputation, and Wibowo et al. (2025) positioned employer branding as a mediator rather than a direct driver of Generation Z's intention to apply. These mixed results suggest that the size of the direct effect may depend on whether the evaluative mechanism through which job seekers process employer signals is modeled.

This inconsistency points to three gaps. Theoretically, prior studies have rarely explained why employer branding should affect intention to apply only through applicants' evaluations; signaling theory (Spence, 1973) and the instrumental-symbolic framework (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003) offer such an explanation but have seldom been used to specify organizational attractiveness as the mediating mechanism. Empirically, the mediators tested so far, with mixed results, have been organizational reputation or image (Soeling et al., 2022; Thang & Trang, 2024) and employer brand attractiveness or person-organization fit (Sheren & Situmorang, 2026), while organizational attractiveness, understood as the individual's evaluative perception of an employer, has mainly been modeled as a predictor (Rani et al., 2022). Contextually, most Indonesian studies have relied on students or millennials (Soeling et

al., 2022; Wijaya et al., 2023), whose application intentions may differ from those of individuals who are actively searching for work.

Accordingly, this study aimed to examine the effect of employer branding on organizational attractiveness and intention to apply, and the mediating role of organizational attractiveness, among Generation Z active job seekers in Indonesia. It addressed three research questions: (1) Does employer branding increase organizational attractiveness among Generation Z job seekers? (2) Does organizational attractiveness increase their intention to apply? (3) Does employer branding affect intention to apply directly, indirectly through organizational attractiveness, or both? The study contributes by grounding the employer branding–organizational attractiveness–intention to apply chain in signaling theory, by testing organizational attractiveness as a formal mediator, and by drawing on older Generation Z respondents who were already active in the labor market. The remainder of the article reviews the literature and develops the hypotheses, describes the methodology, reports the findings, discusses their implications, and closes with conclusions, limitations, and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Underpinning Theory: Signaling and the Instrumental–Symbolic Framework

Signaling theory explains how parties act under information asymmetry: when one party cannot directly observe the qualities of another, it relies on observable signals to infer them (Spence, 1973). Job seekers face such asymmetry because they cannot observe working conditions, culture, or career prospects before joining an organization. Employer branding activities, such as communicating values, benefits, development opportunities, and employee experiences, therefore act as signals from which applicants infer what it would be like to work for the organization (Carpentier et al., 2019). The instrumental–symbolic framework specifies the content of these inferences: applicants evaluate employers on instrumental attributes, such as pay, advancement, and job security, and on symbolic attributes, such as perceived prestige, sincerity, and innovativeness, and both types of attributes shape how attractive the organization appears (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

Together, these perspectives imply a sequence in which employer signals are first interpreted and evaluated before they affect behavior. The theory of planned behavior adds that behavioral intention follows from a favorable attitude toward the behavior (Ajzen, 1991); in recruitment, a favorable evaluation of an employer is the attitude that precedes the intention to apply (Highhouse et al., 2003). This logic positions organizational attractiveness as the evaluative link between employer branding and intention to apply, which is the model tested in this study.

2.2 Generation Z

The literature uses several labels for this cohort, including iGeneration, iGen, post-millennials, centennials, and digital natives (Ameen & Anand, 2020; Cotet et al., 2020; Dorsey, 2020). Zaki and Pusparini (2020) and the Pew Research Center (Dimock, 2019) define the cohort as individuals born between 1997 and 2012. This study adopts this definition because it is also the definition used in Indonesia's 2020 Population Census (BPS, 2021), which makes the sample comparable with national statistics. Within this cohort, the study focused on members born between 1997 and 2000, who were 26–29 years old at the time of data collection. This oldest segment has largely completed formal education and is already active in the labor market, so its members have real rather than hypothetical experience of evaluating employers. The findings therefore describe older Generation Z job seekers and should not be generalized to the whole cohort without further evidence.

2.3 Employer Branding

Ambler and Barrow (1996) defined the employer brand as the package of functional, economic, and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company. Backhaus and Tikoo (2004) described employer branding as the process of building an identifiable and unique employer identity and communicating it to current and prospective employees. Later work has confirmed that employer branding differentiates organizations by highlighting the economic and psychological benefits they offer (Ha et al., 2021) and that it serves both to attract new talent and to retain current employees (Babu & Selvarathinam, 2023; Farooq et al., 2024; Reis et al., 2021). In this study, employer branding refers to the organization's employer-related signals and activities, that is, what the organization communicates and offers as an employer.

2.4 Organizational Attractiveness

Organizational attractiveness is an individual's evaluative perception of an organization as a desirable place to work (Highhouse et al., 2003). It is held by the job seeker rather than produced by the organization, and it reflects the extent to which the job seeker believes that the organization offers attributes he or she values (Berthon et al., 2005; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Berthon et al. (2005) treated employer attractiveness as the envisioned benefits that a potential employee sees in working for a specific organization, which positions attractiveness as an outcome of employer branding rather than as part of it. Following this distinction, employer branding is defined here as the organization's signals and organizational attractiveness as the job seeker's evaluation of those signals. Organizational attractiveness also has an affective component: positive affect toward an employer increases its perceived attractiveness, which is consistent with treating attractiveness as an evaluative attitude (Auer et al., 2019).

2.5 Intention to Apply

Intention to apply refers to an individual's willingness or likelihood to submit an employment application to a particular organization (Tanni & Arief, 2026). In the theory of planned behavior, intention is the most proximal antecedent of behavior and captures the motivation to perform it (Ajzen, 1991). In recruitment research, intention to apply is distinguished from general attraction because it expresses a commitment to act on a favorable evaluation (Highhouse et al., 2003). It is therefore the appropriate outcome for examining whether employer signals translate into job-seeking behavior.

2.6 Hypotheses Development

From a signaling perspective, employer branding gives job seekers observable information about the instrumental and symbolic attributes of an employer, and favorable signals should raise their evaluation of the organization as a place to work (Carpentier et al., 2019; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Employer branding emerged in the 1990s to help organizations attract, retain, and engage talent (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Babu & Selvarathinam, 2023), and a strong employer brand builds a reputation that attracts high-quality applicants. This argument is supported by Noutel et al. (2021), who stated that the concept of organizational attractiveness emerged from employer branding, because employer branding strategies are designed to make organizations more attractive. Because positive affect toward an employer increases its perceived attractiveness (Auer et al., 2019), employer signals that evoke favorable impressions should also strengthen attractiveness. Empirical studies among young job seekers support this link (Sheren & Situmorang, 2026; Tanni & Arief, 2026).

H1: Employer Branding (EB) has a positive effect on Organizational Attractiveness (OA).

The theory of planned behavior holds that a favorable attitude toward a behavior strengthens the intention to perform it (Ajzen, 1991). When job seekers judge an organization to be a desirable employer, they are more likely to intend to apply to it (Highhouse et al., 2003). Attributes such as organizational culture, career development opportunities, work–life balance, and shared values contribute to this attraction. Soeling et al. (2022) found that employer brand attractiveness significantly influenced intention to apply among young job seekers in Indonesia, and Rani et al. (2022) showed that organizational attractiveness significantly affected Generation Z’s intention to apply.

H2: Organizational Attractiveness (OA) has a positive effect on Intention to Apply (IA).

Employer branding may also influence intention to apply directly, because a distinctive and favorable employer brand makes an organization more salient as a potential workplace. Verma et al. (2024) found that employer brand perceptions shaped the application intentions of potential employees, and Thang and Trang (2024) reported that employer branding among Generation Z in Vietnam influenced organizational image and reputation, which in turn affected intention to apply. Soeling et al. (2022) likewise found a direct effect of employer brand attractiveness on intention to apply in Indonesia, although Wibowo et al. (2025) modeled employer branding as a mediator rather than as a direct driver. Following the prevailing evidence, a positive direct effect is hypothesized.

H3: Employer Branding (EB) has a positive effect on Intention to Apply (IA).

Signaling theory implies that signals influence behavior through the inferences receivers draw from them (Spence, 1973). Applied to recruitment, employer branding should affect application intention mainly to the extent that job seekers interpret it as evidence that the organization is an attractive employer (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). Combined with the attitude–intention logic of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991), this reasoning suggests that organizational attractiveness transmits the effect of employer branding to intention to apply. Studies that found reputation, image, or employer brand attractiveness to mediate employer-related effects on intention to apply are consistent with this expectation (Sheren & Situmorang, 2026; Tanni & Arief, 2026; Thang & Trang, 2024).

H4: Organizational Attractiveness (OA) mediates the effect of Employer Branding (EB) on Intention to Apply (IA).

Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual framework and the four hypotheses.

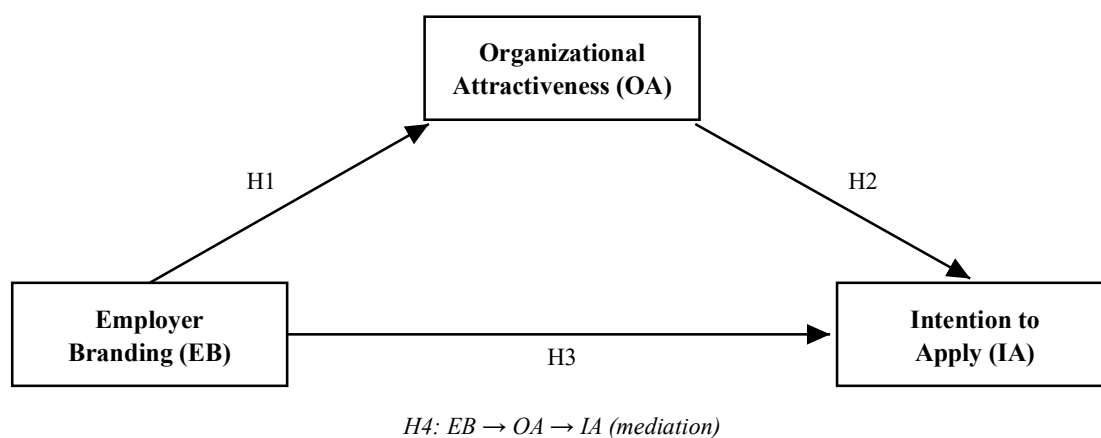


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Source: Developed by the authors based on the literature review (2026)

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Sample

This study used a quantitative, explanatory, cross-sectional survey design. The target population was Indonesian members of Generation Z born between 1997 and 2000 who were actively seeking employment, either because they were unemployed or because they were employed but looking for another position. Because no sampling frame of active job seekers in this cohort exists, judgmental (purposive) sampling was used. The questionnaire was administered online through Google Forms and was distributed through channels such as job-seeker communities, alumni networks, LinkedIn, Instagram, and WhatsApp groups. Two screening questions at the start of the questionnaire asked for the respondent's year of birth and whether he or she was currently seeking employment; respondents outside the 1997–2000 range or not seeking employment were excluded automatically.

The minimum sample size was determined before data collection. A G*Power analysis for a regression with two predictors, a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), a significance level of 0.05, and a power of 0.95 required 107 respondents (Memon et al., 2020). The inverse square root method, assuming a minimum path coefficient of 0.15 at the 5% significance level, required 275 respondents (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 1 summarizes the respondents' profile. The sample was relatively balanced by gender (54.3% female, 45.7% male) and evenly spread across ages 26 to 29. Most respondents held a bachelor's degree (66.0%). Overall, 62.0% were unemployed and seeking employment, and 38.0% were employed but seeking another opportunity; 42.7% had been searching for less than six months.

Table 1. Respondent Profile (n = 300)

Characteristic	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	137	45.7%
	Female	163	54.3%
Age	26 years	73	24.3%
	27 years	76	25.3%
	28 years	77	25.7%
	29 years	74	24.7%
Highest education	Senior high school/vocational school	32	10.7%
	Diploma	35	11.7%
	Bachelor's degree	198	66.0%
	Master's degree	35	11.7%
Employment status	Unemployed and seeking employment	186	62.0%
	Employed but seeking another opportunity	114	38.0%
Job-seeking duration	Less than 6 months	128	42.7%
	6–12 months	103	34.3%
	More than 12 months	69	23.0%
Total		300	100.0%

Source: Data processed (2026)

3.2 Measures

All constructs were measured with multi-item reflective scales adapted from established studies and rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Employer branding was measured with four items, organizational attractiveness with five items, and intention to

apply with five items. Respondents were asked to answer with reference to employers in general. Table 2 lists each construct, its definition, the number of items, and the measurement scale.

Table 2. Operationalization of Variables

Variable	Definition	Items	Scale
Employer Branding (EB)	The organization's employer-related signals and activities that communicate what it offers as an employer	4 (EB1–EB4)	5-point Likert
Organizational Attractiveness (OA)	The job seeker's evaluative perception of the organization as a desirable place to work	5 (OA1–OA5)	5-point Likert
Intention to Apply (IA)	The job seeker's willingness or likelihood to submit an application to the organization	5 (IA1–IA5)	5-point Likert

Source: Compiled by the authors (2026)

3.3 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM). PLS-SEM was chosen because the study aimed to explain and predict the target construct, the model includes a mediating path, and the method does not require multivariate normality (Hair et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2022). The analysis followed two stages. The measurement (outer) model was assessed through indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability), convergent validity (average variance extracted, AVE), and discriminant validity using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT) and the Fornell–Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Henseler et al., 2015). The structural (inner) model was then assessed through collinearity (inner VIF), the coefficient of determination (R^2), and effect size (f^2).

Path coefficients were tested by bootstrapping with 5,000 subsamples, using two-tailed tests at the 5% significance level and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Mediation was assessed by testing the specific indirect effect and was classified using the typology of Zhao et al. (2010): a significant indirect effect with a non-significant direct effect indicates indirect-only (full) mediation. Because all data were collected from a single self-report survey, common method bias was examined with the full collinearity VIF approach, in which VIF values below 3.3 indicate that the model is free from common method bias (Kock, 2015; Podsakoff et al., 2024).

3.4 Research Ethics

Participation was voluntary and anonymous. The first page of the questionnaire explained the purpose of the study, the estimated completion time, and the right to withdraw at any time, and respondents gave informed consent by ticking a consent box before proceeding. No names, contact details, or employer identifiers were collected, and the data were stored on a password-protected device accessible only to the researchers.

4. Findings

4.1 Common Method Bias

The full collinearity VIF values were 2.499 for employer branding, 2.985 for organizational attractiveness, and 1.703 for intention to apply, all below 3.3 (Kock, 2015). Common method bias was therefore unlikely to be a serious concern.

4.2 Reliabilities and Correlations

Table 3 reports the internal consistency reliability of each construct together with the latent variable correlations. All three constructs demonstrated good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha values ranging

from 0.809 (organizational attractiveness) to 0.872 (employer branding), well above the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hair et al., 2019).

All latent variable correlations were positive and in the hypothesized direction. The strongest association was observed between employer branding and organizational attractiveness ($r = 0.772$), followed by organizational attractiveness and intention to apply ($r = 0.638$), whereas employer branding and intention to apply showed the weakest, though still substantial, association ($r = 0.540$). This pattern foreshadows the mediation results: employer branding is more closely tied to how attractive the organization is perceived to be than to the intention to apply itself. The diagonal values, representing the square roots of the AVE, exceeded the corresponding inter-construct correlations for employer branding (0.850) and intention to apply (0.796), but not for organizational attractiveness ($0.752 < 0.772$); this issue is examined further in Section 4.3.

Table 3. Reliabilities and Correlations

Construct	Cronbach's α	EB	OA	IA
Employer Branding (EB)	0.872	0.850		
Organizational Attractiveness (OA)	0.809	0.772	0.752	
Intention to Apply (IA)	0.855	0.540	0.638	0.796

Note: Diagonal values (bold) are the square roots of AVE; off-diagonal values are latent variable correlations.

Source: Data processed (2026)

4.3 Measurement Model

Table 4 shows that all indicator loadings exceeded 0.70, ranging from 0.732 to 0.876. Cronbach's alpha (0.809–0.872) and composite reliability (0.867–0.912) exceeded 0.70, confirming internal consistency reliability, and all AVE values exceeded 0.50 (0.566–0.723), confirming convergent validity (Hair et al., 2022).

Table 4. Indicator Loadings, Reliability, and Convergent Validity

Construct	Item	Loading	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
Employer Branding (EB)	EB1; EB2; EB3; EB4	0.839; 0.834; 0.851; 0.876	0.872	0.912	0.723
Organizational Attractiveness (OA)	OA1; OA2; OA3; OA4; OA5	0.752; 0.732; 0.737; 0.739; 0.799	0.809	0.867	0.566
Intention to Apply (IA)	IA1; IA2; IA3; IA4; IA5	0.760; 0.776; 0.802; 0.845; 0.796	0.855	0.896	0.634

Note: CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. Source: Data processed (2026)

Discriminant validity requires closer attention. As shown in Table 5, the HTMT values for employer branding–intention to apply (0.623) and organizational attractiveness–intention to apply (0.770) were below the conservative 0.85 threshold. However, the HTMT value for employer branding–organizational attractiveness was 0.900, which reaches the liberal 0.90 threshold and exceeds the conservative 0.85 threshold (Franke & Sarstedt, 2019; Henseler et al., 2015; Rönkkö & Cho, 2022). The Fornell–Larcker criterion led to the same conclusion: the square root of the AVE for organizational attractiveness (0.752) was lower than its correlation with employer branding (0.772), whereas the criterion was met for the other constructs (Table 3).

The high overlap is theoretically plausible, because organizational attractiveness is the evaluation of the signals that employer branding sends, but it means that the two constructs share substantial variance. This issue is considered when interpreting the mediation results and is acknowledged as a limitation.

Table 5. Discriminant Validity: Heterotrait–Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

Construct pair	HTMT	Assessment
EB – OA	0.900	At the 0.90 threshold; above 0.85
EB – IA	0.623	Below 0.85
OA – IA	0.770	Below 0.85

Source: Data processed (2026)

4.4 Structural Model

Before the hypotheses were tested, the structural model was checked for collinearity. The inner VIF value for the predictors of intention to apply was 2.475, below the threshold of 3, indicating that collinearity did not bias the path estimates (Hair et al., 2019). Table 6 shows that employer branding explained 59.6% of the variance in organizational attractiveness, and employer branding and organizational attractiveness together explained 41.3% of the variance in intention to apply, which represent moderate and weak-to-moderate explanatory power, respectively. The effect size of employer branding on organizational attractiveness was large ($f^2 = 1.475$), that of organizational attractiveness on intention to apply was medium ($f^2 = 0.206$), and that of employer branding on intention to apply was negligible ($f^2 = 0.010$).

Table 6. Structural Model Assessment

Endogenous construct	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Predictor	f ²	Inner VIF
Organizational Attractiveness (OA)	0.596	0.595	EB	1.475	1.000
Intention to Apply (IA)	0.413	0.409	EB	0.010	2.475
			OA	0.206	2.475

Source: Data processed (2026)

4.5 Hypothesis Testing

Table 7 and Figure 2 summarize the bootstrapping results of the structural model. The four hypotheses are discussed in turn below, beginning with the direct paths and concluding with the mediating role of organizational attractiveness.

H1 proposed that employer branding positively influences organizational attractiveness. The results lend strong support to this proposition: the path was positive and highly significant ($\beta = 0.772$; $t = 31.589$; $p < 0.001$), the strongest relationship in the model. Respondents who perceived a stronger employer brand thus viewed the organization as considerably more attractive. H1 is supported.

H2 posited that organizational attractiveness positively influences intention to apply. This relationship was likewise positive and significant ($\beta = 0.547$; $t = 7.669$; $p < 0.001$), indicating that the more attractive an organization appears, the more inclined respondents are to apply for a position there. H2 is therefore supported.

H3 predicted a direct positive effect of employer branding on intention to apply. Although the coefficient pointed in the expected direction, it did not reach significance ($\beta = 0.118$; $t = 1.650$; $p = 0.100$). On its own, employer branding does not translate directly into application intentions; H3 is therefore not supported.

H4 proposed that organizational attractiveness mediates the effect of employer branding on intention to apply. The specific indirect effect was positive and significant ($\beta = 0.422$; $t = 7.640$; $p < 0.001$), providing clear support for H4.

Taken together with the non-significant direct path, this pattern indicates indirect-only, or full, mediation (Zhao et al., 2010). The total effect of employer branding on intention to apply was 0.540, of which the indirect path through organizational attractiveness accounted for approximately 78%. In other words, employer branding shapes Generation Z's intention to apply largely by first enhancing how attractive the organization is perceived to be.

Table 7. Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	β	SD	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	EB $\rightarrow$ OA	0.772	0.024	31.589	0.000	Supported
H2	OA $\rightarrow$ IA	0.547	0.071	7.669	0.000	Supported
H3	EB $\rightarrow$ IA	0.118	0.072	1.650	0.100	Not supported
H4	EB $\rightarrow$ OA $\rightarrow$ IA	0.422	0.055	7.640	0.000	Supported (indirect-only mediation)

Note: SD = bootstrap standard deviation; two-tailed tests. Source: Data processed (2026)

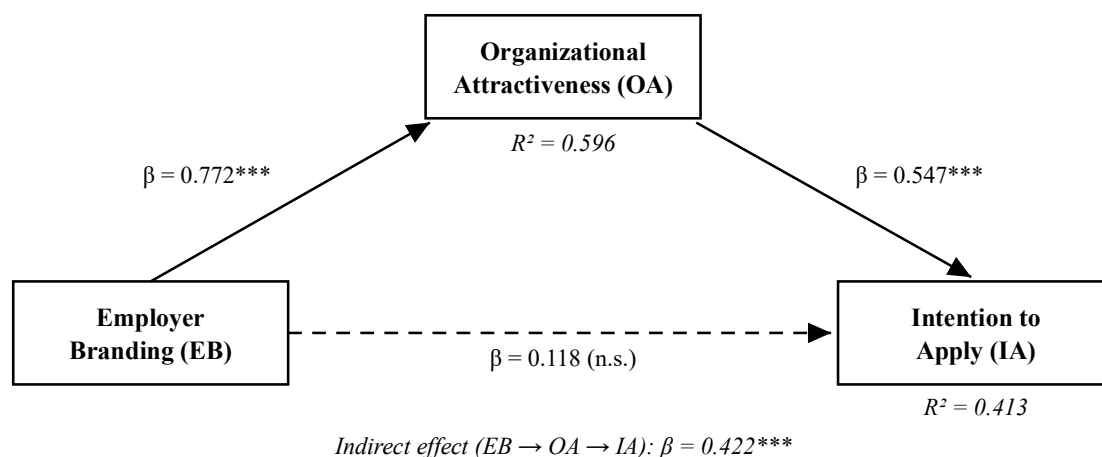


Figure 2. Structural Model Results

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; n.s. = not significant; dashed line = non-significant direct path. Source: Data processed (2026)

Figure 2 visualizes these relationships and makes the structure of the model immediately apparent. The path from employer branding to organizational attractiveness stands out as the dominant link ($\beta = 0.772$), with employer branding accounting for 59.6% of the variance in organizational attractiveness ($R^2 = 0.596$). Organizational attractiveness, in turn, carries this influence forward to intention to apply ($\beta = 0.547$), whereas the direct path from employer branding to intention to apply, shown as a dashed line, remains weak and non-significant ($\beta = 0.118$). Together, the two predictors explain 41.3% of the variance in intention to apply ($R^2 = 0.413$). The figure thus reinforces the central finding of this study: employer branding does not drive Generation Z's intention to apply on its own, but works through the attractiveness it builds in the eyes of prospective applicants.

5. Discussion

The results show that employer branding strongly increased organizational attractiveness, that organizational attractiveness increased intention to apply, and that employer branding affected intention

to apply only through organizational attractiveness. In other words, older Generation Z job seekers in this sample did not intend to apply simply because an employer communicated a strong brand; they intended to apply when that brand led them to see the organization as a desirable place to work.

The positive effect of employer branding on organizational attractiveness is consistent with Sheren and Situmorang (2026) and Tanni and Arief (2026), who found that employer-related communication increased perceived employer attractiveness among young Indonesian and Vietnamese job seekers, and with Carpentier et al. (2019), who showed that employer signals on social media shaped applicants' attraction. The size of the effect in this study ($f^2 = 1.475$) is larger than is typical in these studies. One explanation is that active job seekers pay close attention to employer information because they must make real decisions, so employer signals weigh heavily in their evaluations. Another explanation, discussed below, is the conceptual and empirical closeness of the two constructs. The positive effect of organizational attractiveness on intention to apply agrees with Rani et al. (2022) and Soeling et al. (2022) and supports the attitude–intention logic of the theory of planned behavior (Ajzen, 1991; Highhouse et al., 2003).

The non-significant direct effect of employer branding on intention to apply differs from Soeling et al. (2022), Thang and Trang (2024), and Verma et al. (2024), who reported significant direct effects. Four explanations are plausible. First, the result reflects full mediation: once organizational attractiveness is accounted for, employer branding adds almost no unique explanatory power ($f^2 = 0.010$), which suggests that its influence is channeled through job seekers' evaluations. Second, the sample differs from those of prior studies. Verma et al. (2024) surveyed MBA graduates of a leading business school, who can be selective among employers, whereas 62.0% of the present respondents were unemployed and actively searching. Such job seekers may apply to many organizations regardless of brand strength and become more selective only when an employer appears clearly attractive. Third, the strong shared variance between employer branding and organizational attractiveness (HTMT = 0.900) means that, when both predict intention to apply, most of their common variance is attributed to organizational attractiveness, the more proximal predictor, which leaves little for the direct path. Fourth, the study was powered to detect path coefficients of about 0.15, so a small direct effect of 0.118 may exist but could not be detected with 300 respondents. These explanations are consistent with Tanni and Arief (2026), who found that perceived employer attractiveness mediated the effect of employer branding on job seeker attraction. They also help explain why Soeling et al. (2022), who did not model attractiveness as a mediator, observed a significant direct effect.

Theoretically, the findings support and refine signaling theory in the recruitment context. Employer branding acts as a signal, but the signal influences behavior only after it is interpreted and evaluated (Spence, 1973). The instrumental–symbolic framework explains what is being evaluated: job seekers infer the instrumental and symbolic attributes of the organization and form an overall judgment of its attractiveness (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). The study therefore makes three contributions. First, it specifies organizational attractiveness as the evaluative mechanism that links employer signals to intention to apply, rather than treating attractiveness only as a predictor (Rani et al., 2022) or testing reputation and image as mediators (Soeling et al., 2022; Thang & Trang, 2024). Second, it offers a theory-based explanation for the inconsistent direct effects reported in earlier studies: where the evaluative step is modeled, the direct effect may disappear. Third, it extends this evidence from students to older Generation Z job seekers who are already active in the Indonesian labor market. At the same time, the close empirical relationship between employer branding and organizational attractiveness suggests that future studies should measure the two constructs with clearly distinct items, for example

by measuring employer branding through specific employer attributes or exposure to employer communication and organizational attractiveness through global evaluative judgments.

The findings also have practical implications for HR managers and recruiters. Because brand visibility alone did not raise intention to apply, organizations should evaluate their employer branding by whether it changes how attractive the organization is perceived to be, not only by reach or impressions. Recruiters can, for example, track perceived attractiveness among applicants and candidate pools before and after employer branding campaigns. Employer value propositions for older Generation Z job seekers should feature concrete and verifiable information on development programs, career paths, flexibility, and workplace culture, presented through employee testimonials and realistic job previews rather than general slogans. Because a majority of the respondents were unemployed, organizations recruiting in this segment should also make application processes simple and should communicate the attributes that make the organization a good long-term choice, so that the large pool of active job seekers is converted into well-matched applicants. These recommendations concern recruitment outcomes; because the study measured individual perceptions, it does not show that employer branding produces firm-level competitive advantage.

6. Conclusion

This study set out to explain how employer branding influences the intention of Generation Z job seekers to apply to an organization. Among older members of Generation Z who were actively seeking work in Indonesia, employer branding made organizations appear considerably more attractive as places to work, and this perceived attractiveness, in turn, encouraged their intention to apply. Employer branding did not, however, raise application intention on its own; its influence ran entirely through the way job seekers evaluated the organization.

The central message is that a strong employer brand does not automatically make Generation Z job seekers want to apply. Its value lies in its ability to convince them that the organization offers what they care about. By grounding this mechanism in signaling theory and the instrumental–symbolic framework, the study clarifies why earlier evidence on the direct link between employer branding and application intention has been mixed and identifies organizational attractiveness as the step at which employer signals become behavioral intentions. For practitioners, the findings suggest that employer branding should be designed and evaluated as a means of building credible attractiveness among target candidates, rather than as an exercise in visibility.

7. Limitations and Future Study

This study has several limitations. First, the cross-sectional design does not allow causal conclusions about the sequence from employer branding to organizational attractiveness to intention to apply. Second, purposive sampling of job seekers born between 1997 and 2000 limits generalization to the whole of Generation Z and to the wider Indonesian population. Third, respondents did not evaluate a specific employer, so their answers may reflect general impressions rather than responses to an identifiable employer brand. Fourth, all variables were self-reported in a single survey, which creates a risk of common method bias even though the statistical tests did not indicate a serious problem. Fifth, employer branding and organizational attractiveness showed high shared variance, which limits the precision with which their separate effects can be estimated. Finally, the digital context was treated as background, and no digital variable was measured.

Future research could address these limitations in three ways. First, longitudinal or experimental designs, for example presenting job seekers with real or simulated employer branding content for named organizations, would allow stronger causal inference and clearer separation of employer signals from attractiveness evaluations. Second, comparative samples covering younger Generation Z members, students, and other generations or countries would test whether the indirect-only pattern holds beyond older active job seekers. Third, adding digital constructs such as social media engagement, online employer reviews, or e-recruitment experience, as well as moderators such as person–organization fit or employment status, would clarify when employer branding exerts direct as well as indirect effects.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization: Oliandes Sondakh and Wiwiek; Methodology: Oliandes Sondakh; Data curation: Wiwiek; Formal analysis: Oliandes Sondakh; Writing—original draft: Oliandes Sondakh; Writing—review and editing: Oliandes Sondakh and Wiwiek.

Declarations

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