

## ***The Meaning of Employer Branding for Gen Z: A Phenomenological Study of Expectations and Values in Choosing a Workplace***

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**Abstract:** This study aims to explore the meaning of employer branding from the perspective of Generation Z in choosing a workplace. The phenomenon of increasing dominance of Gen Z in the Indonesian job market poses new challenges for companies in developing employer branding strategies that are not only visually appealing but also value-relevant. Using a qualitative approach of interpretive phenomenology, this study explores the subjective experiences of five Gen Z participants aged 21–27 who are in the job search or transition phase. Data collection techniques were carried out through in-depth semi-structured interviews, visual documentation, and observations of digital activities related to job search. Data analysis was carried out using a thematic approach through the stages of reduction, categorization, and interpretation. The results of the study revealed five main themes: (1) the importance of personal value fit with the organization, (2) employer branding as a reflection of social and professional identity, (3) sensitivity to authenticity versus image in branding, (4) employer branding as a determinant of career decisions, and (5) the need for an inclusive, authentic, and emotional branding narrative. These findings emphasize that effective employer branding must be value-based and represent the real experiences of employees, not just aesthetic visualizations. The theoretical implications strengthen the relevance of Person–Organization Fit, Social Identity Theory, and Career Construction Theory in understanding the job selection process by Gen Z. Meanwhile, in practice, this study recommends that organizations develop participatory, reflective, and contextual employer branding strategies to the preferences of the younger generation. This study also opens up space for further studies with a wider demographic and work sector coverage.

**Keywords:** Employer branding, Generation Z, work values, organizational identity, phenomenological study

### **INTRODUCTION**

There has been a significant change in workforce demographics on both a global and national scale over the last ten years. Generation Z—those born from 1997 to 2012—is now increasingly becoming a major part of the workforce. This generation, differing from earlier ones, has high standards for quality of life, work-life balance, social equity, and workplace diversity (Twenge, 2020). As a result, businesses have had to rethink their recruitment and retention strategies, adjusting their branding approaches to genuinely connect with this cohort. Data from BPS (2022) reveals that the Gen Z population in Indonesia exceeds 74 million, making up approximately 27.9% of the overall population. The influence of Gen Z is now markedly present in the employment sector. Numerous companies recognize the hurdles in grasping the

motivations and preferences of Gen Z in selecting a job. Research by Anggraini and Wijendra (2023) indicates that Gen Z favors organizations that not only offer competitive salaries but also show a dedication to sustainability, inclusiveness, and adaptability. This trend suggests that employer branding has evolved beyond just visual marketing; it now includes relevant psychological and social narratives.

While the body of literature regarding employer branding is expanding quickly, many investigations tend to adopt a quantitative lens that primarily emphasizes the organization's viewpoint. Often, subjective factors such as Gen Z's views, interpretations, and personal experiences are overlooked (Raypur, 2024). However, grasping employer branding from Gen Z's internal viewpoint is crucial for designing a branding strategy that is more compassionate and fitting. As noted by Sari et al. (2024), the choice of Gen Z to accept or decline a job offer is often swayed by their assessment of the company's espoused values rather than solely relying on external observations.

Utilizing a qualitative approach allows for the examination of meanings and emotional complexities that numerical data cannot fully capture. This method is essential since Gen Z is characterized by expressiveness and reflection and is attuned to the company's values identity (Maharani and Paramarta, 2025). For example, preliminary interviews with final-year students revealed that they deliberately steered clear of applying to prominent firms due to their perception of the work culture as "toxic" and misaligned with values of diversity and personal time respect.

The current literature falls short in exploring narratives from the individual Gen Z perspective, who are pivotal in the decision-making process regarding employment. Many studies focus solely on the appeal of the company or brand reputation without considering the symbolic and relational significance felt by this generation. Consequently, this research intends to delve into Gen Z's personal interpretation of employer branding and how their core values shape their career choices.

This research seeks to investigate the expectations, beliefs, and perspectives of Generation Z regarding employer branding when selecting a job. Utilizing a descriptive qualitative method, this investigation will offer a theoretical contribution by broadening the comprehension of employer branding through the lens of generational experiences. Practically, it is anticipated that this study will serve as a guide for HR professionals and decision-makers in creating branding and communication strategies that are more relevant and aligned with the principles valued by Gen Z.

### **Employee Branding**

The idea of employer branding, as noted by (Hein et al., 2025) must be tailored to the current

environment since it ties closely to the organization's identity and culture. Employee branding merges marketing strategies with human resource approaches to create a favorable perception of the organization. Within this perspective, employee branding not only adds financial value to the business but also plays an essential role in setting it apart in a competitive job market, particularly in attracting younger workers like Gen Z, who tend to be more selective regarding the significance and worth of their jobs. Effective employer branding reflects the company's essence through concrete policies related to the work environment, work-life balance, benefits, and growth opportunities, showing that both economic and psychological factors are priorities for employees, according to Ryani Dhyan et al., (2024). Recent studies suggest that Gen Z is more affected by psychological and functional aspects rather than just economic considerations, as indicated by (Maharani and Paramarta, 2025). This illustrates a transition from the mindset of merely "working to survive" to "working for purpose." Thus, organizations that neglect the psychosocial factors in their employee branding strategies may struggle to keep talent from this generation.

The concept of Employer Value Proposition (EVP) is a key aspect of employee branding. EVP represents an unspoken commitment from a company to its staff, forming the basis for productivity and intrinsic motivation, as highlighted by (McLean & Co., 2024). A robust EVP can enhance employees' emotional engagement and alignment with work values that meet their personal expectations. Nevertheless, research by Anggraini and Wijendra (2023) reveals that generic EVPs typically fail to attract Gen Z since they do not align with personal values like flexibility, sustainability, and inclusivity.

While numerous studies have quantitatively examined employee branding, a significant gap remains in the qualitative investigation of Gen Z's personal interpretations and experiences. Previous research has concentrated more on the numerical connections among employee branding, application intent, and retention, overlooking a deeper examination of how Gen Z perceives branding symbols and organizational values. Therefore, this study proposes a qualitative methodology to delve into the perceptions, expectations, and values that affect Gen Z's workplace choices. This suggests that Gen Z not only perceives an organization's image but also "experiences" those values as integral to their identity. Jaekel et al., (2024) focus on value dimensions and EVP principles to understand the psychosocial factors that influence this younger generation's work preferences.

### **Generation Z Theory and Characteristics in the World of Work**

Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012) includes young individuals who have matured in a digital environment, encountered diverse social challenges, and dealt with various global instabilities. Being products of the digital age, they have cultivated job preferences that prioritize

flexibility, personal beliefs, self-improvement, and social accountability (Awan and Abbas, 2025). Besides being tech-savvy, they hold high expectations for businesses to create an inclusive and impactful workplace. These traits set them apart from earlier generations and call for a fresh strategy in talent management and employer branding. To analyze this scenario, the Person–Organization Fit (P-O Fit) theory serves as the key theoretical framework. We aim to explore how the implications of P-O Fit extend from job satisfaction and commitment to various components of overall employee well-being. Jaskeviciute et al. (2024). Research conducted by Zhou, Chi, and Wen (2025) indicates that Gen Z is more likely to remain with organizations that prioritize sustainability, equity, and a healthy work-life balance. This alignment not only enhances retention but also fosters loyalty towards the company. Therefore, in the realm of corporate branding, it is crucial for businesses to communicate genuine values that resonate with this generation's aspirations.

Additionally, Social Identity Theory posits that an applicant's identification with an organization or its leadership plays a crucial role in their job application decisions. Hollstein et al. (2025). Research by Awan and Abbas (2025) demonstrates that an effective process of organizational socialization helps Gen Z connect with their work group's identity, particularly when the company promotes inclusion, transparency, and social responsibility. This highlights the necessity for corporate branding that emphasizes shared values to capture the interest of this generation.

Regarding career advancement, Hope-Action Theory emphasizes that hope—which includes agency (the desire to act) and pathways (the ability to identify various routes to achieve objectives)—coupled with skills oriented towards action such as self-reflection, exploration, planning, decision-making, and execution, are crucial in guiding and maintaining meaningful career growth (Yoon, J., Lee, E., Gysbers, N.C., 2019). Gen Z tends to be more reflective in shaping their professional identity and seeks meaning in the work they do (Joo and Hong, 2025). This necessitates that organizations provide avenues for self-expression, flexible career trajectories, and a variety of learning experiences. In the context of employer branding, organizations that can articulate how they foster individual career development will appeal more to this demographic. Three new studies lend support to the merging of the theories mentioned earlier. To begin with, research conducted by Zhou et al. (2025) within the hospitality industry indicated that alignment of values between Generation Z and their organization plays a crucial role in influencing their intentions to stay. Second, a study by Liu, He, and Cao (2023) at a technology firm in China revealed that how well individuals fit with their organization significantly affects the performance and creativity of Gen Z employees. Third, (Joo and Hong, 2025) the connection between career identity and organizational identity is vital for predicting the commitment to

work among younger employees. Collectively, these findings imply that harmonizing personal and organizational values is essential for effective employer branding.

Nonetheless, there is a noticeable disconnect between theoretical insights and actual evidence regarding how Generation Z perceives employer branding through the lens of their personal values. A significant number of studies continue to rely on quantitative techniques and statistical correlations between perceptions and work behavior; however, qualitative-narrative methods that delve into personal experiences and the processes of value identification are still largely overlooked, as pointed out by (Ticha, 2024). Consequently, this research aims to fill this void by investigating the concept of employer branding more thoroughly from the Gen Z perspective. Drawing upon a review of existing theories and research findings, this study utilizes a conceptual framework that integrates Individual-Organization Fit Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Career Construction Theory. These three frameworks are not only crucial for understanding how Generation Z selects their workplaces but also offer insights into the psychosocial dimensions inherent in employer branding. This methodology will facilitate a more comprehensive and contextual exploration of Gen Z's job preferences and professional identities in the current era.

### **METHOD**

This research employs a qualitative method utilizing an interpretive phenomenological study format. The rationale for this choice is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the subjective experiences of Generation Z as they interpret employer branding. Utilizing phenomenology enables researchers to grasp the core perceptions, anticipations, and values individuals hold regarding their work choices. According to Creswell (2021), phenomenological studies are ideal for examining how a particular group derives meanings from a phenomenon through their personal experiences.

The study took place in Kediri City. The participants were comprised of five informants aged between 21 and 27 who are recognized as Gen Z and are either seeking employment or navigating a transitional phase. The method for selecting participants involved purposive sampling, guided by these criteria: (1) Final-year students or recent graduates.

### **RESULT**

The results of this study reveal that employer branding is not only understood by Generation Z as a visual campaign or marketing narrative, but as a reflection of the values believed in and fought for by an organization. Through an in-depth interview process with five informants from diverse educational backgrounds and work experiences, five main themes emerged consistently, as shown in the following cross-participant thematic code table:

Table 1.  
Cross-Participant Thematic Code Table

| Main Theme                                    | Sub-theme / Code                                             | P1 | P2 | P3 | P4 | P5 |
|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|
| Gen Z Work Values                             | Flexibility, life balance                                    | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
|                                               | Personal growth & learning opportunity                       | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
|                                               | Inclusive & healthy work culture                             | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
| Employer Branding as Organizational Identity  | Social media as the main branding channel                    | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
|                                               | Company communication language & tone                        | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
| Self-Identification through Employer Branding | Imagine yourself in that work environment                    | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
|                                               | Assessing the fit between personal and organizational values | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
| Honesty and Reality of Corporate Image        | Mismatch between branding and internal reality               | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
|                                               | Employer branding ≠ actual work practices                    | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
| Employer Branding as a Career Decision Maker  | Employer branding as an initial filter                       | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |
|                                               | Employer branding influences job application intentions      | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  | ✓  |

### Theme 1: Gen Z Work Values

All participants emphasized the importance of personal values as a basis for assessing companies. These values include flexibility, opportunities for personal development, an inclusive work culture, and sustainability. These values are used by participants as an “initial filter” in considering whether a company is a good fit for them. As expressed by participant 1:

*“ I am more attracted to companies that demonstrate inclusive values and are open to flexibility, not just about salary .”*

In the context of Indonesian work culture which is still dominated by hierarchy and formality, these findings show a shift in Gen Z's career orientation which prioritizes personal identity and expression of values over status structures.

## **Theme 2: Employer Branding as a Representative of Organizational Identity**

Participants understood employer branding as a means to assess the “face of the organization.” They assessed the suitability of the organization’s values from social media, communication style, to the visual content shared by the company. All participants stated that digital channels such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and the company website play an important role in forming initial perceptions of the organization. P2 stated:

*“I can imagine how I would work there, even from the way they reply to comments and the language they use.”*

This identification process indicates that employer branding not only conveys information, but also forms *a sense of belonging* even before a working relationship is formed.

## **Theme 3: Self-Identification of Corporate Image**

Employer branding is not only assessed aesthetically, but also serves as a tool for Gen Z to imagine their role in the organization. All participants stated that good employer branding allows them to “imagine themselves” as part of the company. This shows a strong cognitive and affective process between individual expectations and organizational image. As the answer given by participant 3:

*“I felt like I could see myself working there because they showed their diverse team, how they said hello on social media, how they talked about social issues. It made me feel like, ‘Oh, maybe I’d fit in there.’”*

Employer branding acts as a “social mirror” where participants see their reflection—not only professionally, but also in terms of values and perspectives on the world of work. An inclusive and progressive organizational image strengthens affective engagement before formal employment relationships are formed.

## **Theme 4: Authenticity and Branding–Reality Dissonance**

Participants showed high sensitivity to honesty in employer branding. All participants stated that they had experienced or heard of a discrepancy between the branding displayed publicly and the actual work culture. This discrepancy was considered to be able to damage trust in the organization and influence their decision to accept or reject a job offer. P4 said that:

*“I once interned at a company whose branding seemed to care about social issues, but when I worked there I didn’t see any real action. It was all just slogans on social media.”*

In building effective and sustainable employer branding, companies cannot only rely on visual campaigns or social rhetoric, but must show concrete and tangible *evidence of practice*. Dishonest or excessive branding is counterproductive, especially for a generation that is very sensitive to value inconsistencies.

### **Theme 5: The Influence of Branding on Career Decisions**

All participants explicitly stated that employer branding plays an important role in the career decision-making process. Employer branding is not only a medium of information, but also a reflection of the values, culture, and growth opportunities they are looking for. In some cases, strong employer branding can even make them apply for jobs without waiting for vacancies to be officially opened. P5 said that:

*“I trust more in companies that show real employees and real stories. That makes me confident to join, compared to those who just upload fancy videos with no content.”*

For Gen Z, career decisions aren't just about jobs and salaries—they're about “can I trust this organization?” Employer branding that involves real employees, authentic stories, and unadulterated narratives creates the initial trust that's critical to the hiring and selection process.

With the emergence of five major themes evenly distributed across participants, it can be concluded that the perception and meaning of employer branding among Gen Z tends to be homogeneous in terms of the need for authenticity, value congruence, and opportunities for growth. Consistency across participants also shows that these findings have adequate *credibility* and *transferability* in the Indonesian social context that is undergoing a generational transformation in the world of work.

## **DISCUSSION**

The results of this research support the Person–Organization Fit theory, as outlined by (Fijneman-Ghielen et al. (2020), which emphasizes that an organization's values should be genuine and well-balanced—therefore, not only powerful but also lucid and in harmony with the expectations of Gen Z. The most effective employer branding is not the one that promotes itself the most aggressively, but rather the one that creates the perception that its principles align with the personal values of Gen Z, such as sustainability, compassion, and adaptability. As stated by Liu et al. (2023), noted that younger individuals are inclined to select workplaces that enhance the link between their personal values and their societal roles.

In the perspective of *Social Identity Theory* Pavlović & Slavković (2024), employer branding serves as a representation of the company's values and image that resonate with the identity of the employee. This alignment fosters internal motivation, as indicated by Social Identity Theory, thus promoting engagement and satisfaction within the organization. This aligns with the findings Joo & Hong (2025) who observed that employer branding contributes to work commitment by fostering the identification of common values.

Nevertheless, this study's outcomes reveal that untrue branding—where the company's narrative



does not match the actual working conditions—can create skepticism regarding the organization's integrity. This presents a challenge for companies in Indonesia, where branding efforts often appear superficial and fail to incorporate narratives deeply connected to employee experiences Anggraini & Wijendra (2023), demonstrated that many social media branding efforts lack the involvement of employees.

In the hospitality industry, it was discovered that Gen Z is particularly attentive to the organization's values, such as well-being and career advancement, as expressed through employer branding. This framework shapes their understanding and expectations regarding their career paths, consistent with the narrative element in career development, as asserted by (Kapuściński et al., 2023)

The implications drawn from this study suggest that companies should reassess their employer branding approaches to ensure they are more reflective, inclusive, and representative of the actual organizational environment. Successful branding aimed at Gen Z is characterized by transparency, genuine narratives, and significant social values. Additionally, this research invites further investigation into how employer branding perceptions may vary among different subgroups within Gen Z, considering broader demographic and cultural influences.

### **CONCLUSION**

This study concludes that employer branding is interpreted by Generation Z not only as a visual representation of the company, but also as a reflection of values, social identity, and organizational credibility that have a direct impact on their decisions in choosing a workplace. The main findings show that Gen Z is very selective in assessing the suitability of personal values with the organization, and uses employer branding as a tool for self-identification, a means of forming perceptions of work culture, and an indicator of value alignment.

Authentic employer branding—that is, one that conveys a real narrative, involves employee testimonials, and showcases the everyday work culture—has great power in building trust. In contrast, branding that is only aesthetic or full of imagery without supporting reality risks creating a crisis of trust. These findings strengthen the relevance of the *Person-Organization Fit theory*, *Social Identity Theory*, and *Career Construction Theory* in understanding the dynamics of the younger generation in the world of work.

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Hopefully this research will be useful for the development of science and can provide a positive contribution to [related fields]."

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