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Employer Branding, Leadership Behaviour, and Generation Z Career Intentions: The Mediating Role of Employer Attractiveness among Final-Year Students in Jambi Province, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study examines how employer branding and leadership behavior influence Generation Z's career intentions during their transition from higher education to employment. In increasingly competitive labor markets, organizations rely on credible signals to shape job seekers' perceptions; drawing on signaling theory, this study conceptualizes employer branding and leadership behavior as complementary signals that influence career intentions through employer attractiveness. Prior research has largely treated employer branding as an isolated predictor, with limited attention to leadership behavior as a parallel signal and few studies testing their combined effects within a mediation framework. Addressing this gap, the study employs a structured survey of 400 final-year undergraduate students from five accredited universities in Jambi Province, Indonesia, and analyzes the data using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). The results indicate that employer branding significantly influences career intention ($\beta = 0.373$; $p < 0.001$), while leadership behavior shows a stronger effect ($\beta = 0.532$; $p < 0.001$). Both employer branding ($\beta = 0.378$; $p < 0.001$) and leadership behavior ($\beta = 0.612$; $p < 0.001$) significantly affect employer attractiveness, which in turn predicts career intention ($\beta = 0.609$; $p < 0.001$). Mediation analysis reveals partial mediation, as both direct and indirect effects remain significant, with indirect effects of employer branding ($\beta = 0.230$; $p < 0.001$) and leadership behavior ($\beta = 0.373$; $p < 0.001$) on career intention through employer attractiveness. Given the cross-sectional design, the findings indicate associations rather than causality; however, they provide context-sensitive insights into signaling mechanisms in environments with limited access to organizational information and suggest that organizations may enhance employer attractiveness to potentially improve early-stage recruitment outcomes among Generation Z.

KEYWORDS

employer branding; leadership behavior; career intentions; employer attractiveness.

Introduction

The intensifying competition for high-quality talent has positioned human capital as a critical source of sustainable competitive advantage, particularly amid demographic shifts driven by the entry of Generation Z into the workforce (Cantrell & Carr, 2024, Dayel et al., 2020). As the newest cohort entering employment, Generation Z is reshaping labor market dynamics through distinct preferences, expectations, and decision-making patterns that differ from those of previous generations. In Indonesia, this cohort constitutes a substantial proportion of the labor force while simultaneously experiencing relatively high unemployment rates, suggesting a persistent mismatch between

organizational offerings and job seekers' expectations (Shinde & Surve, 2025; Sumaryono et al., 2025). These conditions highlight the growing importance of understanding how Generation Z forms career intentions, particularly in contexts characterized by information constraints, evolving employment structures, and increasing competition among employers for emerging talent.

Existing literature indicates that Generation Z evaluates prospective employers not solely based on economic rewards but also on symbolic and relational attributes, including organizational reputation, perceived leadership quality, ethical standards, and opportunities for personal development (Lesmono & Widhianto, 2024; Rakhmad et al., 2021). This shift reflects a broader transformation in the psychological contract between employers and employees, in which intangible factors play a more central role in shaping career-related decisions. As a result, organizations are increasingly required to communicate not only what they offer materially, but also who they are as employers, how they operate internally, and what values they embody. Within this context, employer branding has emerged as a central construct in contemporary human resource management and organizational behavior research.

Employer branding refers to the strategic process through which organizations communicate a distinctive and appealing employment value proposition to current and potential employees (Bristol-Alagbariya et al., 2024). Through various communication channels such as corporate websites, recruitment campaigns, and social media platforms organizations attempt to signal desirable attributes, including supportive work environments, ethical practices, career development opportunities, and long-term stability. A substantial body of empirical research demonstrates that employer branding plays a significant role in shaping organizational attractiveness and job pursuit intentions among potential applicants (Thao et al., 2024). These findings suggest that employer branding functions as a critical external signal that reduces uncertainty and guides job seekers' evaluations of potential employers.

However, despite its established importance, the existing literature tends to conceptualize employer branding primarily as an external communication mechanism, often overlooking the internal organizational factors that may reinforce or contradict these externally projected signals. This limitation creates an incomplete understanding of how job seekers interpret and integrate multiple sources of information when forming career intentions. In practice, individuals rarely rely on a single source of information; instead, they synthesize various cues to construct a more holistic perception of organizational reality. This raises an important but insufficiently addressed question in the literature: how do internal organizational signals interact with external employer branding in shaping job seekers' perceptions and decisions?

Leadership behavior represents one of the most salient internal organizational signals in this regard. Leaders are widely regarded as symbolic representatives of organizational values, and their behaviors, communication styles, and interpersonal interactions serve as key indicators of how organizational principles are enacted in practice (Confetto et al., 2023). For job seekers, particularly those seeking supportive and value-aligned work environments, leadership behavior can function as a heuristic for evaluating the authenticity and credibility of employer claims. Nevertheless, a conceptual-operational challenge arises when examining populations such as final-year students, who typically have limited direct experience with the organizations they are evaluating.

To address this challenge, it is important to recognize that perceptions of leadership behavior are not formed exclusively through direct interaction but can also emerge through

indirect and mediated sources of information. In contemporary labor markets, prospective employees increasingly rely on employer-generated content, social media narratives, internship experiences, alumni networks, and employee testimonials to infer organizational characteristics (Hossain et al., 2026). These channels provide observable cues about leadership visibility, communication style, ethical conduct, and relational dynamics within organizations. Consequently, leadership behavior can be conceptualized not only as an experienced phenomenon but also as a perceived signal constructed through available informational cues. This perspective helps align the theoretical construct of leadership behavior with the empirical reality of student-based samples, thereby addressing the conceptual-operational mismatch identified in prior research.

Signaling theory provides a robust theoretical framework for understanding how such cues influence job seekers' perceptions and decision-making processes (Celani & Singh, 2011). Under conditions of information asymmetry, where prospective employees lack complete knowledge about organizational realities, individuals rely on observable signals to infer unobservable attributes. In this study, employer branding and leadership behavior are conceptualized as complementary signals that jointly reduce uncertainty and shape perceptions of employer attractiveness. Employer branding conveys the organization's intended identity and value proposition, while leadership-related cues reflect perceived enactments of those values in practice. Together, these signals provide a more comprehensive informational basis for evaluating potential employers.

Despite this theoretical alignment, empirical research has rarely integrated employer branding and leadership behavior within a unified analytical framework. Most prior studies have examined these constructs in isolation, thereby limiting the ability to understand their combined effects on job seekers' attitudes and intentions. Furthermore, while employer attractiveness is frequently examined as an outcome of employer branding, its role as a mediating mechanism linking multiple organizational signals to career intentions remains underexplored. Limited empirical studies have tested whether employer attractiveness serves as a key psychological mechanism through which both external and internal signals influence job pursuit decisions (Zografo & Galanaki, 2025). This gap reflects a broader unresolved tension in the literature regarding whether different types of organizational signals operate independently or interactively in shaping career-related outcomes.

The importance of addressing this gap becomes even more pronounced in emerging regional labor markets. Compared to developed or metropolitan labor markets, emerging regions often exhibit lower levels of employer brand visibility, less formalized recruitment systems, and more limited access to reliable organizational information. These constraints increase the reliance of job seekers on indirect and symbolic cues when evaluating potential employers. In such contexts, signaling mechanisms are likely to play a more critical role in shaping perceptions and intentions. However, despite its theoretical relevance, this contextual setting remains underrepresented in the literature, which continues to be dominated by studies conducted in developed economies and urban environments. As a result, the generalizability of existing findings is constrained, and the contextual contingencies influencing signaling effectiveness remain insufficiently understood.

Responding to these theoretical and empirical gaps, the present study investigates how employer branding and leadership behavior jointly influence Generation Z's career intentions, with employer attractiveness conceptualized as a mediating mechanism. The study focuses on final-year students in Jambi Province, Indonesia, a context characterized by relatively limited access to organizational information and

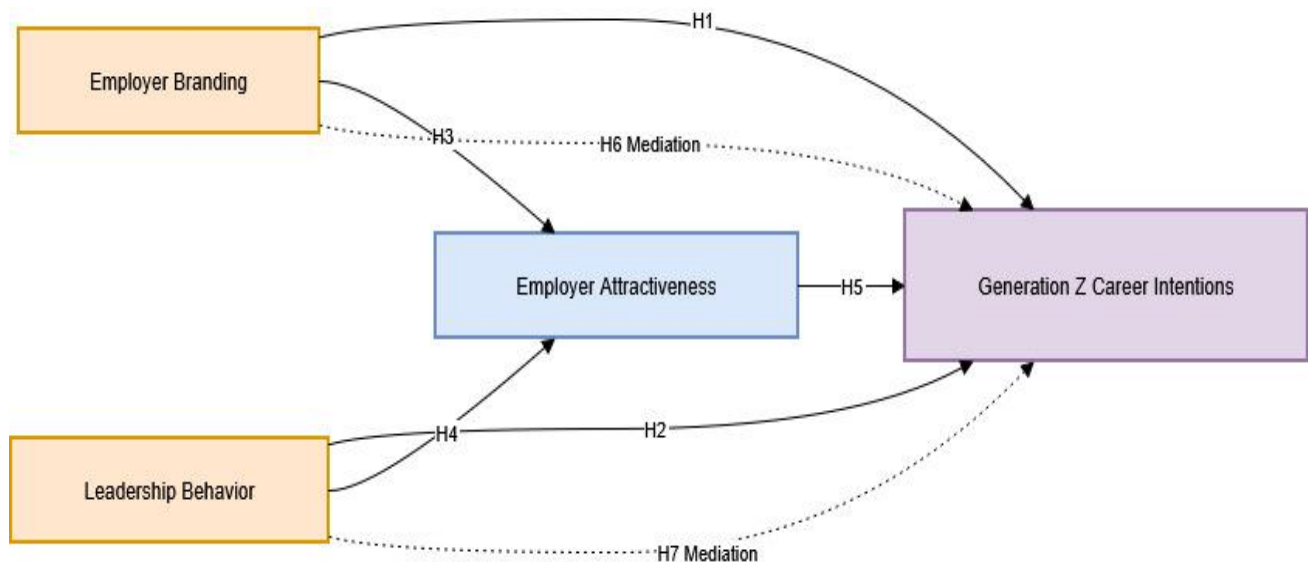


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

evolving labor market structures. By examining how prospective employees interpret and integrate multiple organizational signals under such conditions, this study seeks to provide a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of career intention formation.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it advances signaling theory by integrating external and internal organizational signals within a single analytical framework, thereby addressing the fragmented treatment of these constructs in prior research. Second, it clarifies the role of employer attractiveness as a mediating mechanism, offering insights into the psychological processes through which organizational signals influence career intentions. Third, by situating the analysis within an emerging regional labor market, the study extends the contextual applicability of signaling theory and highlights the importance of informational constraints in shaping job seekers' decision-making processes. The conceptual framework and hypotheses (H1–H7) are presented in the following figure 1.

Hypotheses:

- H1: Employer branding has a positive and significant effect on Generation Z's career intentions.
- H2: Leadership behavior has a positive and significant effect on Generation Z's career intentions.
- H3: Employer branding has a positive and significant effect on employer attractiveness.
- H4: Leadership behavior has a positive and significant effect on employer attractiveness.
- H5: Employer attractiveness has a positive and significant effect on Generation Z's career intentions.
- H6: Employer attractiveness mediates the relationship between employer branding and Generation Z's career intentions.
- H7: Employer attractiveness mediates the relationship between leadership behavior and Generation Z's career intentions.

Methods

Research Type

This study employs a quantitative explanatory research design to examine the relationships among employer branding, leadership behavior, employer attractiveness, and Generation Z's career intentions. A cross-sectional survey approach is used to capture respondents' perceptions during their transition from higher education to workforce entry,

enabling theory-driven hypothesis testing within a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) framework (Creswell, 2014). Rather than establishing causality, this design focuses on testing hypothesized associations and predictive relationships among constructs based on data collected at a single point in time.

Population and Sample

The target population consists of final-year undergraduate students from accredited universities in Jambi Province, representing Generation Z job seekers preparing to enter the labor market. A multi-stage sampling approach is applied. First, five universities are purposively selected based on institutional accreditation status, program diversity, and accessibility to ensure variation in academic backgrounds. Second, proportional allocation is conducted based on the number of final-year students in each faculty and study program, obtained from institutional records. Respondents are approached through academic coordinators and online survey distribution, with participation limited to students in their final year and actively seeking employment. Of the 450 questionnaires distributed, 412 are returned, and 400 valid responses are retained after screening for completeness and consistency. While the sample captures diverse academic profiles, it is intended to represent final-year students in selected institutions rather than the entire Generation Z population in the province (Cohen, 2013).

Research Location

The study is conducted in Jambi Province, Indonesia, an emerging regional labor market characterized by growing higher education participation and increasing competition for young talent. This context provides a relevant setting for examining how organizational signals influence career intentions among Generation Z entrants to the workforce.

Instrumentation or Tools

Data are collected using a structured, self-administered questionnaire consisting of multi-item reflective scales adapted from established literature. Employer branding measures perceptions of organizational reputation and value proposition; leadership behavior reflects supportive and developmental leadership orientations; employer attractiveness captures perceived organizational desirability; and career intention assesses respondents' willingness to pursue employment with an organization. All items are measured using a five-point Likert scale. The instrument undergoes back-translation and pilot testing procedures to ensure clarity, validity, and reliability of measurement. Data are collected using a structured, self-

administered questionnaire consisting of multi-item reflective scales adapted from established literature and operationalized based on validated dimensional structures. Employer branding is measured using five dimensions: interest value, social value, economic value, development value, and application value (Dženopoljac et al., 2023; Hein et al., 2024), comprising 15 items. Leadership behavior is measured using four dimensions: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Cha et al., 2020; Pincus, 2024; Xu et al., 2022), comprising 12 items. Employer attractiveness is measured using five dimensions: interest value, social value, economic value, development value, and application value (Eger et al., 2019; Stiglbauer et al., 2022), comprising 15 items. Career intention is measured using three dimensions: attitude toward career, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Chowdhury et al., 2025), comprising 9 items. To ensure content validity, the instrument is evaluated through expert judgment involving seven experts in human resource management and organizational behavior, assessing item relevance, clarity, and representativeness. Several items are refined accordingly without altering their theoretical meaning. Given the student-based sample, leadership behavior items are adapted to reflect perceived signals derived from indirect sources such as employer narratives, social media content, and employee testimonials. All items are measured using a five-point Likert scale, and back-translation is applied to ensure conceptual equivalence.

Data Collection Procedures

Data collection is conducted through survey administration to final-year undergraduate students across the selected universities. Respondents complete the questionnaire independently after receiving clear instructions regarding participation. The cross-sectional data collection captures perceptions at the critical transition phase from higher education to employment.

Data Analysis

This study employs Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) to evaluate both the measurement and structural models. The analysis is conducted using SmartPLS software (version 4), following recommended procedures for assessing reliability, convergent validity, discriminant validity, and structural relationships (Hair et al., 2021). To test the significance of path coefficients and indirect effects, a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 resamples is applied. Mediation effects of employer attractiveness are examined using the bootstrapping approach to assess the significance of indirect paths. To address potential common method bias, Harman's single-factor test and full collinearity assessment are conducted. The results indicate that no single factor accounts for the majority of variance, and all variance inflation factor (VIF) values are below the recommended threshold, suggesting that common method bias is not a serious concern.

Ethical Approval

This study adheres to established ethical standards for research involving human participants. Participation is voluntary, and respondents are informed about the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, and the confidentiality of their responses prior to completing the questionnaire. Informed consent is obtained electronically, where participants confirm their willingness to participate before accessing the survey. Formal ethical approval was not required in accordance with institutional guidelines of Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Ekonomi Jambi, as the study involves minimal risk, anonymous data collection, and no sensitive

personal information. However, the research protocol was reviewed and approved at the institutional level to ensure compliance with academic and ethical research standards. All data are collected anonymously, and no identifiable personal information is recorded. The data are used solely for academic purposes and are stored securely to prevent unauthorized access.

Result and Discussion

The results section begins with an overview of the respondents' demographic profile, followed by the evaluation of the measurement model and structural model. The respondent profile shows that the sample consists of final-year undergraduate students from diverse academic disciplines and institutions in Jambi Province, representing Generation Z job seekers approaching labor market entry (see table 1). The measurement model assessment confirms the reliability and validity of the constructs, including indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Subsequently, the structural model is evaluated to examine the hypothesized relationships among employer branding, leadership behavior, employer attractiveness, and career intention, including the assessment of direct and indirect effects.

The demographic characteristics of respondents provide a comprehensive overview of the academic, experiential, and career-orientation profiles of Generation Z students in Jambi Province, which is essential for understanding the formation of career intentions within an emerging regional labor market. The majority of respondents were male (210; 52.5%), with females accounting for 190 (47.5%), indicating a relatively balanced gender composition that enhances the generalizability of findings across gender groups. In terms of age, most respondents were between 21–22 years (115; 28.8%) and 23–24 years (110; 27.5%), followed by 18–20 years (95; 23.8%) and ≥25 years (80; 20.0%), reflecting a cohort at a critical transition from higher education to full labor market participation (Dzimiri et al., 2019).

Institutional representation shows that respondents were drawn from five major universities in Jambi Province, with the largest proportion from Universitas Jambi (100; 25.0%), followed by Universitas Batanghari (80; 20.0%), Universitas Muhammadiyah Jambi (75; 18.8%), Universitas Nurdin Hamzah (75; 18.8%), and UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi (70; 17.5%). This distribution ensures institutional diversity across public and private higher education contexts. Regarding study programs, most respondents were enrolled in Management (110; 27.5%) and Accounting (90; 22.5%), followed by Business/Entrepreneurship (80; 20.0%), Development Economics (70; 17.5%), and other majors (50; 12.5%), indicating a strong concentration in business-related disciplines relevant to employer branding and organizational attractiveness research (Briones et al., 2021).

The educational level profile shows that the majority were Bachelor's degree (S1) students (300; 75.0%), with the remainder enrolled in Diploma (D3/D4) programs (100; 25.0%). In terms of academic progression, most respondents were in Semester 8 (150; 37.5%) and Semester 7 (140; 35.0%), while 110 (27.5%) were in Semester 9 or above, confirming that the sample largely consisted of students nearing graduation. This is further supported by study completion status data, where 180 respondents (45.0%) were currently writing their thesis, 120 (30.0%) had completed their thesis defense, and 100 (25.0%) were awaiting graduation decisions or ceremonies indicating high proximity to labor market entry (Škrinjaric, 2023).

Work and internship experience data reveal varying levels of labor market exposure: 150 respondents (37.5%) had

Table 1. Characteristics of respondents

Characteristics	Amount	Percentage%
Gender	Male	210 52,5%
	Female	190 47,5%
Age	18–20 years	95 23,8%
	21–22 years	115 28,8%
	23–24 years	110 27,5%
	≥ 25 years	80 20,0%
Home University / University of Origin	Universitas Jambi	100 25,0%
	Universitas Batanghari	80 20,0%
	Universitas Muhammadiyah Jambi	75 18,8%
	UIN Sulthan Thaha Saifuddin Jambi	70 17,5%
	Universitas Nurdin Hamzah	75 18,8%
Study Program / Major	Management	110 27,5%
	Accounting	90 22,5%
	Development Economics	70 17,5%
	Business / Entrepreneurship	80 20,0%
	Other	50 12,5%
Education Level	Bachelor's Degree (S1)	300 75,0%
	Diploma (D3/D4)	100 25,0%
Current Semester	Semester 7	140 35,0%
	Semester 8	150 37,5%
	Semester 9 or above	110 27,5%
Study Completion Status	Currently writing thesis	180 45,0%
	Have completed thesis defense	120 30,0%
	Waiting for graduation decision / ceremony	100 25,0%
Work or Internship Experience	None	120 30,0%
	Have done an internship	150 37,5%
	Have worked part-time	80 20,0%
	Have worked full-time	50 12,5%
	Private company	120 30,0%
Desired Field of Work After Graduation	State-owned enterprise (SOE)	90 22,5%
	Government institution	80 20,0%
	Entrepreneurship	70 17,5%
	Other	40 10,0%
Planned Time to Start Career After Graduation	< 6 months	150 37,5%
	6–12 months	130 32,5%
	> 1 year	60 15,0%
	No definite plan yet	60 15,0%
	Jambi Province	140 35,0%
Preferred Work Location	Outside Jambi Province	120 30,0%
	Willing to work anywhere	140 35,0%

Table 2. Expert validation result.

No.	Expert validator scores							V	Z	p Value	Status	Decision
Item	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7					
1	4	4	5	3	4	5	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
2	4	4	4	4	4	5	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
3	4	4	5	4	4	4	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
4	4	4	4	3	5	5	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
5	4	4	5	4	5	5	3	0,821	2,272	0,012	Valid	Used
6	4	5	5	4	5	5	3	0,857	2,539	0,006	Valid	Used
7	4	5	5	4	4	5	3	0,821	2,272	0,012	Valid	Used
8	4	4	5	4	5	5	3	0,821	2,272	0,012	Valid	Used
9	4	5	5	4	4	5	3	0,821	2,272	0,012	Valid	Used
10	4	5	5	4	5	5	3	0,857	2,539	0,006	Valid	Used
11	4	4	5	3	5	5	3	0,786	2,004	0,023	Valid	Used
12	4	5	5	3	5	5	3	0,821	2,272	0,012	Valid	Used
13	4	4	5	3	5	5	3	0,786	2,004	0,023	Valid	Used
14	4	4	5	4	4	5	3	0,786	2,004	0,023	Valid	Used
15	4	3	5	4	4	5	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
16	4	4	4	4	5	5	3	0,786	2,004	0,023	Valid	Used
17	5	4	5	4	5	5	3	0,857	2,539	0,006	Valid	Used
18	4	4	5	5	5	5	3	0,857	2,539	0,006	Valid	Used
19	4	3	5	5	5	5	3	0,821	2,272	0,012	Valid	Used
20	5	4	4	4	5	5	3	0,821	2,272	0,012	Valid	Used

No.	Expert validator scores							V	Z	p Value	Status	Decision
Item	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	E7					
21	4	4	4	4	5	4	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
22	4	3	5	4	5	4	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
23	4	5	4	5	5	5	3	0,857	2,539	0,006	Valid	Used
24	4	4	5	4	4	5	3	0,786	2,004	0,023	Valid	Used
25	4	4	5	4	4	4	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
26	4	4	4	4	4	5	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
27	5	4	4	4	4	5	3	0,786	2,004	0,023	Valid	Used
28	4	4	4	4	4	5	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
29	5	3	4	4	4	5	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
30	4	4	5	4	4	4	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
31	4	4	4	4	5	5	3	0,786	2,004	0,023	Valid	Used
32	4	4	5	5	4	5	3	0,821	2,272	0,012	Valid	Used
33	5	4	4	4	5	5	3	0,821	2,272	0,012	Valid	Used
34	4	5	5	4	5	5	3	0,857	2,539	0,006	Valid	Used
35	4	5	4	5	4	5	3	0,821	2,272	0,012	Valid	Used
36	4	5	4	4	4	5	3	0,786	2,004	0,023	Valid	Used
37	4	5	4	4	4	5	3	0,786	2,004	0,023	Valid	Used
38	4	5	4	5	4	5	3	0,821	2,272	0,012	Valid	Used
39	5	5	4	5	5	5	3	0,893	2,806	0,003	Valid	Used
40	4	3	5	4	4	5	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
41	3	4	5	4	4	5	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
42	4	4	4	5	4	5	3	0,786	2,004	0,023	Valid	Used
43	4	5	5	4	4	5	3	0,821	2,272	0,012	Valid	Used
44	3	5	5	5	5	5	3	0,857	2,539	0,006	Valid	Used
45	4	4	5	4	4	4	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
46	4	4	4	4	5	5	3	0,786	2,004	0,023	Valid	Used
47	5	4	4	5	5	5	3	0,857	2,539	0,006	Valid	Used
48	4	4	4	4	4	5	3	0,750	1,737	0,041	Valid	Used
49	5	5	5	4	4	5	3	0,857	2,539	0,006	Valid	Used
50	5	4	5	4	5	5	3	0,857	2,539	0,006	Valid	Used
51	4	5	5	4	5	4	3	0,821	2,272	0,012	Valid	Used

Table 3. Summary Statistics of Experimental Groups Based on Two-Factor ANOVA Without Replication

SUMMARY	Count	Sum	Average	Variance
E1	50	211	4,22	0,379184
E2	50	229	4,58	0,248571
E3	50	206	4,12	0,27102
E4	50	225	4,5	0,255102
E5	50	224	4,58	0,27102
E6	50	243	4,86	0,122857
E7	50	150	3	0

completed internships, 80 (20.0%) had worked part-time, 50 (12.5%) had worked full-time, and 120 (30.0%) had no prior work experience. This heterogeneity allows for meaningful analysis of how prior exposure to organizational environments shapes perceptions of employer branding and leadership behavior. Regarding career aspirations, the majority preferred employment in private companies (120; 30.0%), followed by state-owned enterprises (90; 22.5%) and government institutions (80; 20.0%), while 70 (17.5%) expressed interest in entrepreneurship and 40 (10.0%) selected other fields (Sakhy et al., 2023).

In terms of career timing, most respondents intended to begin working within less than six months after graduation (150; 37.5%) or within 6–12 months (130; 32.5%), whereas 60 (15.0%) planned to wait more than one year and another 60 (15.0%) had no definite plan. Preferred work location was evenly distributed between those wishing to remain in Jambi Province (140; 35.0%) and those willing to work anywhere (140; 35.0%), with 120 (30.0%) preferring employment outside Jambi. Overall, the integration of demographic, academic, experiential, and career-preference data demonstrates that the sample consists predominantly of final-year Generation Z students with diverse institutional

backgrounds, varying levels of work exposure, and clearly articulated career intentions thereby providing a robust empirical foundation for analyzing the structural relationships among employer branding, leadership behavior, employer attractiveness, and career intentions within the SEM framework.

According to Table 2, expert validation involving seven experts was conducted to ensure the content validity of the adapted measurement scales within the specific context of Generation Z students in Indonesia. Although the items were derived from established literature, expert judgment was necessary to evaluate their contextual relevance, clarity, and representativeness following adaptation to a different cultural and respondent setting. The results show that all 51 items achieved Aiken's V coefficients ranging from 0.750 to 0.893, meeting the minimum threshold of 0.75 and indicating strong agreement among experts. The highest coefficient ($V = 0.893$) was obtained for item 39, while several items reached values above 0.80, reflecting substantial consensus. In addition, all Z values ranged from 1.737 to 2.806, with p-values between 0.041 and 0.003, all below the 0.05 significance level (Kadir & Sappaile, 2019), confirming statistical significance. Importantly, no items were removed during the validation process, and all 51 items were retained. These items are consistently mapped across constructs as follows: employer branding (15 items), leadership behavior (12 items), employer attractiveness (15 items), and career intention (9 items). This confirms that the instrument demonstrates acceptable content validity and is suitable for subsequent analysis.

Subsequently, inter-rater reliability was calculated using the following formula.

Table 4. Results of Two-Factor ANOVA Without Replication

ANOVA						
Source of Variation	SS	df	MS	F	P-value	F crit
Rows	10,34667	49	0,211156	0,990807	0,496943	1,406423
Columns	105,7867	5	21,15733	99,2763	7,07E-57	2,250876
Error	52,21333	245	0,213116			
Total	168,3467	299				

Table 5. Loading factor result

Indicator	Career Intention	Employer Attractiveness	Employer Branding	Leadership Behaviour
CI1	0.759			
CI2	0.806			
CI3	0.824			
CI4	0.807			
CI5	0.776			
CI6	0.805			
CI7	0.795			
CI8	0.814			
CI9	0.747			
EA1		0.815		
EA10		0.793		
EA11		0.709		
EA12		0.757		
EA13		0.786		
EA14		0.733		
EA15		0.760		
EA2		0.779		
EA3		0.790		
EA4		0.752		
EA5		0.775		
EA6		0.812		
EA7		0.764		
EA8		0.796		
EA9		0.797		
EB1			0.741	
EB10			0.770	
EB11			0.800	
EB12			0.783	
EB13			0.772	
EB14			0.749	
EB15			0.742	
EB2			0.776	
EB3			0.807	
EB4			0.775	
EB5			0.756	
EB6			0.776	
EB7			0.774	
EB8			0.787	
EB9			0.763	
LB1				0.782
LB10				0.790
LB11				0.765
LB12				0.806
LB2				0.773
LB3				0.738
LB4				0.765
LB5				0.802
LB6				0.792
LB7				0.786
LB8				0.782
LB9				0.801

Based on the ANOVA: Two-Factor Without Replication analysis, the following summary results were obtained (see Table 3 and Table 4).

$$r = \frac{MS_{columns} - MS_{error}}{MS_{columns}}$$

Table 6. Measurement model assessment

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
Career Intention	0.926	0.927	0.729
Employer Attractiveness	0.952	0.953	0.701
Employer Branding	0.951	0.952	0.795
Leadership Behaviour	0.942	0.943	0.712

Table 7. R-Square result

Variable	R Square
Career Intention	0.826
Employer Attractiveness	0.943

Table 8. Effect size (f²) result

Variable	F Square	T statistics	P values
Employer Attractiveness -> Career Intention	0.738	6.543	0.000
Employer Branding -> Employer Attractiveness	0.375	4.280	0.000
Leadership Behaviour -> Employer Attractiveness	0.984	7.015	0.000

Based on the ANOVA calculation results for the data above, the following findings were obtained.

$$r = \frac{MS_{columns} - MS_{error}}{MS_{columns}}$$

$$r = \frac{21.15733333 - 0.213115646}{21.15733333}$$

$$r = \frac{20.944217684}{21.15733333}$$

$$r \approx 0.942$$

Based on the ANOVA-based inter-rater reliability calculation, a coefficient of 0.942 (94.2%) was obtained, indicating a very high level of agreement among the seven expert raters. The reliability assessment was conducted on the ratings of 51 instrument items, where each expert evaluated the relevance, clarity, and representativeness of the items. The ANOVA-based approach was selected as it allows the estimation of consistency across multiple raters assessing the same set of items. This result indicates that the experts provided highly consistent evaluations, supporting the stability of the content validation process. However, this inter-rater reliability is interpreted as complementary to content validity and does not replace other measurement model assessments such as internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, which are evaluated separately in the subsequent analysis.

Outer Model Evaluation

Convergent validity testing determines how well the indicators used in the measurement correlate with other indicators of the same construct. The correlation between the indicator and construct scores indicates convergent validity. Based on table 5, it is known that all indicators have a loading factor value of > 0.7; thus, they can be considered valid

because they have met the predetermined requirements (Hair et al., 2021).

The measurement model was evaluated by assessing convergent validity and internal consistency reliability, as illustrated in the following table. As presented, all latent constructs demonstrated Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values above the recommended threshold of 0.50, indicating adequate convergent validity. Specifically, the AVE values for Career Intention (0.729), Employer Attractiveness (0.701), Employer Branding (0.795), and Leadership Behaviour (0.712) confirm that each construct explains more than half of the variance of its respective indicators. An AVE value greater than 0.50 suggests that the indicators sufficiently converge to measure their underlying latent constructs (Hair et al., 2021). Therefore, all constructs in this study meet the criteria for convergent validity.

Furthermore, reliability testing was conducted to examine the internal consistency of the measurement instruments, as shown in the table 6 below. The composite reliability (rho_A) values for Career Intention (0.927), Employer Attractiveness (0.953), Employer Branding (0.952), and Leadership Behaviour (0.943) all exceed the recommended minimum threshold of 0.70. Similarly, the Cronbach's alpha values for Career Intention (0.926), Employer Attractiveness (0.952), Employer Branding (0.951), and Leadership Behaviour (0.942) are above the acceptable threshold of 0.60. According to Hair et al., composite reliability values greater than 0.70 and Cronbach's alpha values above 0.60 indicate satisfactory internal consistency reliability. Based on these results, all constructs can be considered reliable, and the measurement model is deemed appropriate for subsequent structural model analysis.

Inner Model Evaluation

Table 7 shows that the R-square value for Career Intention is 0.826 and for Employer Attractiveness is 0.943, both of which fall into the strong category based on Duryadi's classification (≥ 0.67) (Duryadi, 2021). This indicates that 82.6% of the variance in Career Intention and 94.3% of the variance in Employer Attractiveness are explained by the predictor variables in the structural model, while the remaining 17.4% and 5.7% are attributed to factors outside the model. These results indicate that the proposed model demonstrates strong explanatory power for both endogenous constructs.

The results of the effect size (f²) are presented in Table 8, indicating the relative contribution of each exogenous construct to the endogenous variables. According to Cohen, f² values of 0.02, 0.15, and 0.35 represent small, medium, and large effects, respectively (Cohen, 2013). The relationship between Employer Attractiveness and Career Intention shows a large effect size (f² = 0.738), indicating a substantial contribution of Employer Attractiveness in explaining variations in Career Intention. Furthermore, Employer Branding demonstrates a large effect on Employer Attractiveness (f² = 0.375), while Leadership Behaviour also shows a large effect on Employer Attractiveness (f² = 0.984). These results indicate that both constructs make meaningful contributions to Employer Attractiveness, with Leadership Behaviour showing a relatively stronger effect compared to Employer Branding. Overall, the findings suggest that Employer Branding and Leadership Behaviour are important antecedents of Employer Attractiveness, which in turn plays a key role in explaining Career Intention within the proposed structural model. Statistical significance indicators (t-statistics and p-values) are reported separately in the structural model results section and are not used in the interpretation of effect size.

Hypothesis Testing

The results of the structural model analysis indicate that all hypothesized direct relationships are statistically significant (see Table 9). Employer Branding has a significant positive

Table 9. Hypothesis testing result

	Hypothesis	Path Coefficient	T statistics	P values	Result
Direct	H ¹ Employer Branding -> Career Intention	0.373	11.461	0.000	Accepted
	H ² Leadership Behaviour -> Career Intention	0.532	12.523	0.000	Accepted
	H ³ Employer Branding -> Employer Attractiveness	0.378	11.229	0.000	Accepted
	H ⁴ Leadership Behaviour -> Employer Attractiveness	0.612	18.944	0.000	Accepted
	H ⁵ Employer Attractiveness -> Career Intention	0.609	16.655	0.000	Accepted
Indirect	H ⁶ Employer Branding -> Employer Attractiveness -> Career Intention	0.230	10.482	0.000	Accepted
	H ⁷ Leadership Behaviour -> Employer Attractiveness -> Career Intention	0.373	20.414	0.000	Accepted

effect on Career Intention ($\beta = 0.373$, $t = 11.461$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H1. Leadership Behaviour also has a significant positive effect on Career Intention ($\beta = 0.532$, $t = 12.523$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. In addition, Employer Branding significantly influences Employer Attractiveness ($\beta = 0.378$, $t = 11.229$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H3, while Leadership Behaviour shows a significant effect on Employer Attractiveness ($\beta = 0.612$, $t = 18.944$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4. Finally, Employer Attractiveness has a strong and significant effect on Career Intention ($\beta = 0.609$, $t = 16.655$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H5.

The indirect effects were reassessed using the bootstrapping procedure in PLS-SEM to ensure consistency with the structural model. The results show that employer branding has a significant indirect effect on career intention through employer attractiveness ($\beta \approx 0.230$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H6. Similarly, leadership behaviour also has a significant indirect effect on career intention via employer attractiveness ($\beta \approx 0.373$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H7. These indirect effects are consistent with the product of the corresponding structural paths (i.e., employer branding $\rightarrow$ employer attractiveness $\rightarrow$ career intention and leadership behaviour $\rightarrow$ employer attractiveness $\rightarrow$ career intention). Since both the direct effects of employer branding ($\beta = 0.373$, $p < 0.001$) and leadership behaviour ($\beta = 0.532$, $p < 0.001$) on career intention remain significant alongside the indirect effects, employer attractiveness is concluded to act as a partial mediator in both relationships.

Grounded in Signaling Theory, this study set out to examine how employer branding and leadership behavior function as organizational signals that shape Generation Z's career intentions through employer attractiveness. The structural model demonstrates strong empirical support for all hypothesized relationships, providing important theoretical and contextual contributions to the human resource management and employer branding literature, particularly within an emerging regional labor market context (Tumasjan et al., 2020).

First, the findings confirm that employer branding exerts a positive and significant effect on career intention ($\beta = 0.373$, $p < 0.001$). This result reinforces the argument that employer branding serves as a credible external signal regarding organizational values, work environment, and career development opportunities. For Generation Z—characterized by high digital exposure and information sensitivity—employer branding likely reduces information asymmetry and uncertainty during the school-to-work transition (Hein et al., 2024). In line with signaling theory, strong employer branding communicates symbolic and instrumental attributes that align with Gen Z's preferences for meaningful work, growth opportunities, and organizational reputation. However, the magnitude of the coefficient suggests that while employer branding is important, it is not the dominant driver of career intention when considered alongside leadership behavior and employer attractiveness (Bahri-Ammari et al., 2025; Cha et al., 2020).

Second, leadership behavior demonstrates a stronger direct effect on career intention ($\beta = 0.532$, $p < 0.001$). This indicates that beyond corporate-level branding messages, Generation Z places substantial weight on proximal and relational signals embodied by leaders. Leadership behavior may be interpreted as a more tangible and immediate indicator of daily work experience, psychological safety, and developmental support. In emerging labor markets such as Jambi Province, where organizational formalization and employer branding practices may still be evolving, leadership conduct could represent a more credible and observable signal compared to abstract branding communications (Pincus, 2024). This finding advances the literature by integrating leadership behavior into employer branding frameworks, suggesting that internal behavioral signals may outweigh external reputational signals in shaping early-career intentions (Appels, 2023; Wojtaszczyk et al., 2025).

Third, both employer branding ($\beta = 0.378$, $p < 0.001$) and leadership behavior ($\beta = 0.612$, $p < 0.001$) significantly influence employer attractiveness. Notably, leadership behavior exhibits a stronger effect, reinforcing the argument that attractiveness is not constructed solely through symbolic brand narratives but also through anticipated interpersonal experiences. Employer attractiveness, therefore, emerges as a perceptual bridge between organizational signals and behavioral intentions. These results are consistent with the view that attractiveness reflects a cognitive-affective evaluation of organizational desirability, formed through the interpretation of multiple signals (Llanos-Contreras et al., 2024).

One notable finding is the relatively strong effect of employer attractiveness on career intention ($\beta = 0.609$, $p < 0.001$). This suggests that employer attractiveness plays an important role in translating organizational signals into career-related evaluations. However, the magnitude of this relationship should be interpreted with caution, as the cross-sectional design and the use of self-reported data limit causal inference. In addition, although discriminant validity was established, the relatively high association may partly reflect conceptual proximity between employer attractiveness and career intention. Common method bias was also assessed and did not indicate a serious concern, but its potential influence cannot be entirely ruled out. Within these limitations, the findings are consistent with signaling theory, indicating that organizational signals may shape career intentions both directly and indirectly through perceptual evaluations rather than solely through direct influence (G. et al., 2021).

The mediation analysis further substantiates this conclusion. Employer attractiveness significantly mediates the relationships between employer branding and career intention, as well as between leadership behavior and career intention. The persistence of significant direct effects alongside significant indirect effects indicates partial mediation. This suggests that organizational signals influence career intention both directly and indirectly through attractiveness perceptions. However, given the substantial path coefficient from employer

attractiveness to career intention, the indirect pathway appears to be the more structurally influential mechanism. This finding enriches signaling theory by empirically demonstrating how signal interpretation (attractiveness) functions as an intermediate cognitive filter before behavioral intention is formed (G. et al., 2021).

Contextually, this study contributes by providing empirical evidence from a specific regional setting in Indonesia, namely Jambi Province, which remains relatively underexplored in employer branding and leadership research. By focusing on Generation Z respondents in this context, the study enriches the literature with localized insights into how young job seekers evaluate organizational attractiveness. The findings suggest that, within this specific setting, Generation Z exhibits evaluation patterns consistent with those reported in prior studies, particularly in prioritizing leadership quality, authenticity, and perceived organizational value. However, the generalizability of these findings should be interpreted with caution due to the study's regional and sample-specific scope.

From a managerial perspective, the findings suggest that organizations seeking to attract Generation Z talent may benefit from moving beyond surface-level branding campaigns. Investments in authentic and development-oriented leadership practices could potentially enhance perceived organizational attractiveness and career intention among prospective employees. In addition, aligning employer branding strategies with internal leadership behaviours may help ensure signal consistency, which may strengthen organizational credibility. However, these implications should be interpreted as strategic suggestions rather than confirmed causal effects, given the cross-sectional nature of the study.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. The cross-sectional design restricts causal inference, and future longitudinal research could better capture how perceptions evolve over time. Additionally, the sample focuses on final-year students in one province, which may limit generalizability. Future research could compare multiple regions or incorporate multi-source data to reduce common method bias.

Overall, this study demonstrates that employer attractiveness is the pivotal mediating construct linking organizational signals both symbolic (employer branding) and relational (leadership behavior)—to Generation Z's career intentions. By integrating leadership into employer branding research and situating the analysis within an emerging labor market, this research advances both theoretical refinement and contextual understanding in contemporary talent attraction scholarship.

Conclusion

This study examined how employer branding and leadership behavior function as organizational signals associated with Generation Z's career intentions, with employer attractiveness acting as a mediating mechanism. The findings indicate that both employer branding and leadership behavior are significantly associated with career intention, while employer attractiveness serves as a key evaluative mechanism through which these signals are

interpreted. Notably, leadership behavior demonstrates a relatively stronger association with employer attractiveness, suggesting that more proximal and experience-based signals may play a particularly important role in shaping early-career perceptions among Generation Z respondents. Importantly, these findings should be interpreted as associative relationships derived from cross-sectional data collected from final-year students in a specific regional context. As such, the generalizability of the results is inherently limited, and the findings should not be extended to broader labor markets or to actual employee behavior without further empirical validation. Within these boundaries, this study contributes to the literature in two specific ways. First, it provides empirical evidence that multiple organizational signals external (employer branding) and internal (leadership behavior) can be jointly considered within a single mediation framework, offering a more integrated understanding of how career intentions are formed. Second, it highlights the role of employer attractiveness as a central perceptual mechanism through which these signals are translated into intention, particularly within a context characterized by limited access to organizational information. While similar constructs have been examined in prior HRM and leadership research, this study refines their integration by situating them within a signaling-based mediation model in a regional setting. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that organizations may consider aligning employer branding strategies with observable leadership practices to enhance perceived organizational attractiveness. However, such implications should be interpreted as strategic considerations rather than confirmed causal effects, given the study's design and sample characteristics. Future research is encouraged to extend this work by employing longitudinal designs, incorporating multi-source data, and examining broader geographic contexts. Such approaches would provide a more robust basis for understanding how organizational signals influence career-related decisions over time and across different labor market conditions.

Author contributions

Musthafa Luthfi conceptualized the study, developed the research framework, designed the methodology, supervised the research process, and led the manuscript writing and revision. Noviard Ferzi contributed to data collection, data analysis, interpretation of results, and preparation of the manuscript draft. Both authors reviewed, edited, and approved the final version of the manuscript and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

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