

EXPLORING GEN Z'S INTEREST IN START-UPS: THE ROLE OF EMPLOYER BRANDING AND CORPORATE REPUTATION, WITH INNOVATIVE WORK BEHAVIOR AS A MODERATOR

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Abstract

This study aims to identify the job preferences of Generation Z in Samarinda and the factors that influence their interest in working for start-up companies. The research focuses on analyzing the influence of employer branding and corporate reputation on intention to apply, with innovative work behavior considered as a moderating variable. A quantitative approach was employed, using a questionnaire distributed to 105 Gen Z respondents in Samarinda. The results indicate that both employer branding and corporate reputation have a positive and significant effect on intention to apply. However, innovative work behavior does not moderate the relationship between employer branding and intention to apply. These findings highlight that a company's image and reputation play a crucial role in attracting Generation Z to job opportunities, particularly in the start-up sector. Therefore, companies are encouraged to develop appropriate strategies by understanding the work preferences of Generation Z, who are expected to dominate the labor market in the near future.

Keywords: Generation Z, Employer Branding, Corporate Reputation, Intention to Apply, Innovative Work Behavior.

1. Introduction

Effective Human Resources (HR) management is a cornerstone of organizational success in navigating increasingly intense global competition, particularly in attracting and retaining top talent (Muktamar & Sahibuddin, 2024; Mahmud et al., 2023). The "war for talent" phenomenon, first identified by McKinsey in 1997, highlights the acute challenge companies face in securing high-quality individuals in the labor market (Tetik, 2017). This challenge is exacerbated by a significant digital skills gap in Indonesia, with projected talent shortages reaching 500,000 annually, and a global deficit of 85 million workers by 2030 (Rakhmayanti, 2024; Kurschner, 2018; SHRM.org, 2024). Meanwhile, Generation Z, now the largest demographic group in Indonesia (27.94% of the population, or 74.93 million people) and soon to dominate the workforce, brings distinct work preferences and expectations (IDN Research Institute, 2024; Bulut, 2021). They seek not only high salaries but also career growth opportunities, supportive and innovative work environments, and recognition (Iorgulescu, 2016; Deloitte, 2019).

In the pursuit of attracting this talent, employer branding and corporate reputation emerge as two extensively researched crucial factors. Employer branding, a concept introduced by Ambler & Barrow (1996), represents the functional, economic, and psychological values companies offer, and it has been shown to positively influence Generation Z's intention to apply for jobs (Yuspita et al., 2025). Similarly, corporate reputation reflects the public's perception of a company (Dacin & Brown, 2006), serving as a vital attraction factor for potential employees (Indra & Widoatmodjo, 2021; Ekhsan & Fitri, 2021; Ekhsan & Fitri, 2021). However, most existing studies predominantly focus on conventional corporate settings or broader samples, without specifically addressing the unique dynamics within the rapidly growing startup sector in Indonesia (Annur, 2024; (Bakhar et al., 2023). While Indonesian startups are largely concentrated in Jabodetabek, the growth of local startups in Samarinda also shows dynamic trends, supported by local government initiatives and the Ibu Kota Nusantara (IKN) project (MIKTI, 2021; Zakaria, 2019). Furthermore, despite innovative work behavior (IWB) being recognized as a critical characteristic for modern employees (Yuan & Woodman, 2010) and aligning with Gen Z's preference for innovation, its specific role as a moderating variable that strengthens the relationship between employer branding and job application intention within the Generation Z and startup context remains underexplored.

Addressing these gaps, the scientific novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive analysis of Generation Z's interest in startup companies, specifically by examining the influence of employer branding and corporate reputation, and critically investigating the moderating role of innovative work behavior. This research aims to bridge existing knowledge gaps by providing empirical evidence from the specific context of Generation Z in Samarinda and the local startup landscape, whose characteristics may differ from those explored in previous studies.

From this background, the following hypotheses are formulated:

1. H1: Employer Branding has a positive influences on Intention to Apply.
2. H2: Corporate Reputation has a positive influences on Intention to Apply.
3. H3: Innovative Work Behavior moderates the relationship between Employer Branding and Intention to Apply.

The core purpose of this research is multifaceted, aiming to meticulously investigate the factors shaping Generation Z in Samarinda career aspirations within the dynamic startup sector. Primarily, this study seeks to analyze and identify the direct influence of both employer branding and corporate reputation on Gen Z's intention to apply for positions within these emerging companies. Furthermore, a crucial secondary objective is to empirically test the potential moderating role of innovative work behavior in this relationship, specifically exploring if this individual characteristic strengthens the link between a company's image (via employer branding) and an applicant's intent. This comprehensive approach ensures a deeper understanding of how these critical factors collectively drive talent attraction among the younger workforce in a unique regional context..

2. Method

This study utilized a quantitative approach with a survey design to investigate the relationships among Employer Branding, Corporate Reputation, Innovative Work Behavior, and Gen Z's Intention to Apply for startup companies in Samarinda. A quantitative approach was chosen as it allows for statistical hypothesis testing, precise measurement of relationships between variables, and generalization of findings to a broader population (Sugiyono, 2017). The survey design was selected for its efficiency in collecting data on attitudes, perceptions, and intentions from a large number of respondents, which is highly relevant to this study's objectives.

The research population comprises all Generation Z individuals in Samarinda aged 18-27 years, aligning with both the Generation Z age range (IDN Research Institute, 2024) and the legal working age. Purposive sampling was used for respondent selection, with criteria including residency in Samarinda, being between 18-27 years old, and having an interest in startup companies. Slovin's formula was applied to ascertain a minimum sample size requirement of 100 respondents for the study.

Data was collected using online questionnaires, distributed via social media and Generation Z communication networks in Samarinda. Additionally, data was gathered offline by directly approaching individuals randomly and conducting brief interviews to verify respondent criteria before questionnaire completion. The questionnaire utilized a 5-point Likert scale to measure each variable. Employer Branding indicators were adapted from Sivertzen, Nilsen, & Olafsen, (2013); Corporate Reputation from Fombrun, Gardberg, & Sever (2000); Innovative Work Behavior from De Jong & Den Hartog (2010); and Intention to Apply from Highhouse, Lievens, & Sinar (2003). Before the main analysis, the research instruments underwent validity and reliability testing through a pilot study on a small, representative sample, ensuring the questionnaire consistently and accurately measured the intended constructs using SPSS 26.

Data analysis procedures involved SmartPLS version 4.1.1.2, for structural model analysis. The Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach was chosen due to its capability to analyze complex structural models with relatively small sample sizes and without strict assumptions of normal distribution (Hair et al., 2019). The analysis steps with SmartPLS 4 included: (1) evaluating the Measurement Model (Outer Model) to assess convergent validity, discriminant validity, and composite reliability of indicators. ; (2) evaluating the Structural Model (Inner Model) to test the research hypotheses. Hypothesis testing was performed by examining path coefficients, t-statistics, and p-values from the bootstrapping results. Furthermore, the model was evaluated based on f^2 values for independent variable effect sizes, R^2 for the explained variance of the dependent variable, and Q^2 for predictive relevance, to confirm the model's explanatory and predictive power. This analysis process allowed for drawing valid conclusions regarding the influence of employer branding and corporate reputation

on intention to apply, as well as the moderating role of innovative work behavior among Generation Z in Samarinda in startup companies.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Respondent Profile

| Category | | Frequency (N = 105) | Percentage (%) |
|---|--|---------------------|----------------|
| Gender | Male | 59 | 56% |
| | Female | 46 | 44% |
| Age | 17-20 | 12 | 11.4% |
| | 21-23 | 68 | 64.7% |
| | 24-26 | 25 | 23.8% |
| Education | Highschool/vocational school | 66 | 62.8% |
| | Bachelor degree | 39 | 37.2% |
| Work experience | Has internship experience | 43 | 40.95% |
| | Has work experience | 40 | 38.10% |
| | No work or internship experience | 22 | 20.95% |
| Experience of applying to startup companies | Has applied to a start up company | 8 | 7.61% |
| | Has never applied to a startup company | 97 | 92.39% |

Source: Primary Data, Processed 2025

Table 1. RESPONDENT PROFILE

This study collected data from 105 valid respondents, comprising 59 males (56%) and 46 females (44%), indicating a male-dominated participation. The majority of respondents (64.7%, n=68) were aged 21–23 years, followed by those aged 24–26 years (23.8%), and 17–20 years (11.4%). This age distribution aligns with the early productive age group, typically encompassing university students or recent graduates. In terms of education, 62.8% (n=66) were high school graduates or equivalent, while 37.2% (n=39) held a Bachelor's degree. This demographic profile confirms that most participants are in the early stages of their careers or higher education, which is highly relevant to examining Generation Z's interest in start-up companies.

Regarding work experience, the data revealed that 40.95% of respondents had internship experience, and 38.10% had previous work experience, leaving only 20.95% with no prior work or internship experience. This suggests that the majority of participants possess some initial work exposure. However, despite this, over 90% of the 105 respondents had never applied to a startup company. Among the few who had, applications were primarily directed towards large national startups like Gojek, Kopi Kenangan, Traveloka, Vindes Corp, and Ternak Uang. Only a small fraction applied to local Samarinda startups, such as Wonder Academia and East Kreatif Indonesia. This

highlights that Generation Z in Samarinda has limited direct experience with the startup ecosystem, especially local ones.

3.2 Measurement Model (Outer Model)

Assessment of convergent validity aimed to verify that all indicators precisely measured their intended latent constructs and demonstrated strong interconnections. Although Loading Factor (LF) values ideally reach ≥ 0.70 , scores from 0.50 to 0.70 are permissible in exploratory or scale development studies (Hair et al., 2019). Furthermore, the AVE (Average Variance Extracted) was required to be ≥ 0.50 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). The internal consistency of the indicators for each construct was evaluated to establish its reliability. This process involved calculating CA (Cronbach's Alpha) and CR (Composite Reliability), with a score of ≥ 0.70 for each being the criterion for deeming a construct reliable (Hair et al., 2019).

| Item Code | Validity Test | | Reliability Test | | | |
|-----------|---------------|----------|------------------|-------|-------|----------|
| | LF | Decision | CA | CR | AVE | Decision |
| EB 1 | 0,649 | Valid | 0.889 | 0,942 | 0,535 | Reliable |
| EB 2 | 0,801 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| EB 3 | 0,824 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| EB 4 | 0,584 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| EB 5 | 0,745 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| EB 6 | 0,758 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| EB 7 | 0,749 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| EB 8 | 0,778 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| EB 9 | 0,659 | Valid | | | | Reliable |

Source: Primary Data, Processed 2025

Table 2. EMPLOYER BRANDING'S VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY RESULT

Table 2 indicates that all indicators for the Employer Branding construct are valid and reliable. Their loading factors and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values are all above 0.5, while their Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values exceed the 0.7 threshold.

| Item Code | Validity Test | | Reliability Test | | | |
|-----------|---------------|----------|------------------|-------|-------|----------|
| | LF | Decision | CA | CR | AVE | Decision |
| CR 1 | 0,745 | Valid | 0.932 | 0,911 | 0,596 | Reliable |
| CR 2 | 0,689 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| CR 3 | 0,765 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| CR 4 | 0,772 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| CR 5 | 0,766 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| CR 6 | 0,825 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| CR 7 | 0,818 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| CR 8 | 0,790 | Valid | | | | Reliable |

| | | | |
|-------|-------|-------|----------|
| CR 9 | 0,738 | Valid | Reliable |
| CR 10 | 0,781 | Valid | Reliable |
| CR 11 | 0,785 | Valid | Reliable |

Source: Primary Data, Processed 2025

Table 3. CORPORATE REPUTATION'S VALIDITY AND RELIBILITY RESULT

Table 3 indicates that all indicators for the Employer Branding construct are valid and reliable. Their AVE (Average Variance Extracted) and Loading Factors (LF) values are all above 0.5, while their CA (Cronbach's Alpha) and CR (Composite Reliability) values exceed the 0.7 threshold.

| Item Code | Validity Test | | Reliability Test | | | |
|--------------|---------------|----------|------------------|-------|-------|----------|
| | LF | Decision | CA | CR | AVE | Decision |
| IWB 1 | 0,641 | Valid | 0.870 | 0,898 | 0,524 | Reliable |
| IWB 2 | 0,734 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| IWB 3 | 0,735 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| IWB 4 | 0,691 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| IWB 5 | 0,753 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| IWB 6 | 0,756 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| IWB 7 | 0,747 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| IWB 8 | 0,725 | Valid | | | | Reliable |

Source: Primary Data, Processed 2025

Table 4. INNOVATIVE WORK BEHAVIOR'S VALIDITY AND RELIBILITY RESULT

For the Corporate Reputation construct, Table 4 confirms the validity and reliability of all its indicators. Their Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Loading Factors (LF) values consistently exceeded 0.5, and their Cronbach's Alpha and Composite Reliability values were comfortably above 0.7.

| Item Code | Validity Test | | Reliability Test | | | |
|--------------|---------------|----------|------------------|-------|-------|----------|
| | LF | Decision | CA | CR | AVE | Decision |
| ITA 1 | 0,688 | Valid | 0.812 | 0,861 | 0,509 | Reliable |
| ITA 2 | 0,801 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| ITA 3 | 0,764 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| ITA 4 | 0,696 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| ITA 5 | 0,700 | Valid | | | | Reliable |
| ITA 6 | 0,616 | Valid | | | | Reliable |

Source: Primary Data, Processed 2025

Table 5. INTENTION TO APPLY'S VALIDITY AND RELIBILITY RESULT

Table 5 reveals the Intention to Apply construct's indicators performed exceptionally well in validity and reliability assessments. Each Loading Factor (LF) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) value comfortably surpassed the 0.5 minimum, and

both Cronbach's Alpha (CA) and Composite Reliability (CR) scores were notably above the 0.7 benchmark..

| Construct | Corporate Reputation | Employer Branding | Intention to Apply | Innovative Work Behavior | IWB X EB |
|--------------------------|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|----------|
| Employer Branding | | | | | |
| Corporate Reputation | 0.885 | | | | |
| Intention To Apply | 0.771 | 0.717 | | | |
| Innovative Work Behavior | 0.661 | 0.612 | 0.706 | | |
| IWB X EB | 0.630 | 0.723 | 0.453 | 0.356 | |

Source: Primary Data, Processed 2025

Table 6. DISCRIMINAN VALIDITY (HTMT) RESULT

To ascertain discriminant validity, the Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT) criterion was employed. This approach was selected due to its recognized superiority and precision over alternative methods like the Fornell-Larcker criterion or cross-loadings (Hair et al., 2019). An examination of Table 6 demonstrates that every HTMT value between the constructs fell below 0.90. This outcome provides strong evidence that all constructs within our model are empirically distinguishable and indeed represent unique conceptual domains

3.3 Structural Model (Inner Model)

Structural model or inner model testing was conducted using SmartPLS version 4.1.1.2, same to the measurement model (outer model) testing. This model is designed to depict the causal relationships between latent constructs within the study. The primary objective of structural model analysis is to test the formulated hypotheses, specifically to analyze how one latent construct influences another. Several tests performed during the structural model analysis include assessing the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect size (f^2), and hypothesis testing (path coefficients and bootstrapping).

| Endogenous Variabel | R^2 | Decision |
|---------------------|-------|----------|
| Intetion to Apply | 0.583 | Moderate |

Source: Primary Data, Processed 2025

Table 7. COEFFICIENT OF DETERMINATION (R^2) RESULT

Table 7 displays an adjusted R^2 value of 0.583 for the Intention to Apply variable, signifying that 58.3% of its variance is explained by the included predictor variables (Corporate Reputation, Employer Branding) and the moderating effect of Innovative Work Behavior within the model. The unaddressed 41.7% of variance can be attributed to external influences not captured in this study. Consistent with Hair et al. (2019)'s

guidelines, this R^2 value categorizes the model's explanatory power as moderate, indicating a reasonable capacity to predict Generation Z in Samarinda job application interest for startup sector.

| Construct's Relationships | f^2 | Keterangan |
|---|-------|--------------|
| Employer Branding → Intention to Apply | 0.027 | Small effect |
| Corporate Reputation → Intention to Apply | 0.116 | Small effect |
| IWB*EB → Intention to Apply | 0.000 | No effect |

Source: Primary Data, Processed 2025

Table 8. EFFECT SIZE (f^2) RESULT

Based on Table 8, the interpretation of the effect size (f^2) values is as follows:

1. Influence of Employer Branding on Intention to Apply: The f^2 value is 0.027. This indicates a small effect size, meaning Employer Branding's contribution to the explained variance in Intention to Apply within the model is minimal, despite the relationship being statistically significant.
2. Influence of Corporate Reputation on Intention to Apply: The f^2 value is 0.116. This also demonstrates a small effect size, suggesting its contribution to the explained variance in Intention to Apply within the model is relatively minor, even with proven statistical significance.
3. Moderating Effect of Innovative Work Behavior: The f^2 value for the moderating effect of Innovative Work Behavior on the relationship between Employer Branding and Intention to Apply is 0.000. This value signifies no effect size or contribution from Innovative Work Behavior's moderation to the variance in Intention to Apply. This finding is consistent with the hypothesis testing results, which showed that this moderating effect was not statistically significant.

| Endogenous Variabel | Q^2 | Decision |
|---------------------|-------|-----------------|
| Intention to Apply | 0.540 | High prediction |

Source: Primary Data, Processed 2025

Table 9. PREDICTIVE RELEVANCE (Q^2) RESULT

Based on Table 9, the predictive relevance (Q^2) value for the Intention to Apply variable is 0.540. This figure surpasses the 0.35 threshold set by Hair et al. (2019), indicating that the model demonstrates strong predictive capability for the Intention to Apply variable. Consequently, this research model not only effectively explains the variance of the dependent variable (R^2), but also showcases a robust ability to accurately predict the values of Intention to Apply.

| Hypothesis | Original Sample | T-Statistic | P-Value | Result |
|--|-----------------|-------------|---------|-------------|
| Direct Effect | | | | |
| EB → ITA | | | | |
| H1 : Employer branding has a positive influences on intention to apply | 0.200 | 1.686 | 0.002 | H1 Accepted |
| CR → ITA | | | | |
| H2 : Corporate reputation has a positive influences on intention to apply | 0.396 | 2.939 | 0.046 | H2 Accepted |
| Moderate Effect | | | | |
| EB * IWB → ITA | | | | |
| H3 : Innovative work behavior moderates the relationship between employer branding and intention to apply. | 0.004 | 0.067 | 0.473 | H3 Rejected |

Source: Primary Data, Processed 2025

Table 10. HYPOTHESIS TESTING RESULT

Based on Table 10, the results of each hypothesis test are explained as follows:

1. Influence of Employer Branding on Intention to Apply analysis revealed a path coefficient (original sample) of 0.200. This positive value indicates a direct (positive) relationship. Bootstrapping for significance testing yielded a t-statistic of 1.686 and a p-value of 0.002. Since the t-statistic (>1.645) and the p-value (<0.05), Hypothesis 1 is accepted, confirming that Employer Branding positively influences Intention to Apply. It is also consistent with previous studies by Kusdiyanto & Ishbah (2024) and Hapsara & Nugrahaningsih (2024), highlighting the crucial role of Employer Branding in attracting talent, especially Generation Z, in competitive labor markets.
2. Influence of Corporate Reputation on Intention to Apply analysis revealed a path coefficient (original sample) of 0.396. This relationship was found to be statistically significant, with a t-statistic of 2.939 (which is greater than 1.645) and a p-value of 0.046 (less than 0.05). Consequently, Hypothesis 2 is accepted, indicating that Corporate Reputation positively influences Intention to Apply. Empirically, these findings align with prior research by Widiyanti & Murti (2022) and Indra & Widodoatmodjo (2021), which confirm that a positive corporate reputation significantly enhances job application intent.
3. Regarding the Moderating Role of Innovative Work Behavior, the test for the interaction between IWB and Employer Branding (IWBXEB) on Intention to Apply yielded a path coefficient (original sample) of 0.004. With a t-statistic of 0.067 (less than 1.645) and a p-value of 0.473 (greater than 0.05), Hypothesis 3 is rejected. This indicates that Innovative Work Behavior does not significantly moderate the relationship between Employer Branding and Intention to Apply. This non-significance might be attributed to several factors: (1) Innovative Work

Behavior being more active in an internal organizational context rather than during job application decisions; (2) respondents' limited experience with the local startup ecosystem; or (3) the possibility that Innovative Work Behavior functions as a direct predictor rather than a moderator. This finding suggests that other factors might be more dominant in influencing application intent for all applicant segments within the startup context, regardless of their innovation levels.

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

This study investigated the influence of employer branding and corporate reputation on Generation Z's intention to apply in Samarinda for startup companies, with innovative work behavior as a moderating variable. Our key findings show that both Employer Branding and Corporate Reputation significantly and positively impact application intent. This highlights the crucial role of a company's image and public standing in attracting Gen Z to dynamic career opportunities, especially within the startup sector. Interestingly, Innovative Work Behavior was not found to moderate the relationship between Employer Branding and Intention to Apply. This suggests that while Gen Z values innovation, this personal characteristic doesn't significantly amplify their response to a company's employer branding efforts. Overall, our research model demonstrates moderate explanatory power ($R^2=0.583$) and strong predictive relevance ($Q^2 = 0.540$), confirming that the factors we examined effectively explain and predict Gen Z's job application intentions. This research has important implications for startup companies, urging them to prioritize strong employer branding and reputation building to attract young talent. It also provides insights for policymakers to better understand the preferences of the generation poised to dominate the workforce.

While this study offers valuable insights, it does have some limitations. Generation Z's limited awareness of local and national startup companies posed a challenge in finding respondents with a specific interest in applying to this sector. Additionally, using a survey method might be susceptible to respondent bias, and the scope of variables was limited to Employer Branding, Corporate Reputation, and Innovative Work Behavior. Based on these limitations, we offer several recommendations for future research. It would be beneficial to explore other relevant moderating or predictive variables, such as compensation or person-organization fit. Future studies could also test Innovative Work Behavior as a direct predictor or mediator. Expanding the sample to include other generations or different regions could yield more diverse findings. Practically, startup companies should continue to build strong reputations and employer branding, while also adapting to better understand the specific preferences of Gen Z in the local market to attract top talent.

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