



Human-Centered and Value-Based Employer Branding: an Implementable Model to Enhance Gen Z Retention in the Creative Fashion Industry

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Abstract, This study aims to develop an implementable employer branding model tailored to the characteristics of Generation Z (Gen Z) within Indonesia's creative fashion industry. Employing a qualitative exploratory approach and utilizing NVivo 15 for thematic data analysis, the research involved in-depth interviews with HR managers and Gen Z employees from three fashion companies. The study identifies five essential pillars for an effective employer branding strategy: (1) employer authenticity, (2) integration of spiritual and social values, (3) participatory narrative involvement from Gen Z, (4) emotionally engaging digital communication platforms, and (5) meaningful work experience. The resulting model advances employer branding theory by incorporating co-narrative branding and value-based representation, reflecting the changing expectations of the younger workforce. Moreover, it offers strategic implications for reducing the high turnover intention commonly observed among Gen Z by enhancing organizational identification, emotional connection, and trust. This value-driven and human-centered employer branding framework serves as both a theoretical enrichment and a practical guide for fashion-based organizations to foster sustained engagement, loyalty, and advocacy among Gen Z employees. The model makes notable contributions across four dimensions: theoretically by bridging generational identity and branding literature; methodologically by applying qualitative analysis supported by NVivo; practically by outlining concrete branding actions; and strategically by equipping HR and communication professionals with a roadmap to improve employer-employee alignment.

Keywords: employer branding, Gen Z, employee retention, creative fashion, participatory branding, work values

1. Introduction

Over the past five years, the transformation of the work landscape has been marked not only by digitalization but also by a demographic shift, with Generation Z (Gen Z) those born between 1997 and 2012 now dominating the workforce. This generation brings unique characteristics: they are digital natives, value-driven, and emphasize meaningful work. They tend to prioritize the alignment of personal values with organizational culture over purely financial incentives (Sahni et al., 2025; Schullery, 2013).

One of the strategic responses by organizations to these changes is through employer branding, a systematic process of building the company's image as an attractive and valuable place to work. In the context of the local creative fashion industry in Indonesia, employer branding serves not only a functional role in attracting talent but also reflects aesthetic values, community culture, and the company's social identity (Elhamy, 2021). Thus, establishing an authentic and participatory employer brand has become increasingly crucial for fostering loyalty and engagement, particularly among young talents known for their job-hopping tendencies (Fedulova & Dzhulai, 2024).

According to LinkIn Learning (2023), over 65% of Gen Z in Southeast Asia consider social media content and employee testimonials when evaluating a company's desirability. A study by Ghani et al. (2023) and Srinivas et al. (2025) emphasizes the importance of consistency between the employer branding narrative and the actual work experience, as discrepancies may undermine young employees' trust. Meanwhile, local studies in the fashion sector remain limited and predominantly rely on quantitative approaches that overlook the narrative and emic dimensions of Gen Z's experiences as active subjects in the branding process (Szegedi et al., 2023).

This research builds on the employer branding framework (Srinivas et al., 2025) but further develops it using a participatory approach in which employees are not merely branding objects but narrative co-creators. The model is also strengthened by the generational value theory of Ozkan & Solmaz (2015) which explains how Gen Z's expectations of the workplace extend beyond professional logic to include identity resonance and meaning.

Contemporary research indicates that employer branding has a positive impact on organizational attractiveness, application intentions, and employee retention (Harini, 2020; Szegedi et al., 2023). However, generic employer branding practices that do not involve employee participation have been found to be less effective, particularly in engaging Generation Z. Ozkan & Solmaz (2015) emphasize the importance of a co-constructive approach to employer branding, positioning employees as active narrators in shaping organizational reputation. Heimann (2024) found that visual narratives on TikTok, showcasing authentic work dynamics and corporate social values, resonate more strongly with Gen Z than formal LinkedIn campaigns. Nevertheless, research on employer branding practices in the local fashion industry remains scarce, especially studies highlighting community-based and spiritual value approaches.

The main research gap addressed in this study concerns the limited exploration of how creative local fashion companies with constrained resources implement employer branding to engage young employees through social media, collaborative work culture, and value-driven narratives. Additionally, this study seeks to understand how Gen Z perceives these branding practices: do they see them as authentic and motivating, or merely as manipulative promotional strategies?

Based on this background, the research problem addressed in this study focuses on how employer branding strategies are designed, implemented, and perceived by Generation Z employees in creative fashion companies in Indonesia. The objectives of this study are to: (1) identify the forms of employer branding strategies used by local fashion companies; (2) analyze Gen Z's perceptions and experiences regarding these

strategies; and (3) formulate an effective, participatory, and value-based employer branding implementation model.

This research contributes to three main domains. Theoretically, it enriches the employer branding literature by integrating generational and narrative dimensions, which remain underexplored in the Southeast Asian context. Methodologically, this study employs a thematic qualitative approach using NVivo coding to explore in-depth verbal data from HR managers and Gen Z employees. Practically, it offers an implementable model as a strategic roadmap for companies to develop employer branding that is not only appealing externally but also authentically internal, thus fostering young employee loyalty and reducing turnover rates.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concept and Theory of Employer Branding

Employer branding is an integrative strategy combining human resource management and brand marketing to project an ideal image of the company as an attractive workplace (Theurer et al., 2018). More than mere image-building, employer branding embodies the narrative of values and authentic experiences perceived by employees. The classical framework (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Srinivas et al., 2025a) has been continuously refined, emphasizing the Employer Value Proposition (EVP), which encompasses financial rewards, career development, and emotional connections (Bondarouk & Olivas-Luja'N, 2013; Evans et al., 2025; Mamun & Uddin, 2025; Ruparel et al., 2020).

In creative industries such as fashion, emotional and cultural aspects are decisive factors, as many employees prefer organizations that align with their personal values, lifestyle, and self-identity (Vieira & Gomes Da Costa, 2024). Employer branding today is participatory in nature, involving employees as co-creators of the company's identity narrative.

2.2 Characteristics and Work Values of Generation Z

Generation Z (born after 1997) are digital natives who prioritize transparency, diversity, and sustainability (Schroth, 2019). They seek inclusive, flexible, and meaningful workplaces (Ghani et al., 2023; Schullery, 2013). Effective employer branding for Gen Z must highlight authenticity, sustainability, and provide space for participation and self-expression (Srinivas et al., 2025). Social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are not merely communication channels; they serve as cultural identification mediums between the company and potential candidates (Heimann, 2024).

Based on this review, this study proposes a conceptual model integrating: (1) a value-based and participatory co-narrative employer branding model; (2) an EVP emphasizing authenticity and Gen Z engagement; and (3) the role of digital channels as the primary medium for building work culture relationships. The conceptual framework of this study is illustrated as follows:

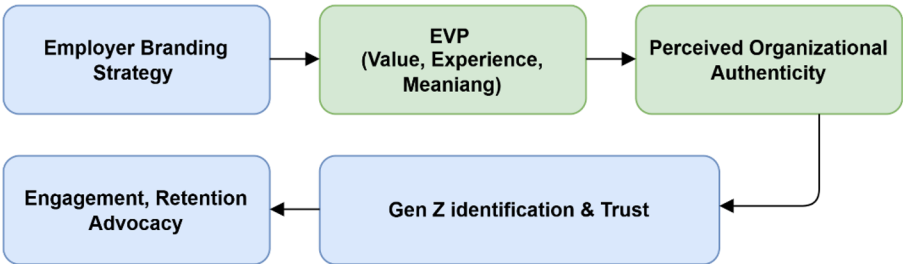


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework
Source: Researcher, 2025

This framework describes the flow of employer branding, which starts from value strategies within the EVP, generating authentic perceptions, fostering identification and trust among Gen Z, and ultimately leading to engagement, retention, and advocacy. The model emphasizes the integration of symbolic, psychological, and affective values to build long-term loyalty.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative approach to understand employer branding practices aimed at Generation Z within the context of Indonesia’s creative fashion industry. This approach allows for an in-depth exploration of meanings, perceptions, motivations, and engagement narratives from the internal perspectives of industry practitioners and Gen Z employees (Belk, 2024). The study does not aim to test hypotheses but rather to explore phenomena contextually and participatorily. A multi-case study design was employed to capture cross-organizational dynamics. This study compares employer branding strategies from three local fashion companies using a participatory narrative approach (co-branding model) in shaping their employer value proposition (EVP). This approach enables the researcher to interpret branding practices not merely as managerial strategies but as cultural representations and authentic values experienced by Gen Z (Di Paolo et al., 2025).

The research was conducted in three creative fashion companies located in Eastern Priangan, namely Russ&Co, Amily Hijab, and Fadsan. These companies share the following characteristics: operating for more than three years, employing a majority workforce from Generation Z (aged 19–27), and actively building employer branding through social media and value narratives. The research subjects were divided into two groups: HR practitioners or brand owners responsible for designing branding strategies, and Gen Z employees engaged in daily operations and brand narratives.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with HR representatives and Gen Z employees, each lasting 45–60 minutes per session. Narratives were developed using open-ended questions focusing on experiences, value expectations, social media engagement, and work aspirations. Digital documentation

included social media content, LinkedIn profiles, corporate Instagram accounts, and internal documents such as work guidelines and organizational value statements.

Data analysis followed the Thematic Narrative Analysis approach proposed by Braun & Clarke (2021), conducted in six stages: familiarization with data; initial coding based on value narratives and experiences; identification and categorization of key themes related to EVP, organizational authenticity, and engagement; reviewing and confirming themes with other researchers; naming themes and mapping the conceptual model; and interpretative writing based on co-constructed meanings. NVivo 15 software was used as a supporting tool to visualize coding and thematic maps.

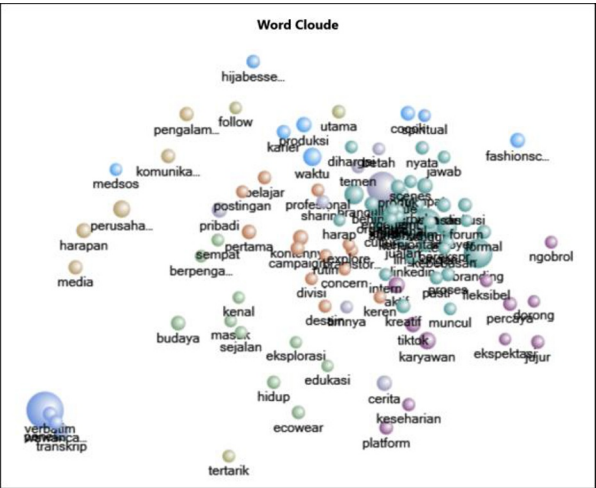
The principle of trustworthiness (Lincoln, 1984; Purzycki & Bendixen, 2023) was applied, including credibility through technique triangulation (interviews, focus group discussions, documentation) and member checking; transferability through detailed contextual descriptions of each case; dependability via an audit trail and documentation of all research steps; and confirmability through inter-researcher validation and the use of reflexive journals.

4. Results

This study explores the employer branding practices developed by local creative fashion companies and Generation Z employees' perceptions of their work experiences. Using a thematic qualitative approach, interviews were conducted with three management representatives (HR/Owners) and six Generation Z employees from three fashion industry categories: urban streetwear, modest fashion, and eco-sustainable fashion.

4.1 Informant Descriptions and Company Context

The three companies in this study, representing Fashionscape, HijabEssence, and Ecowear Project namely Russ&Co, Amily Hijab, and Fadsan each adopt diverse employer branding approaches. Each company has unique visual identities and values communicated to the public and potential employees. HR plays a strategic role in shaping work culture, while Generation Z employees act as both recipients and amplifiers of the brand narrative through co-creation.



4.2 NVivo 15 Analysis Output

Figure 2. Cluster Analysis

Source: NVivo 15 Data Processing, 2025

Figure 2 above displays the cluster visualization output from NVivo 15, illustrating semantic relationships among the most frequently occurring terms in the interview transcripts. The clusters show close connections between key terms such as branding, content, value, work, and digital platforms like Instagram, Tik Tok, and LinkedIn. The appearance of words such as spiritual, openness, culture, forum, and trust in adjacent clusters indicates that emotional value representation, authentic work experiences, and authenticity in communication form a strong foundation for Gen Z's perception of employer branding. These findings serve as a basis for constructing themes such as Authentic Content via Co-Creation, Emotional Identity, Social Values, and Organizational Culture, explaining how the interplay of these elements establishes trust and psychological safety, ultimately leading to engagement and retention. This visualization reinforces the consistency between empirical data and the conceptual model, providing academic justification for the theoretical construction offered.

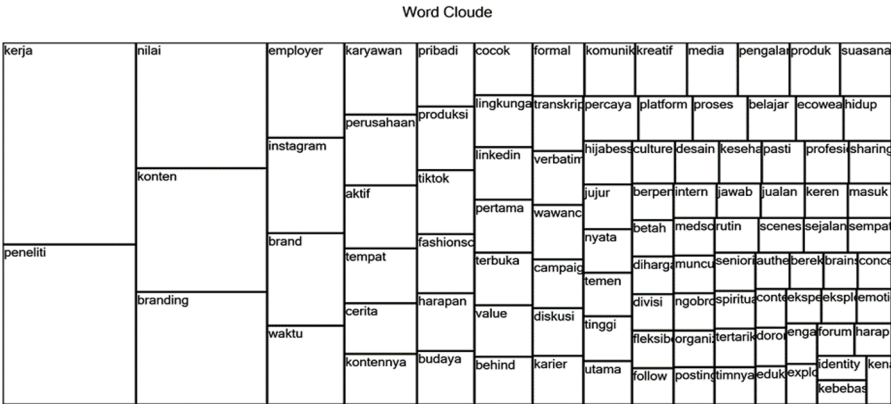


Figure 3. Treemap

Source: NVivo 15 Data Processing, 2025

4.3 Main Themes from Analysis

Theme 1: Employer Branding as Emotional Identity Medium

From the Gen Z perspective, employer branding is not merely a promotional tool but a reflection of the company's emotional identity, encompassing values, communication style, and internal psychological atmosphere. Branding that touches the emotional side—such as warm content tones and inclusive visuals fosters affective closeness even during the pre-recruitment phase (Harini, 2020). As stated by GZ1, “I felt the vibes fit me. I think I can really work in an environment like this,” indicating the connection between employer brand tone and personal identification.

Theme 2: Content Authenticity through Co-Creation and Real Testimonials

Generation Z is highly sensitive to staged content and trusts authentic representations shaped through direct narratives from employees. The co-creation process, where employees act as content actors rather than mere promotional objects, enhances employer brand credibility (Hardcastle et al., 2025). As HR2 noted, “Content from ‘insiders’ is more trustworthy... not just a strategy.” This reinforces the variables of Authentic Content and Participation Narrative as key drivers of trust.

Theme 3: Social and Spiritual Values as EVP Attraction Points

An Employer Value Proposition (EVP) that includes social values, spirituality, and sustainability is a primary preference for Gen Z when selecting a workplace. Gen Z seeks not just jobs but meaning, values, and contributions to social missions (Fernandes et al., 2024). GZ2 stated, “I’m looking for a job that’s not just about money but also has a vision.” A purpose-driven EVP becomes a strategic differentiation for creative companies aiming to attract young talent.

Theme 4: Organizational Culture as Infrastructure for Trust and Engagement

An inclusive, flexible organizational culture that encourages active employee participation creates a psychologically safe space (Kremer et al., 2019). Findings show that when ideas are valued regardless of seniority, loyalty increases. GZ4 emphasized, “I had just joined, but I was immediately involved in a content project, and it made me feel valued.” This supports sub-variables such as Psychological Safety, Organizational Openness, and Collaborative Culture as retention pillars.

Theme 5: Trust and Psychological Safety as Retention Anchors

Trust built from the alignment between digital narratives and real work experiences forms the main foundation of employee retention. Inconsistencies between employer brand imagery and workplace reality damage trust and prompt Gen Z employees to leave more quickly (Saks, 2021). As GZ6 stated, “If the branding is just aesthetic but inside it's different, we feel deceived.” Therefore, transparency and value consistency are foundational to long-term engagement models. Based on the NVivo analysis results, the researcher summarized the findings as follows.

Table 1. Summary of Findings

Theme	Narrative	Implication
Employer Branding as Emotional Identity	Branding is not only visual but represents values and emotions	Branding communication should touch Gen Z's emotional and personal sides
Content Authenticity & Co-Creation	Employees want to be actors, not just objects, in content	Involve Gen Z in producing employer branding content based on real experiences
Social & Spiritual Values in EVP	Gen Z seeks meaning and social contributions from work	Develop a purpose-driven EVP, not just cosmetic or symbolic
Work Culture & Psychological Safety	Early involvement builds trust and long-term loyalty	Foster an inclusive, cross-hierarchy work culture open to innovation
Trust & Narrative Consistency	Reality should match employer branding promises	Ensure alignment between promotional content and actual workplace practices

5. Discussion

5.1 Employer Branding as Emotional Identity

The findings of this study reveal that effective employer branding does not merely function as a workforce promotion tool but rather serves as a medium for building emotional connections between the company's identity and the personal identity of Generation Z employees (Vieira & Gomes Da Costa, 2024). Branding that resonates with emotional and personal aspects has proven to be more appealing to Gen Z, who are highly responsive to "vibes" or perceived workplace atmosphere. This concept reinforces theories stating that the resonance between personal and organizational values contributes to psychological ownership and high emotional engagement (Nguyen et al., 2024; Van Zoonen & Sivunen, 2022). In the creative fashion context, expressive values such as freedom, inclusivity, and meaningfulness are key factors driving long-term attachment.

5.2 Authentic Content and Co-Creation as Participatory Strategies

This study found that the narrative participation of Gen Z in branding processes through co-created content strengthens brand authenticity (Eriksson et al., 2022). Generation Z is highly sensitive to staged or manipulative content. By involving them as actors rather than mere promotional objects, companies foster stronger two-way relationships. This aligns with findings by Soeling et al. (2022) that employee-generated content enhances organizational authenticity and employer attractiveness.

Employee testimonials, behind-the-scenes stories, and authentic experiential narratives serve as high-credibility sources (Kadek et al., 2025).

5.3 Social and Spiritual Values in the Employer Value Proposition (EVP)

Gen Z consistently emphasizes the importance of meaningful work and social contributions as part of the EVP. They are drawn to companies with a clear purpose, such as spiritual values (HijabEssence), sustainability (Ecowear Project), and collaboration (Fashionscape). This finding supports the concept of purpose-driven employment (Fernandes et al., 2024), which suggests that young workers are more loyal to companies whose values align with their personal aspirations. When work is perceived as aligned with their life mission, turnover intentions tend to decrease.

5.4 Organizational Culture as the Foundation of Engagement

An open, non-hierarchical, and inclusive work culture has been shown to create a psychologically safe space, which is crucial for Gen Z. Early participation in projects fosters a sense of being valued and accelerates the engagement process. This aligns with Nguyen et al. (2024), who demonstrated that collaborative cultures increase the sense of belonging and engagement. Work environments that encourage exploration, idea openness, and informal dialogue create ecosystems supporting loyalty and growth.

5.5 Trust and Narrative Consistency as Retention Anchors

Trust is formed when the work reality aligns with the promises conveyed through employer branding. Discrepancies between digital narratives and workplace realities create brand dissonance, leading to distrust and increased turnover intentions (Saks, 2021). Therefore, it is crucial for companies to maintain consistency between promotional content and actual practices. When Gen Z feels “deceived” by inauthentic portrayals, loyalty drops drastically. Conversely, openness, transparency, and consistent value representation strengthen long-term trust.

5.6 Interdisciplinary Contributions and Strategic Implications

The model developed in this study carries not only theoretical strength but also strategic value. It facilitates the integration of HR, creative, and digital marketing functions to build a cohesive and measurable employer brand. This model enables branding strategy planning based on robust qualitative data, with potential development into quantitative measurements. As described by Backhaus & Tikoo (2004) and Srinivas et al. (2025), cross-functional collaboration strengthens internal brand alignment and enhances employee advocacy.

This strategy supports not only recruitment but also strengthens employee advocacy, which extends the brand image beyond the organization. Based on the discussion, the research findings are illustrated in the following model.

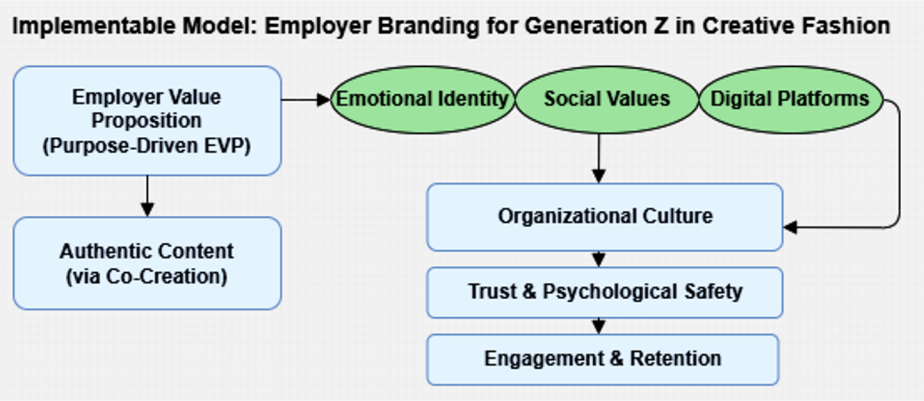


Figure 5. Research Model
Source: Researcher, 2025

This model illustrates a value-based and participatory strategic employer branding process designed to build Gen Z loyalty within the creative fashion industry. It starts from employer branding designed not merely as a promotional tool but as an organizational value narrative communicated through Authentic Content via Co-Creation, meaning content authentically produced through direct employee participation. The three main foundations of this content are Emotional Identity, Authentic Narrative, and Social-Spiritual Values, which shape an Organizational Culture that is open, collaborative, and meaningful.

Such a culture becomes the basis for Trust & Psychological Safety, where Gen Z feels emotionally safe to express themselves, participate, and grow. This trust becomes a prerequisite for Engagement & Retention, namely active involvement and long-term staying intention. The model aligns humanistic and participatory approaches with the characteristics of Gen Z, who seek authenticity, values, and growth space in work thus providing a strategic alternative for organizations to address high turnover and low loyalty challenges among this generation.

This discussion underscores that the success of employer branding in the context of Gen Z depends not only on visual or aesthetic narratives but more on value consistency, employee participation, and relational authenticity. The proposed model contributes new insights to academic discourse and offers strategic solutions for companies to navigate the dynamic realities of young generations in the evolving workplace.

Table 2. Model Contributions

Aspect	Explanation
Theoretical	This model expands employer branding theory by integrating emotional identity, social values, and co-creation narratives dimensions, matching Gen Z's preference for authentic and participatory relationships.
Methodological	Provides a solid conceptual foundation for future quantitative testing, with indicators that can be empirically validated as a

	continuation of the qualitative thematic approach.
Practical	Offers a concrete roadmap for fashion companies to design employer branding strategies that are authentic, grounded in real employee experiences, and emotionally and socially connected.
Strategic	Serves as a guide for HR, creative, and communication divisions to develop a collaborative, psychologically safe work culture to sustainably enhance Gen Z loyalty and engagement.

6. Conclusion

This study affirms that employer branding in the creative fashion industry can no longer be understood merely as a visual promotional tool but should be seen as a strategic narrative shaped by the integration of values, experiences, and the active participation of Generation Z. Through a qualitative approach using thematic analysis with NVivo 15, it was found that impactful employer branding begins with a purpose-driven Employer Value Proposition (EVP), which is translated into authentic content through a co-creation process.

This authentic content represents three main foundations: emotional identity, social values, and the use of relevant digital platforms. These three elements internalize the company's values into the work culture, creating an environment that supports psychological safety and trust. The ultimate outcome is increased engagement, retention, and more stable long-term loyalty among Gen Z employees. This model demonstrates that value-driven and participatory employer branding not only enhances the attractiveness to young talent but also strengthens organizational identification and addresses the high job-hopping tendency prevalent among Gen Z.

Recommendations

Practical recommendations, first, collaboratively build authentic content; involving employees in creating social media content strengthens their sense of ownership and emotional engagement. Second, facilitate a culture of open dialogue and psychological safety; conduct informal weekly forums to listen to Gen Z voices without hierarchy, as a form of inclusive culture.

Third, design reflective and transparent EVP; the EVP should honestly convey organizational values and reflect daily realities. Fourth, develop clear career pathways and internal mentoring programs; Gen Z requires a transparent career roadmap to maintain their loyalty to the company (Chawla & Lenka, 2022). Recommendations for future research, It is suggested to conduct quantitative testing of the model using SEM-PLS or CFA methods. Cross-industry studies (e.g., technology, public services) are recommended to examine the model's generalizability. Longitudinal exploration is also needed to assess the long-term impact of employer branding strategies on employee retention.

Research Limitations

This study involved only three small to medium-sized companies in the creative fashion sector, with informants limited to HR representatives and Gen Z employees.

Thus, not all findings can be generalized across sectors or generations. Additionally, the qualitative approach used is exploratory in nature and cannot explain causal relationships among variables.

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