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Job Evaluations and Preference Hierarchies: Symbolic Employer Brand among Generation Z

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Zusammenfassung

Diese Arbeit untersucht, ob die symbolischen Employer Brand Dimensionen Organizational Culture, Corporate Social Responsibility und Work Environment ein moderat niedrigeres Gehalt bei der Bewertung eines Stellenangebots kompensieren können. Des Weiteren wird geprüft, wie die genannten Dimensionen bei der Bewertung potentieller Arbeitgeber von Generation Z priorisiert werden. Die Datenerhebung erfolgte mittels einer Online-Befragung, die ein experimentelles Vignetten-Design sowie eine innerhalb der Personen durchgeführte Präferenzmessung umfasste (N = 141). Nach umfassender Datenanalyse zeigten die Ergebnisse, dass symbolische Employer Brand Dimensionen die wahrgenommene Attraktivität eines Stellenangebots erhöhen, jedoch in der Gesamtstichprobe keine Kompensation für ein niedrigeres Gehalt leisten. Auch für die Bewerbungsabsicht zeigte sich in der Gesamtstichprobe kein kompensatorischer Effekt. Allerdings weist eine signifikante geschlechtsspezifische Interaktion darauf hin, dass symbolische Employer Brand Dimensionen unter Bedingungen geringerer Vergütung die Bewerbungsabsicht von Frauen erhöhen, während Männer stärker auf das Gehalt reagieren.

Darüber hinaus zeigt sich innerhalb Generation Z eine klare Präferenzhierarchie zwischen den untersuchten Dimensionen. Organizational Culture wird am stärksten priorisiert, gefolgt von Corporate Social Responsibility, während Work Environment die geringste relative Bedeutung aufweist. Geschlechtsspezifische Unterschiede in diesen Priorisierungsmustern sind nicht statistisch signifikant. Insgesamt verdeutlichen die Ergebnisse, dass symbolische Employer Brand Dimensionen den Rekrutierungserfolg unterstützen können, jedoch keine generelle Substitution für monetäre Anreize darstellen. Gleichzeitig unterscheiden sich ihre Effekte zwischen der wahrgenommenen Attraktivität eines Stellenangebots und der Bewerbungsabsicht, sowie zwischen verschiedenen Bewerbergruppen.

Die Studie leistet einen Beitrag zur Forschung, indem sie zwischen einstellungsbezogenen und verhaltensbezogenen Zielgrößen differenziert, das Kompensationspotenzial symbolischer Employer Brand Dimensionen isoliert betrachtet und deren relative Bedeutung innerhalb der Generation Z empirisch untersucht.

Schlüsselwörter:

Symbolische Arbeitgebermarke; Arbeitgeberattraktivität; Bewerbungsabsicht; Generation Z; Kompensationseffekt

Abstract

This thesis examines whether the symbolic employer brand dimensions of Organizational Culture, Corporate Social Responsibility, and Work Environment can compensate for moderately lower salary in shaping the evaluation of an employment opportunity, while simultaneously analyzing how these dimensions are prioritized by Generation Z. Using an experimental vignette design and a within-subject preference assessment (N = 141), the findings reveal that symbolic employer brand dimensions increase Job Attractiveness but do not compensate for lower salary in the overall sample. No compensatory effect was observed for Job Pursuit Intentions at the general sample level. However, a significant gender-specific interaction indicated that symbolic employer brand dimensions increased Job Pursuit Intentions among women under weaker salary conditions, whereas men remained more responsive to salary.

Beyond these effects, Generation Z exhibited a clear preference hierarchy among symbolic employer brand dimensions. Organizational Culture was prioritized most strongly, followed by Corporate Social Responsibility, while Work Environment was rated lowest. Gender differences in these prioritization patterns were not statistically significant. Overall, the results show that symbolic employer brand dimensions can support recruitment but cannot generally substitute for salary, and their effects differ between Job Attractiveness and Job Pursuit Intentions as well as across applicant groups. The study contributes to the literature by distinguishing between attitudinal and behavioral outcomes, by isolating the compensation potential of symbolic employer brand dimensions from other non-monetary attributes, and by providing evidence on their relative importance within Generation Z.

Keywords:

Symbolic Employer Brand; Job Attractiveness; Job Pursuit Intentions; Generation Z; Compensation Effect

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List of Abbreviations

JPI	Job Pursuit Intentions
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
RQ1	Research Question 1
RQ2	Research Question 2

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1. Introduction

In increasingly competitive labor markets, organizations face the challenge of attracting qualified talent while managing substantial human resource costs. As personnel expenses represent one of the largest cost components for firms, recruitment decisions are not only strategic but also economic in nature. This creates a fundamental tension for organizations regarding how to remain attractive to potential employees and how to position individual employment opportunities as appealing, without continuously increasing salary levels.

In this context, the employer brand has emerged as an important strategic factor in recruitment. Prior research suggests that employer brand signals shape how organizations are perceived by potential employees and may improve recruitment outcomes by influencing job evaluations and the pool of interested talent (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). At the same time, existing studies have begun to explore whether non-monetary employer attributes can compensate for less favorable financial conditions, often relying on different samples, geographical contexts, and experimental designs. While these studies provide initial insights, their findings remain mixed, indicating that the underlying mechanisms are complex and not yet fully understood. Consequently, it is still unclear to what extent symbolic employer brand dimensions can substitute for less favorable salary.

At the same time, Generation Z is entering the labor market as a key target group and represents an increasingly important source of early-career talent for organizations. This cohort is frequently associated with distinct value orientations shaped by digitalization, social awareness, and changing expectations toward work, which has led to growing academic interest in how Generation Z evaluates potential employers (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023). While existing research has already identified structured preference hierarchies among employer attributes for Generation Z, there is still a need for more nuanced insights. A more differentiated understanding on how these preferences are shaped can help refine employer brand strategies, particularly in relation to specific contextual factors such as industry or cultural environment. In addition, it has not yet been fully established whether such preference structures vary context-dependent across demographic groups, for instance with respect to gender.

Building on these considerations, this study addresses two central research questions. First, it examines whether symbolic employer brand dimensions can compensate for a moderately lower salary in shaping Job Attractiveness as well as action-related outcomes such as Job

Pursuit Intentions (JPI). Second, it investigates how Generation Z prioritizes different symbolic employer brand dimensions and whether these preference structures vary by gender.

Using an experimental research design, the study contributes to the existing research in three ways. It provides a differentiated perspective on the compensatory potential of a focused set of symbolic employer brand dimensions, distinguishes between attitudinal and behavioral evaluation outcomes, and offers empirical insights into the relative importance of employer brand dimensions within Generation Z.

2. Current Labor Market Developments and Resulting Challenges

Understanding current labor market dynamics is fundamental for analyzing how organizations can position themselves as attractive employers and for demonstrating the relevance of a strong employer brand. Over the past decades, the world of work has undergone profound transformations driven by demographic, technological, economic and cultural forces. Researchers emphasized that contemporary labor markets are strongly shaped by megatrends such as digitalization, globalization and demographic change (Fitzenberger & Kagerl, 2025; Vandeplas & Thum-Thysen, 2019). These developments have significantly altered the structure and functioning of labor markets and increasingly require organizations to adapt their strategies for attracting and retaining talent in order to remain competitive.

One of the most influential developments is the demographic change. It is characterized by population aging, declining fertility rates and shifts in generational composition. As a result, many industrialized countries face a shrinking working-age population and a decreasing labor supply. In Germany for example, demographic aging has already created pressure on employment structure and workforce planning, as the retirement of older cohorts occurs alongside the entry of fewer young workers (Brussig, 2015; Fuchs & Zika, 2010). Similar trends can also be observed in other economies such as China, where declining fertility has contributed to a transition from a surplus of labor to labor scarcity (Du & Yang, 2014). In addition to reducing labor supply, demographic change also leads to qualitative workforce shifts as younger generations enter the labor market with different skills and work expectations (Eberhard et al., 2017). Organizations must therefore simultaneously retain experienced employees while creating work environments that meet the expectations of younger workers (Katiraee et al., 2024).

Another key transformation driver is digitalization, which describes the increasing integration of digital technologies such as automation, artificial intelligence and data analytics into economic and organizational processes. This development is often associated with the "Fourth Industrial Revolution", characterized by the fusion of digital and physical systems (Eberhard et al., 2017). Digitalization has reshaped labor demand by automating routine tasks while increasing the need for creativity, complex problem solving and social interaction. Dun, Yuan and Lunqu (2020) describe this shift as the "Creativization" of work. At the macroeconomic level, digitalization represents one of the dominant transformation pressures on the German labor market (Fitzenberger & Kagerl, 2025). At the same time, digital communication technologies enable flexible work arrangements such as remote and hybrid work, which can improve autonomy and work-life-balance but also blur the boundaries between work and private life (Eberhard et al., 2017).

A further structural development shaping modern labor markets is globalization. This phenomenon refers to the increasing interconnectedness of national economies through flows of goods, capital, technology and labor across national borders. Globalization expands the geographical scope of labor market competition as multinational companies increasingly allocate production and employment based on labor costs and skill availability (Sana et al., 2024). As a result, firms are no longer competing solely within national labor markets but increasingly on an international scale. This development intensifies the global competition for labor and, as economic models suggest, forces organizations to offer competitive wages and adapt to higher quality standards to attract and retain skilled employees (Hili et al., 2016). Furthermore, increased global interconnectedness contributes to cultural shifts in employment expectations, including a stronger emphasis on diversity, sustainability, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) (Berger-Walliser & Scott, 2018).

These developments collectively give rise to several structural challenges for contemporary labor markets. One of the most prominent challenges is the emergence of talent shortages, particularly in sectors that rely on advanced knowledge and skills such as information technology, engineering and healthcare. Demographic decline combined with rising demand for highly skilled labor creates a growing mismatch between labor supply and employer demand (Maier et al., 2015). Even under optimistic migration assumptions, labor supply in countries such as Germany is expected to decline significantly by 2050 (Fuchs, 2013). Consequently, organizations face increasing difficulties in filling vacancies and must compete more intensely for qualified employees (Vandeplas & Thum-Thysen, 2019).

In addition, the modern labor market is characterized by increasing volatility and changing employment relationships. Rapid technological progress continuously alters job profiles and skill requirements, which makes long-term workforce planning more complex (Stryzhak, 2023). At the same time, employment relationships have become more dynamic. Shorter job tenures and greater labor mobility weaken traditional long-term employment relationships, particularly among younger employees who tend to display lower organizational commitment and higher turnover intentions. As a result, employee retention and engagement have become key strategic concerns for organizations (Ashford et al., 2018; Eberhard et al., 2017).

Finally, changing work structures present additional challenges for today’s organizations. Digitalization and globalization have facilitated flexible employment models such as remote, hybrid and project-based work (Stryzhak, 2023). While these arrangements provide greater flexibility, they may also fragment the workforce and complicate the development of a cohesive organizational culture (Ashford et al., 2018). Remote work can weaken employees’ sense of belonging and social inclusion, which can lead to a mismatch between the individual and the work environment and create challenges for attracting and integrating talent (Carnevale & Hatak, 2020). Maintaining employee engagement in such environments therefore requires transparent communication, authentic leadership and deliberate efforts to foster organizational culture in digital work settings (Hadziahmetovic & Salihovic, 2022).

Overall, the combined effects of demographic change, digital transformation and globalization have created a more competitive and dynamic labor market environment. As organizations face intensifying competition for talent, shifting employee expectations and evolving work structures, the ability to position themselves as an attractive employer becomes increasingly important. In this context, the employer brand plays a crucial role in enabling organizations to attract and retain qualified employees.

3. The Employer Brand

In strategic human resource management, employer branding has become a central concept over the last decades. It unites the disciplines of organizational identity, marketing and talent management. This helps organizations in today´s competitive labor market to not solely compete through products and services but also through their ability to attract and retain skilled employees (Reis et al., 2021). The concept builds on the belief, that employment can be treated like a brand, which carries associations, values and promises, which in turn shape perceptions of the organization as a workplace.

3.1. Definitions and Concept Origins

This subchapter discusses the historical origins, the conceptual development and definitions that underpin employer branding as a managerial practice and a theoretical construct. The idea of transferring branding principles to employment relationships first emerged in the 1990s. Ambler and Barrow (1996) introduced the term "employer brand" and described it as "the package of functional, economic and psychological benefits provided by employment and identified with the employing company" (p.187). This definition conveyed traditional product brand thinking into the context of employment, by claiming that organizations can market their workplace in the same way they market their goods or services. The employer brand can be understood as an image held by current employees and job seekers, representing how the company is perceived as a place to work (Mokina, 2014). Over time, the concept progressed beyond image building and came to include deeper aspects of organizational culture, identity and behavior (Backhaus, 2016; Edwards, 2010).

By the introduction of the employer brand concept an important theoretical shift took place. Employees were now recognized as internal customers of an organization, and not just as resources anymore. While the term "resource" implies a primarily utilitarian perspective focused on the use of employees as means to an end, the approach of the "internal customer" reflects a shift towards strategic investment in the employee experience. This perspective is grounded in the assumption that only employees who are adequately supported and engaged internally are able to authentically deliver the organization's brand promise to the external market (Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). As this perspective shows, employer branding is not restricted to an internal focus but essentially links internal and external aspects. While it focuses internally on employees referred to as internal customers, it simultaneously addresses the external labor market by shaping how potential employees and job seekers perceive the organization as a place to work (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Figurska & Matuska, 2013). From today's point of view, it can be stated that the employer brand became a tool for differentiation, allowing organizations to stand out in competitive labor markets. As research developed, the employer brand has increasingly been conceptualized as an integral part of corporate branding and a facet of corporate identity, which is responsible for communicating the organization´s values and employment experiences (Mokina, 2014).

In the academic literature, the terms employer brand and employer branding are often used in close connection to describe both the perception of an organization as an employer and the strategic activities through which this perception is shaped. In this context, the employer brand can be understood as the set of functional, economic and psychological benefits associated with employment, while employer branding refers to the processes through which these attributes are developed, communicated and maintained (Ambler & Barrow, 1996; Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Edwards, 2010; Figurska & Matuska, 2013). These processes typically involve the strategic development of a distinctive employer profile aimed at differentiating an organization from its competitors (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Bali & Dixit, 2016; Chhabra & Sharma, 2014). They often begin with an internal analysis of organizational culture and values to identify authentic employment-related attributes (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). In a subsequent stage, organizations communicate these attributes externally to strengthen their attractiveness in the labor market and position themselves as an employer of choice (Figurska & Matuska, 2013). At the same time, internal initiatives ensure that these attributes are consistently experienced by employees in their daily work (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Bali & Dixit, 2016).

From a strategic perspective, employer branding has evolved from a recruitment tool into a holistic management approach that integrates human resource management, marketing and corporate communication (Bali & Dixit, 2016; Reis et al., 2021). By ensuring consistency between organizational identity and stakeholder communication, the employer brand supports long-term corporate objectives (Mokina, 2014). This alignment has become increasingly important in a transparent digital environment, where employees act as key brand carriers and shape organizational attractiveness through their shared experiences (Spoljarić & Ozretić Došen, 2023). Consequently, organizations must continuously adapt both, their employer branding strategies and their employer brand, to changing labor market expectations, diverse workforce values and evolving communication dynamics (Reis et al., 2021). Despite these developments, the core logic of Ambler and Barrow’s (1996) original definition remains relevant. Employment represents a bundle of functional, economic and psychological benefits, and organizations that communicate and deliver this value effectively are better positioned to attract and retain qualified employees.

3.2. Classification of Symbolic Employer Brand Dimensions

Originally, the marketing literature on consumer research provided a theoretical construct called the instrumental-symbolic framework, which is summarized in Table 1. Instrumental attributes capture objective, tangible and utilitarian characteristics of products and services and like this help individuals to maximize their rewards and minimize their costs. Symbolic attributes in contrast represent subjective, intangible and self-expressive meanings attached to a brand. They enable individuals to maintain and enhance their self-concept as well as their self-esteem and therefore provide a psychological benefit to them (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003).

Table 1: The Instrumental-Symbolic Framework in Marketing

	Instrumental Attributes	**Symbolic Attributes**
Synonyms	• Utilitarian or functional attributes	• Self-expressive attributes
Content (Keller, 1998)	• Product-related attributes • Describe a product in terms of objective, physical, and tangible attributes that a product either has or does not have.	• Non-product-related attributes, especially user imagery • Describe a product in terms of subjective and intangible attributes that accrue from how people perceive a product and make inferences about it rather than what a product does/has
Motive (Katz, 1960; Shavitt, 1990)	• People's need to maximize rewards and minimize costs. • Utility serves as the primary reason for consumers' attraction to instrumental attributes.	• People's need to maintain their self-identity, enhance self-image, or express themselves (beliefs, traits, personality, etc.). • Self-expression serves as the primary reason for consumers' attraction to symbolic attributes.

Note. Adapted from Lievens & Highhouse (2003, p.78)

In prior research that uses the instrumental-symbolic framework in a recruitment context, papers conceptualized symbolic employer brand attributes as personality traits an organization can provide to its applicants and employees. Those character traits were namely categorized as Sincerity, Innovativeness, Cheerfulness, Competence, Prestige and Ruggedness (Lievens, 2007; Lievens & Highhouse, 2003). When taking a closer look at what those trait inferences are supposed to capture, it can be seen that Sincerity for instance refers to "traits related to warmth [and] acceptance" (Lievens & Highhouse, 2003, p.79), whereas Innovativeness captures the perceived excitement and novelty a job or an employer can provide. Cheerfulness observes the provided friendliness of an organization and its employer brand (Lievens, 2007) and Competence is defined by traits referred to reliability and intelligence. Finally, Prestige and Ruggedness are conceptualized as personality types linked to aspirational images of status and individualism, respectively (Lievens, 2007; Lievens & Highhouse 2003).

However, in the research done on the conceptualization of different employer brand dimensions, it can be noted, that those character-giving and personality-forming attributes are also heavily represented in the statements used to measure and form these employer brand dimensions. Berthon et al. (2005) for example capture in their study on employer brand attractiveness five dimensions, namely the Interest Value, Social Value, Economic Value, Development Value and Application Value. The scientific paper states especially the dimensions of Interest Value and Social Value capturing psychological benefits an employer brand has to offer. Interest Value is defined as “the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides an exciting work environment, novel work practice and that makes use of its employee’s creativity to produce high-quality, innovative products and services” (Berthon et al., 2005, p.159). This parallels the trait inference of Innovativeness as characterized by Lievens & Highhouse (2003). Furthermore, the Social Value dimension “assesses the extent to which an individual is attracted to an employer that provides a working environment that is fun, happy [and offers] good collegial relationships” (Berthon et al., 2005, p.159). This dimension reflects the characteristic of Cheerfulness defined by Lievens (2007) and Sincerity defined by Lievens and Highhouse (2003). Therefore, these dimensions can be classified as symbolic within the logic of the instrumental-symbolic framework. The dimensions of Application Value, Economic Value and Development Value in the context of Berthon et al.’s study (2005) are classified as functional and utilitarian dimensions and thus represent instrumental dimensions.

Contemporary research also continues to redefine and expand the dimensional structure of employer brands. Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. (2022) capture the seven employer brand dimensions Career Development Opportunities, Training and Development, Compensation and Benefits, Work-Life Balance, Work Environment, CSR and Organizational Culture. The dimensions of Career Development Opportunities and Training and Development both show clear parallels to the Development Value established by Berthon et al. (2005). In the context of the instrumental-symbolic framework used in this thesis, these attributes are considered functional and utilitarian in nature and are thus categorized as instrumental dimensions. The same applies to the Compensation and Benefits dimension of Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. (2022), which closely resembles Berthon et al.’s Economic Value. Both dimensions focus on tangible reward and therefore are classified as instrumental attributes within this framework. The dimensions of CSR and Organizational Culture (Nanjundeswaraswamy et al., 2022) both reflect aspects of the Social Value originally described by Berthon et al. (2005), as they relate to the intangible, value-based environment of an employer. Consequently, these dimensions are defined as symbolic employer brand dimensions, as they represent subjective and intangible trait inferences rather than objective functional benefits. The Interest Value is not represented in the final factor structure of Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. (2022). Instead, their dimension of Work environment is primarily described by items like “job security within the organization” and “well set policies and procedures” in a company. Another newly introduced dimension is Work-Life Balance, which is defined as a “state of equilibrium where a person equally prioritizes the demands of one’s career and the demands of one’s personal life” (Nanjundeswarasway & Nagesh, 2022, p.13). While this dimension is critical for employee well-being, its operationalization through items like “flexible working conditions” reflects a functional employment condition rather than an identity-related characteristic. It describes a practical arrangement of time and resources that enables employees to manage responsibilities effectively. In this sense, the dimension captures utilitarian and structural aspects of employment and is therefore not classified as a symbolic employer brand dimension for this thesis.

To establish a theoretically robust foundation for this thesis, the employer brand dimensions are defined and selected by integrating the research of Berthon et al. (2005) and Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. (2022) into the instrumental-symbolic framework. For the purpose of this research, three primary symbolic dimensions are utilized. They were synthesized from the established literature to capture the psychological attraction of the employer brand and to form the conceptual basis of the empirical analysis. First, Organizational Culture integrates Berthon et al.’s Social Value, emphasizing a fun, happy, and supportive social environment, with Nanjundeswaraswamy et al.’s focus on the organization valuing employee opinions and suggestions. Second, CSR is adopted from Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. to reflect the organization’s ethical reputation and humanitarian engagement, functioning as a symbolic representation of the firm's character rather than a physical job benefit. Finally, although the Work Environment dimension can often refer to structural policies, it is classified as a symbolic dimension for this study by specifically operationalizing it through the attributes of Berthon et al.’s Interest Value, which focuses on innovation, creativity, and novel work practices. This classification ensures a clear distinction between utilitarian employment conditions and identity-related characteristic attributions. Thereby it provides a modern and precise representation of the symbolic employer brand dimensions, which serve as the foundation for the research model and measurement scales applied in this thesis.

3.3. The Power of Brands

As the previous chapter discussed the theoretical concept of an employer brand, a brand especially constructed for the labor market, the following chapter takes a step back to examine brands in a broader sense. The purpose of this chapter is to explore general mechanisms that give brands their strength and influence across diverse markets. By first understanding how brands affect consumers and shape economic as well as psychological behavior, it becomes possible to later transfer these insights to the employment context.

Brands hold a unique ability to influence both financial decisions and human perception, and therefore go beyond being symbols identifying a product or company. Branding mechanisms create meaning, trust and attachment which is transforming intangible beliefs into measurable outcomes (Erdem et al., 2006; Keller, 1993; Laradi et al., 2024). The combination of economic and psychological influence explains why strong brands can maintain loyalty, justify higher prices and create lasting relationships (Bayraktar, 2015; Dwivedi et al., 2018; Leckie et al., 2023). To comprehend how brands achieve this influence, the following pages will examine economic effects of brands, their psychological foundations and how those dynamics operate when individuals interact with organizations as potential employers.

The power of a brand is rooted in the human mind long before it manifests itself in the marketplace. Brands operate through psychological processes that create familiarity, meaning and emotional connection and due to this shape how people perceive value and make decisions. They are described as networks of associations in an individual's memory, which represent attributes, emotions and experiences linked to a name or symbol (Keller, 1993). These associations guide attention and interpretation and like this influence how information about a product or company is processed (Bayraktar, 2015; Keller, 1993). When a brand repeatedly fulfills expectations, these mental networks get strengthened, making it more trusted in decision-making processes (Erdem et al., 2002; Erdem et al., 2006). Decision-making is not only a cognitive process but also an emotional one. Consistent and positive brand experiences over time foster attachment to a brand, so a feeling of connection that goes beyond functional satisfaction (Dwivedi et al., 2018; Laradi et al., 2024). Emotional bonds are being formed when a brand aligns with personal identity or reflects values that feel authentic to the consumer. Research shows that such attachment result in affection, passion and a feeling of connection that makes switching away from the brand psychologically costly (Laradi et al., 2024). When a brand becomes part of how individuals express themselves, its value extends beyond its products to a symbolic role in defining who they are. This emotional investment is one of the strongest predictors of loyalty and long-term engagement (Keller, 1993; Laradi et al., 2024; Leckie et al., 2023; Munteanu & Pagalea, 2014).

Another vital component contributing to the psychological foundation of brand power is trust. When consumers perceive a brand as reliable and consistent, they attribute credibility to it (Erdem et al., 2002; Erdem et al., 2006; Laradi et al., 2024; Leckie et al., 2023). Credibility signals that a brand will deliver on its promises reducing the feeling of perceived risk and making a poor choice. This mechanism becomes particularly important in contexts of uncertainty, where direct information about quality is limited. Erdem, Swait and Valenzuela (2006) demonstrated across multiple countries that brands act as credible signals simplifying decision-making and lowering information costs. Particularly in those situations, consumers rely on brands to provide confidence, assurance and stability. Beyond trust and attachment, brands also carry symbolic meanings that serve social and self-expressive purposes. Through the images, stories and personalities associated with them, brands communicate lifestyles and values that individuals identify with (Keller, 1993; Laradi et al., 2024; Munteanu & Pagalea, 2014). They become tools for self-expression and social differentiation, allowing individuals to signal belonging (Erdem et al., 2006; Munteanu & Pagalea, 2014). Empirical findings confirm that consumers often select brands they perceive as congruent with their self-image and in addition to that express bigger sociological constructs such as lifestyle. Thus, brands in this context operate as instruments that help consumers "to project [their] own values, life visions and life goal to the outside world" (Munteanu & Pagalea, 2014, p.106).

Taken together, the presented psychological mechanisms reveal that a brand is more than a collection of tangible attributes. It functions as a signal and source of value beyond functional benefits. When trust, attachment and meaning merge together, a brand serves as a decision-simplifying tool that reduces cognitive effort and provides an emotional anchor which fulfills psychological needs for certainty and identity. Customers no longer evaluate only the product but much more the relationship and symbolic meaning it carries and due to this the psychological mechanisms kicked off by brands form the basis for measurable economic strength.

A brand's economic power becomes particularly evident in its influence on price tolerance (Anselmsson et al., 2014; Laradi et al., 2024). From an economic perspective, this is reflected in reduced price elasticity, meaning that demand becomes less responsive to price changes (Erdem et al., 2002). Empirical research shows that loyal consumers exhibit lower price elasticity, as they tend to maintain their preferred brand choice even when prices increase or cheaper alternatives are available (Dwivedi et al., 2018; Krishnamurthi & Raj, 1991). As Krishnamurthi and Raj (1991, p. 173) state, "because of their strong preference for the brand's attributes, [loyal consumers] will choose the brand most of the time regardless of price." This indicates that strong brand-consumer relationships reduce the importance of price in purchase decisions and enable firms to exercise greater pricing power (Laradi et al., 2024; Leckie et al., 2023).

A further key indicator of a brand's economic power is its ability to increase consumers' willingness to pay a price premium. Research demonstrates that consumers are not solely guided by functional product attributes but are willing to pay higher prices for brands that convey symbolic, emotional or social value (Anselmsson et al., 2014; Dwivedi et al., 2018; Keller, 1993; Munteanu & Pagalea, 2014). Anselmsson et al. (2014) show that willingness to pay is strongly influenced by perceived uniqueness and social image, highlighting the importance of intangible brand associations. Similarly, Bayraktar (2015) finds that favorable brand associations increase willingness to pay, particularly in contexts of higher perceived value or risk. In addition, Dwivedi et al. (2018) demonstrate that positive brand experiences enhance consumers' willingness to pay by strengthening brand credibility and perceived uniqueness. This effect is not limited to consumer markets. In business contexts, brand credibility also enables firms to command higher prices, as buyers are more willing to maintain relationships with trusted partners (Leckie et al., 2023).

Taken together, these scientific findings show that willingness to pay and price premiums emerge not solely from the functional superiority of products, but from intangible meanings attached to those branded goods or services. The brand thereby transforms emotional engagement, perceived distinctiveness and psychological assurance into measurable financial advantage, enabling firms to secure higher margins and sustain their profitability even in highly competitive markets.

3.4. Compensation Power of Employer Brands

The mechanisms that make brands powerful in B2C or B2B markets, like trust, credibility and identity alignment, also shape how individuals evaluate employers or potential employers. Just as strong brands can justify higher prices, employer brands may enhance the attractiveness of job offers even when financial conditions are less competitive. Research suggests that a convincing employer brand can reduce the importance of salary in decision-making by offering symbolic value, emotional benefits and a sense of identity or purpose. Building on these parallels, the following section of this thesis examines the state of research for employer brands and their compensational strength.

Firms increasingly recognize that a strong employer brand can compensate for less favorable job conditions such as lower salary levels, as there already exist some scientific papers that investigate the compensational strength of an employer brand. One of the most comprehensive studies in this area was conducted by Tavassoli et al. (2014), who examined more than 2700 executives of U.S. companies on the question whether strong brands could pay their employees less. It was found that executives working for companies with well-established brands accepted a lower salary than those employed by weaker brands, and due to this "making it possible for firms to employ key personnel more cheaply" (p.687). The effect was particularly pronounced among CEOs and younger executives. The authors explained these findings through identity-related mechanisms like enhanced self-esteem or augmented social and professional status. Another study centering around the U.S. labor market was conducted in 2022 by Wilmers & Zhang. They examined how employers use prosocial job attributes, like CSR, organizational purpose or mission-driven work, to shape wage levels across different types of job postings. Using a large dataset of online job advertisements, they distinguished between prosocial jobs and standard postings, as well as between positions requiring a college degree and those accessible to workers without higher education. Their findings reveal a clear prosocial pay discount for college-level jobs, indicating employers offering prosocial roles consistently posted lower salaries than non-prosocial employers for otherwise comparable positions. However, this pattern did not appear in low-education jobs, where prosocial language did not reduce posted pay. Additional evidence from worker-reported salary data and hiring manager estimations confirm that this discount for prosocial college-level jobs reflects real wage-setting dynamics. Therefore, Wilmers & Zhang's results also indicate that purpose-driven attributes can meaningfully reduce compensation expectations, especially among higher educated job seekers.

Similar tendencies have been observed among employees in the South African insurance sector. Bussin and Mouton (2019) surveyed 254 employees from five firms and found that higher perceptions of employer attractiveness were associated with stronger intentions to stay as well as lower compensation expectations when considering a potential move to another employer. The article specifically mentions, "that as employees' perceptions of employer branding of their own organisations increase, their willingness to work for a lower salary (…) also increases" (p.6). The results of this particular study prove that when employees consider their employing organization as reputable, people-oriented and ethically responsible, their salary sensitivity decreases.

Further empirical support for the compensatory potential of employer brands comes from research focusing on younger generations entering the labor market, although the evidence remains mixed. Styśko-Kunkowska & Kwinta (2020) examined how materialistic tendencies influence the trade-off between salary and employer reputation among 101 Polish university students. Participants were between 20 and 38 old and from business-related programs. They were asked to choose between two job offers, one being from a strong employer brand offering a low salary and the other being from a weak employer brand offering a higher salary. The majority of respondents chose the offer with higher salary and weaker employer brand, what suggests that financial incentives continue to play a dominant role in job choice decisions among young adults. However, the study also revealed an important subgroup pattern. Individuals who displayed stronger tendencies towards identity-based brand attachment and lower levels of materialism were more likely to select the job option of unattractive salary and strong employer brand, despite its lower pay level. These participants also expected higher levels of job satisfaction when imagining themselves employed by the organization with the strong employer brand. This finding furthermore indicates that, although financial rewards remain the dominant factor for most of the young job seekers in this particular study, a subset of participants viewed working for a known and respected employer as personally rewarding and an opportunity for growth and development. A different study examining the relationship of employer brands and salary expectations was conducted by Kucherov et al. (2019). They investigated young professionals and business students in Russia using a mixed-method design of interviews and surveys. It was found that 88% of the bachelor students and 92% of the master students preferred to work for a company with a strong employer brand, even when this meant accepting a lower salary. Respondents described those companies for instance as reliable or responsible, so with attributes creating trust and reduced perceived employment risk. Thus, the study suggests that for early-career job seekers belonging to Generation Y or Z, symbolic qualities may outweigh financial incentives. Complementary findings were provided by Fairfax et al. (2023). With their study in the United States examining employees' willingness to accept lower pay for preferred employer attributes across four generations, empirical evidence was collected from 129 employees. Three attributes emerged as central to employer attractiveness, which were Opportunities of Growth and Development, Organizational Purpose and Interpersonal Relationships. Across the quantitative sample, 67% of respondents identified Opportunities of Growth and Development as their most valued attribute and Generation Z participants were more willing to accept lower pay in exchange for such opportunities than older generations. Interestingly, this willingness was even more pronounced among employees working in profitmaking business than in non-profit settings, which indicates that purpose and team climate have become attractive symbolic assets across diverse employment contexts. An overview of the discussed empirical studies and their key findings is provided in Table 2 on the next page.

Table 2: Empirical Findings on the Compensation Effect of Employer Brands

Study	Sample/ Context	Key Findings
Tavassoli et al. (2014)	U.S. (2.717 Executives)	• Executives at firms with strong brands accept substantially lower total compensation compared to those at weaker brands • Symbolic status and identification substituted for monetary rewards
Wilmers & Zhang (2022)	U.S. (9M Job Postings)	• Job postings emphasizing prosocial or purpose-driven attributes are associated with lower salaries, indicating a "prosocial pay discount" • Effect is primarily observed in college-level jobs, where highly educated candidates are more willing to accept lower pay for purpose-driven work
Bussin & Mouton (2019)	South Africa (254 Employees)	• Higher perceived employer attractiveness is associated with stronger retention intentions and lower salary expectations when considering job changes • Positive perceptions of the employer brand reduce salary sensitivity, increasing willingness to accept lower pay
Styśko-Kunkowska & Kwinta (2020)	Poland (101 Students)	• Majority of participants preferred higher-salary offers from weaker brands, indicating the dominance of financial incentives • Individuals with low materialism and strong identity-based brand attachment preferred strong employer brands despite lower pay and expected higher job satisfaction
Kucherov et al. (2019)	Russia (133 Students)	• Large majority of young professionals prefer strong employer brands, even when this involves accepting lower salaries • Trust-related brand attributes reduce perceived employment risk and can outweigh financial incentives for early-career job seekers
Fairfax et al. (2023)	U.S. (129 Employees)	• Opportunities for growth and development are the most valued attribute (Generation Z showing the highest willingness to accept lower pay in exchange) • Willingness to trade pay for purpose or team-related attributes particularly strong in for-profit settings

Overall, existing research provides considerable evidence that a strong employer brand can compensate for less favorable financial terms under certain conditions. However, the extent of this compensatory effect varies notably across individuals and generations, depending on personal values, cultural context and individual perceptions of meaning. Therefore, the employer brand functions as a multilayered and social mechanism whose ability to balance out salary differences is situational rather than universal. This highlights the need for further nuanced and methodologically robust studies that examine the ability of an employer brand to offset financial disadvantages in the job choice process.

4. Job Attractiveness & Job Pursuit Intentions

4.1. Job Attractiveness: Conceptualization & State of Research

Job Attractiveness refers to an individual's overall evaluation of how appealing a specific job is as an employment opportunity. It captures "the applicant's overall evaluation of the attractiveness of the job" (Chapman et al., 2005, p. 929) and like this reflects how desirable an open position appears based on its attributes. Job Attractiveness is influenced by the characteristics of the job, as empirical research shows that specific job attributes can influence the perceived attractiveness of a position and even increase Job Attractiveness (Schlechter et al., 2014; Schlechter et al., 2015; Valet et al., 2021).

The academic literature on Job Attractiveness provided already some substantially relevant insights, especially through experimental research designs examining how particular job attributes influence applicants' Job Attractiveness perceptions. In the following, three studies will be presented that capture the existing state of research on the influence of financial rewards, the role of non-financial rewards and the broader importance of work arrangement preferences in regard to Job Attractiveness. Together, these research studies contribute to a multidimensional understanding of how individuals evaluate job offers. Schlechter et al. (2014) investigated in their scientific work the isolated effects of financial reward components on perceived attractiveness of jobs for knowledge workers. Their field experiment demonstrated that the three financial reward elements of Remuneration, Employee Benefits and Variable Pay each significantly influenced Job Attractiveness in a positive way. Remuneration here exerted the strongest effect. They furthermore show that Variable Pay as a reward element, although attractive, is insufficient to compensate for a low base salary. This suggests that applicants prioritize stable and high Remuneration over performance-based reward elements.

A second important research strand on Job Attractiveness centers on the rising strength of non-financial rewards. Schlechter et al. (2015) extend the financial focus by experimentally testing the effects of Work-Life Balance, Learning Opportunities and Career Advancement on Job Attractiveness. Their findings clearly demonstrate that all three non-financial rewards significantly increase perceived attractiveness of job offerings and therefore constitute crucial elements of modern total reward strategies. The authors highlight that non-financial rewards have become increasingly relevant due to changes in workplace expectations and shifting employee demographics. Reward strategies need to be seen in a holistic way beyond monetary compensation. In particular, Work-Life Balance performed as the strongest attractor for participants of their South African sample, followed by Career Advancement and Learning opportunities. In the study also gender-related nuances can be seen. Women placed higher value on the presence of non-financial rewards than men.

The third article reviewed extends the reward-based perspective by examining broader job attributes and work arrangements. Valet et al. (2021) examined German and Dutch participants to determine which job characteristics individuals prioritize when choosing among competing job offers. Their study identified six critical attributes influencing Job Attractiveness, which namely were Earnings, Job Security, Training Opportunities, Scheduling Flexibility, Company Prestige and Gender Composition of the Work Team. The prioritization of those attributes revealed Job Security, meaning the presence of a permanent contract, ranking highest for German participants. To Dutch participants on the other hand Company Reputation was most important. Nevertheless, the study also showed the persistent importance of Earnings in terms of Job Attractiveness, with this factor ranking short behind Job Security and Company Reputation. Moreover, the study also identified gendered preference patterns similar to those found by Schlechter et al. (2015). Women placed greater emphasis on Scheduling Flexibility and Organizational Reputation, whereas men prioritized Earnings and a permanent contract. The cross-country comparison of the study from Valet et al. (2021) further strengthens the robustness of those findings, as similar gender patterns emerged in both Germany and Netherlands despite different labor market structures. Table 3 provides a structured summary of the reviewed studies on Job Attractiveness.

Table 3: Empirical Findings on Job Attractiveness

Study	Sample/ Context	Key Findings
Schlechter et al. (2014)	South Africa (169 Employees)	• Financial rewards strongly increase Job Attractiveness • Higher levels of Remuneration are the most influential driver of Job Attractiveness compared to other financial incentives
Schlechter et al. (2015)	South Africa (180 Employees)	• Non-financial rewards significantly increase Job Attractiveness (Work–Life Balance having the strongest effect followed by Career advancement opportunities) • Women are significantly more responsive to non-financial rewards than men, indicating stronger sensitivity to such attributes
Valet et al. (2021)	Germany (2659 Employees) Netherlands (2678 Citizens)	• Job Attractiveness is primarily driven by Job Security, Company Reputation and High Income (Job Security and Reputation emerging as strongest factors) • Preferences vary by demographics: German participants prioritize Job Security; Dutch participants emphasize Reputation; Women value Flexibility and Reputation more while men place greater importance on Earnings and Job Security

Taken together, the studies illustrate a clear trend towards multidimensional and individually differentiated job preference structures. While financial rewards continue to play a major role in shaping Job Attractiveness, they are no longer sufficient as the exclusive basis for competitive employer offers. Job seekers increasingly value non-financial rewards and broader work arrangement characteristics that for instance contribute to organizational fit.

4.2. Job Pursuit Intentions: Conceptualization & State of Research

JPI represent the action-oriented expression of a job seeker's motivation to actively follow through on an employment opportunity. While Job Attractiveness reflects a general evaluative attitude towards an open position, JPI capture the willingness to take concrete steps towards joining an organization. Sharma and Prasad (2018) explicitly include Intent to Pursue as part of candidates' overall intent to join and define this construct as the intention "to apply for a company, attend its selection process and join if selected" (p. 537). Nguyen Ngoc et al. (2022) further clarify that JPI is an active behavioral orientation describing it as job seekers "attempting actively to find out more information about the organization, its job opportunities and eventually getting a job interview" (p. 3). In combination those definitions conceptualize JPI as the readiness to act on one's attraction to an employer by progressing towards application and selection steps. This makes them the actionable counterpart to the more attitudinal construct of Job Attractiveness.

Research on JPI has increasingly focused on employer-related signals and job attribute perceptions as predictors of whether individuals move from initial attraction to behavioral actions. Across the reviewed scientific articles, two consistent themes emerge. First, that employer brand perceptions strongly shape JPI, and second, that generational and cultural contexts influence which employer attributes translate into pursuit behavior.

Sharma and Prasad (2018) provide comprehensive empirical evidence that employer brands play a decisive role in shaping candidates' JPI in the Indian IT sector. Their study identified five core dimensions of an employer brand, which together form the basis on how job seekers evaluate an employer. The dimensions they took into account were Growth and Development Opportunities, Company Reputations, Acceptance and Belongingness, Work-Life Balance and Ethics and CSR. In their research they show that an employer brand is an effective contributor to intent to join, with Company Reputation emerging as the strongest predictor, followed by Growth and Development Opportunities and Work-Life Balance. Their findings confirm that the presence of an employer brand not only enhances general attractiveness but also actively increases candidates' willingness to take concrete steps in the recruitment process.

Santiago (2019) also investigates the transition from employer brand perceptions to behavioral intentions focusing on Portuguese millennials. It was tested whether employer brand attractiveness predicts the intention to submit a job application to the organization. The empirical insights reveal an interesting difference between the quantitative and qualitative results. In the quantitative survey with future employees, several dimensions of employer brand attractiveness like Social Value, Interest Value, Development Value and Value of Cooperation were positively associated with the intention to apply, while economic factors did not significantly contribute to the consideration of pursuing a job offer. However, the qualitative interviews led to contradicting findings. Here, career progression and economic stability emerged as central concerns with respondents emphasizing that economic aspects such as salary levels and advancement opportunities were in fact important. This contrast highlights a fundamental difference between the two participant groups. Potential employees in the quantitative survey tended to downplay Economic Value as a driver of their intention to apply, whereas current employees in the interviews, already embedded in the organizational context, placed much greater weight on economic security and career development. Therefore, Santiago (2019) shows that what millennials claim to value before entering an organization does not fully align with what they prioritize once they have gained real work experience. This can be seen as an indicator for JPI to be shaped differently at various career stages.

Nguyen Ngoc et al. (2022) extend the understanding of JPI by examining how Generation Z job seekers in Vietnam form expectations about employers in a transition and emerging economy. Their findings reveal that Generation Z participants showed a stronger orientation towards intangible and symbolic attributes, like a positive Office Atmosphere or Workplace Ethics, than towards physical features. At the same time, the study shows that Generation Z evaluates organizations through both instrumental attributes, like Pay and Benefits, and symbolic ones such as CSR. It is important to note that the study highlights nuanced variations between participants with and without work experience. Students without work experience relied more heavily on symbolic cues, emphasizing ethical behavior and a supportive social environment. In contrast, participants with work experience evaluated employers in a more differentiated manner and assessed instrumental features more specifically based on their professional background. This suggests that symbolic factors play a particularly important role in shaping JPI among inexperienced job seekers, whereas work experience enables a more differentiated evaluation. A consolidated presentation of the main findings discussed in this section is displayed in Table 4.

Table 4: Empirical Findings on Job Pursuit Intentions

Study	Sample/ Context	Key Findings
Sharma & Prasad (2018)	India (380 Students)	• Five employer brand dimensions drive intention to join (Growth Opportunities, Reputation, Belonging, Work–Life Balance and Ethics/CSR) • Employer brand strength is a strong predictor of intention to join (Company Reputation identified as most influential factor)
Santiago (2019)	Portugal (180 Potential Employees; 9 Employees)	• Quantitative analysis: Economic Value did not significantly predict intention to pursue an employment opportunity • Qualitative analysis: Results showed participants valued career progression and economic stability
Nguyen Ngoc et al. (2022)	Vietnam (48 Students)	• Generation Z shows a stronger orientation towards intangible and symbolic attributes than towards instrumental job attributes • The importance of symbolic attributes is particularly pronounced among individuals without work experience; Experienced individuals evaluate employers in a more differentiated manner, considering both symbolic and instrumental factors

5. Generation Z

Generation Z, commonly defined as individuals born between the middle of the 1990s and the early 2010s, represents a generational cohort shaped by a unique constellation of sociocultural, technological and environmental forces (Andruszkiewicz et al., 2023). Growing up in a world characterized by rapid digitalization, global interconnectivity and significant societal shifts, this generation has been exposed to smartphones, social media and instant access to information from an early age. Those conditions have profoundly influenced how they communicate, learn and construct their identities (Wandhe et al., 2024). At the same time, Generation Z has reached adulthood in an era marked by ecological crises, economic uncertainty and the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. All of those factors have contributed to increased awareness of sustainability, social inequalities and the fragility of global systems (Grénman et al., 2024). These formative dynamics distinguish Generation Z from preceding generations and shape their values, expectations and worldviews across domains like social engagement, environmental concerns, work orientations and patterns of consumption (Hernandez-Arriaza et al., 2023). Understanding these influences provides an essential foundation for analyzing the beliefs and behavioral tendencies that characterize this generation.

5.1. Generational and Societal Background

A central factor shaping Generation Z's development is their exposure to a fully digitalized environment starting from early childhood. Digital technologies structure how Generation Z learns, communicates and forms identities. Growing up with continuous access to smartphones, high-speed internet and social media has normalized instant information gathering and shaped preferences for personalization and seamless as well as instant digital interactions (Wandhe et al., 2024). Algorithmically curated content streams further influence how information is consumed and interpreted, what contributes to dynamic identity exploration while simultaneously increasing exposure to social comparison, online pressure and information overload (Dokoupilová et al., 2024; Wandhe et al., 2024). These digital conditions have become foundational to everyday life for Generation Z, and deeply shape their behavioral patterns, social expectations and modes of self-expression (Andruszkiewicz et al., 2023).

Globalization represents another significant sociocultural influence on Generation Z. The maturing in an environment where multicultural exposure and cross-border information flows are easily accessible encourages inclusive attitudes and openness towards cultural diversity (Wandhe et al., 2024). Survey data from Spanish Generation Z university students reveal that most participants view immigration and globalization positively, especially in terms of cultural enrichment and economic contributions (Hernandez-Arriaza et al., 2023). Continuous exposure to international challenges, like climate change, migration and inequality, further deepens the global awareness and reinforces Generation Z's tendency towards critical reflection and social engagement (Grénman et al., 2024; Hernandez-Arriaza et al., 2023).

Beyond digitalization and globalization, Generation Z's worldview has also been shaped by a series of societal crises that unfolded during their formative years. The ecological crisis, which is characterized by accelerating climate change, biodiversity loss and concerns about planetary limits, has become a defining reference point for this cohort. Particularly because they grew up with continuous media coverage of environmental risks and the expectation that their generation will face the long-term consequences of environmental degradation (Andurszkiewicz et al., 2023; Grénman et al., 2024). Increased awareness of ecological threats has fostered strong environmental concerns, more support for sustainability initiatives and a pronounced sense of moral responsibility towards nature and future generations (Andurszkiewicz et al., 2023; Fuchs et al., 2024; Grénman et al., 2024). The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified this sensitivity to global risks by disrupting education, social life and economic stability, which reinforces perceptions of vulnerability and highlights the importance of health, community and psychological well-being (Wandhe et al., 2024). Experiencing these overlapping crises has encouraged many members of Generation Z to question traditional notions of material prosperity and to orient their understanding of a good life towards balance, meaningful relationships and a sustainable lifestyle rooted in long-term well-being rather than consumption (Grénman et al., 2024).

5.2. Values and Beliefs

The values and beliefs of Generation Z reflect the conditions of their upbringing in digitally connected, globally exposed and crisis shaped environments. Research shows that this cohort's orientations differ from those of previous ones, in combining a strong desire for autonomy and personal development with the awareness of social and environmental challenges. Their value system is shaped by the interplay of individual aspirations, concerns related to wellbeing and expectations for fairness and meaningful engagement across different life domains (Jayatissa, 2023).

A reoccurring theme across studies is the emphasis that Generation Z puts on independence, autonomy and self-responsibility. The constant and unrestricted access to information when growing up and the freedom in shaping their online and offline identities has cultivated a preference for autonomy in decision-making and self-directed learning (Zahra et al., 2025). Many members of this generation seek opportunities for growth, flexibility and the ability to influence their own development paths in education and work (Fuchs et al., 2024). Therefore, autonomy is a fundamental belief that shapes individuals' evaluations and interactions.

At the same time, Generation Z places considerable importance on emotional wellbeing, stability and balance. Experiences of economic uncertainty and the societal disruptions associated with COVID-19 have contributed to stronger expectations for environments that support psychological safety, protect mental health and offer balanced workloads that do not exceed personal capacities (Grénman et al., 2024). Those beliefs extend into their work preferences. Positions that compromise mental health or personal life are viewed critically, while organizations that prioritize supportive cultures and respect are perceived more positively (Zahra et al., 2025).

Social relationships also play an important role in Generation Z's value landscape. They appreciate trustworthy, respectful and collaborative interactions. However, trust is not assumed but must be earned through competence and reliability rather than through formal authority or hierarchy (Lazányi & Bilan, 2017). This reflects a broader belief that relationships, whether at work or in personal life, should be based on authenticity and mutual respect.

Another key element shaping Generation Z's values is their interest in experiences, enjoyment and novelty. Young adults often attach importance to stimulation, which results in pursuing activities and opportunities that offer variation or creativity (Dokoupilová et al., 2024; Jayatissa, 2023). This does not necessarily imply a lack of seriousness, but a preference for environments that feel dynamic and meaningful. Personal achievement also plays a role as many members of Generation Z are motivated by the desire to accomplish goals, develop competencies and gain recognition for their efforts (Fuchs et al. 2024).

Understanding Generation Z's unique value orientations emphasizes why this cohort requires separate attention in employer brand research. Since the prioritization of employer attractiveness factors depends on the generation, a principle also already established for previous cohorts (Reis & Braga, 2016), employer brands must be interpreted from the perspective of experiences and needs that are specific to each cohort. Consequently, analyzing Generation Z as a distinct segment is essential to identify the dimensions that resonate most strongly with this group and to optimize organizational recruitment outcomes.

5.3. Employer Attractiveness and Generation Z

Current research across European and international contexts demonstrates that Generation Z evaluates employer brands and employer attractiveness through a consistent yet multilayered set of expectations. While the exact weighting of employer brand dimensions varies by study and national context, empirical patterns generally point to a dominance of Social Value, followed by development and career-related opportunities, economic benefits, work environment characteristics, Work-Life Balance and CSR.

As this thesis focuses on the role and relative importance of symbolic employer brand dimensions in comparison to monetary incentives, the following review adopts a broader perspective by incorporating all major employer attractiveness dimensions identified in prior research. This allows for a comprehensive understanding of how symbolic attributes are positioned within overall employer preferences.

The literature consistently shows that Social Value represents one of the strongest and most important drivers of employer attractiveness for Generation Z. It for instance includes parameters like Organizational Culture and Collegial Climate. Lassleben and Hofmann (2023) identify a fun work environment, a positive team atmosphere and supportive relations with colleagues and superiors as the highest ranked employer brand dimension among German Generation Z students. Similar findings appear in cross-cultural contexts. Eger et al. (2019) report that Czech business students place the greatest importance on supportive colleagues, good relationships with supervisors and an enjoyable atmosphere. Similarly, in the Portuguese context, university students ranked Social Value as their most important work value, prioritizing it over intrinsic and extrinsic dimensions (Silva & Carvalho, 2021). Even in more specialized industries this motivation pattern holds. Kapuściński et al. (2023) show in their focus group interviews that applicants derive considerable psychological benefits from supportive colleagues and a team driven environment. In their internalized value structure Social Value plays a vital role.

Development Value forms the second most important dimension. Across the reviewed studies, there is broad agreement that opportunities for learning, skill growth and career progression play a substantial role in shaping young applicants' employer preferences. However, the specific components included under this dimension differ noticeably between authors. Several studies adopt a broad conceptualization, merging short-term learning, recognition and long-term advancement into one holistic construct. For instance, Lassleben and Hofmann (2023) frame Development Value as a combination of learning opportunities, recognition and potential for advancement. While this dimension does not appear among the very top ranked attributes in their German sample, holding a mid-level position relative to Social Value or Work-Life Balance, it nevertheless emerges as an aspect that Gen Z expects employers to provide reliably. Other researchers distinguish more sharply between immediate skill acquisition and future-oriented career advancement. Lukić Nikolić and Lazarević (2023) find that career advancement opportunities constitute the highest rated employer attribute among Serbian Generation Z students. Similarly, Dzhulai et al. (2022) show that Ukrainian Generation Z prioritizes training and continuous development as the foremost element of employer attractiveness when evaluating internship opportunities. Those quantitative research findings are again reinforced by qualitative research findings, where Generation Z confirmed the importance of development opportunities within their value structure (Kapuściński et al., 2023).

Compensation and the Economic Value hold a moderate but mentionable importance for Generation Z. For Serbian students, the salary amount ranks fifth behind development opportunities and Social Value (Lukić Nikolić & Lazarević, 2023). This can be seen as an indicator for pay being a relevant but not primary motivator among young job seekers. Similarly, Lassleben and Hofmann (2023) show Economic Value ranking behind Social Value and Work-Life Balance for the German student sample. However, with this position and a mean score well above the scale’s midpoint, it remains a notable foundation for employer attractiveness. From the reviewed studies, salary and other material benefits ranked worst for Croatian students of Gen Z, with the second to last position among presented factors of employer attractiveness (Ružić & Benazić, 2023). In contrast to this, Dzhulai et al. 2022 showed compensation being one of the most important employer brand components for students in Ukraine and a study on workplace motivation among Canadian service-sector employees provided evidence for extrinsic rewards remaining an essential motivator for young workers (Mahmoud et al., 2021). Taken together, these varying results illustrate that although compensation does not uniformly dominate Generation Z’s employer preferences and “money is not the only priority for them” (Pandita, 2022, p. 556), the motivational impact of Economic Value remains significant across contexts.

Another upper-mid ranked component of employer attractiveness is the Interest Value. Across papers it is conceptualized as exciting and stimulating tasks, innovative work and intrinsic motivation. Several studies underline the relevance of this employer brand factor. Eger et al. (2019) report Interest Value as the second highest dimension for employer attractiveness in the Czech Republic, and also for Portuguese Generation Z students’ intrinsic motivation is in second place regarding their work values and job preferences (Silva & Carvalho, 2021). Those results find similar support in the Serbian context, where an interesting working environment is identified as an important employer brand attribute (Lukić Nikolić & Lazarević, 2023), which signals that young job seekers value engaging tasks, creativity and meaningful work content across different nations. Mahmoud et al. (2021) provide additional evidence that intrinsic motivation is a significant generational characteristic of Generation Z, shaping their broader workplace motivation. Despite the presented indications of relevance, studies also show Interest Value remaining less influential than Social Value, Development Value and Economic Value in samples for Germany (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023). Other research, such as the study by Dzhulai et al. (2022), does not prominently feature this dimension in its primary findings.

Work-Life Balance emerges as an increasingly relevant dimension, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic. Lassleben and Hofmann (2023) explicitly included this factor as an additional employer brand dimension. It was found that Generation Z in their German sample ranked flexible working hours and options for remote work as very high in their importance, whereas work-life balance services, like leisure activities offered by a potential employer, or opportunities for a sabbatical turned out to be a positive add on but not essential to provide. Other studies do not treat Work-Life Balance as a separate factor, but reflect Generation Z's preference for flexible working hours. In the Serbian context Flexible Working Hours ranked in importance right behind Social Value, Development Value and Economic Value (Lukić Nikolić & Lazarević, 2023). A similar pattern appeared for Generation Z in the Ukraine. Schedule flexibility in their internship ranked behind training opportunities and salary level, indicating early career expectations of autonomy and time management (Dzhulai et al., 2022). Furthermore, human resource professionals noted the preference for a flexible work environment as one of the drivers for employer attractiveness (Pandita, 2022). Together these findings position Work-Life Balance as a second-tier but increasingly decisive factor.

CSR appears as a consistently lower ranked component of employer brand attractiveness for Generation Z. Ethical behavior and societal contribution appear in several of the reviewed studies behind the above mentioned, more dominant values and benefits. In a German context, the attribute of being a responsible organization received only the seventh place out of eight dimensions, suggesting that while Generation Z acknowledges organizational responsibility, it does not serve as a decisive criterion when for instance compared to interpersonal climate or other dimensions (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023). A similar pattern emerges in the Croatian study by Ružić and Benazić (2023). The factor Organization's Market Orientation is ranked last among all attractiveness dimensions. In their presented framework, Market Orientation captures the organization's broader strategic orientation towards customers, innovation and external stakeholder. Those elements reflect a company's societal engagement and ethical standpoint. Similarly, in the Serbian context, CSR does not emerge as a key driver of employer attractiveness for Generation Z (Lukić Nikolić & Lazarević, 2023). Other studies however introduce important nuances. Silva and Carvalho (2021) find that meaningful work, conceptualized as part of the intrinsic value dimension, holds the second rank right behind Social Value for Portuguese Generation Z students. Qualitative research insights further highlight that Generation Z is motivated by community contribution and seeks employers whose values align with broader societal and ethical commitments (Pandita, 2022). Consequently, it can be stated that CSR and ethical orientations rarely constitute top-ranked motivators for Generation Z when selecting an employer. However, this dimension contributes to employer brand attractiveness by aligning organizational identity with young people's desire for meaningful and socially responsible work.

Gender-related patterns in work value orientations persist within Generation Z, with studies indicating that young women often maintain higher expectations toward employers than their male counterparts. Research consistently shows that Social Value is rated significantly higher by women, emphasizing their preference for supportive team climates and positive interpersonal relations (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023). A similar gap exists regarding CSR. Women in both German and Czech samples valued the attribute of being a responsible organization significantly more than men (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023). In contrast, the Interest Value, which captures a preference for innovation, creativity, and exciting tasks, does not differ significantly between genders. Both Lassleben and Hofmann (2023) and Eger et al. (2019) reported no significant differences between male and female participants for this dimension, indicating a shared importance of engaging work environments. Finally, a nuanced perspective is provided by Silva and Carvalho (2021). They found that Portuguese women rated almost all work value dimensions higher than men. Despite these generally higher value orientations among women, a persistent gap remains in practical outcomes. In the same study, men still maintained significantly higher starting salary expectations than women.

An overview of the reviewed literature from this chapter is provided in Table 5 on the following page.

Table 5: Empirical Findings on Generation Z and Employer Preferences

Study	Sample/ Context	Key Findings
Lassleben & Hofmann (2023)	Germany (308 Students)	• Social Value as primary driver of employer attractiveness for Generation Z, followed by Work–Life Balance and Economic Value • Women assign significantly higher importance to social, development, application, and work–life balance factors than men • No significant gender differences observed for Economic Value and Interest Value
Eger et al. (2019)	Czech Republic (281 Students)	• Social Value as most important driver of employer attractiveness, followed by interest and economic/development-related attributes • Women assign higher importance to most employer attractiveness dimensions (Social/ Development/ Application/ Economic Value) • No significant gender differences observed for Interest Value
Silva & Carvalho (2021)	Portugal (3349 Students)	• Generation Z prioritizes social values most strongly, followed by intrinsic and then extrinsic work values • Female participants rate all work-related dimensions higher than males • Male participants report significantly higher salary expectations
Kapuściński et al. (2023)	UK (40 Hospitality Management Students)	• Generation Z evaluates employers based on three core value structures: psychological, development, and social value • Key priorities include mental well-being, career progression, self-fulfilment, and social connections • Salary is viewed as a means to support psychological well-being rather than a primary driver
Lukić Nikolić & Lazarević (2023)	Serbia (339 Students)	• Generation Z prioritizes pleasant and interesting work environment far over CSR • Salary holds moderate importance, ranking behind development opportunities and social values
Dzhulai et al. (2022)	Ukraine (1341 Students)	• Generation Z students prioritize training opportunities and salary as the most important factors when evaluating internship opportunities • Schedule flexibility is also a key driver, with a strong preference for hybrid work formats
Pandita (2022)	India (21 HR Professionals)	• Generation Z attracted to innovative and flexible work environments that emphasize collaboration and community-oriented values • Financial rewards alone are not a primary motivator, as Gen Z places greater importance on flexibility, independence, diversity, and meaningful work
Ružić & Benazić (2023)	Croatia (220 Students)	• Generation Z prioritizes career advancement as most important driver of employer attractiveness, followed by positive relationships with colleagues and a fun work environment • Salary and material benefits rank among least important factors compared to social and development-related attributes
Mahmoud et al. (2021)	Canada (1349 Employees)	• Generation Z is strongly driven by intrinsic motivation, particularly the desire for meaningful and engaging work • At the same time, extrinsic rewards such as pay and benefits remain important and act as valid motivators • Generation Z requires a combination of meaningful work and tangible rewards to feel motivated

6. Research Questions and Hypotheses

As the competition for qualified talent particularly among younger cohorts entering the labor market has intensified, the research of this thesis centers around the following research questions and hypotheses. In response to the growing strategic relevance of employer brands, this study specifically focuses on the role of symbolic employer brand dimensions and their potential to offset disadvantages in monetary compensation during the job choice process. The investigated symbolic employer brand dimensions include CSR, Organizational Culture and Work Environment, as conceptually derived from the integration of Berthon et al. (2005) and Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. (2022) within the instrumental-symbolic framework (see Chapter 3.2.). By examining their effects on Job Attractiveness and JPI, this thesis aims to assess whether symbolic employer brand dimensions can function as a compensatory mechanism when salary levels are moderately lower. In addition, this study adopts a generational perspective by explicitly examining Generation Z and their distinct value orientations and expectations towards employers.

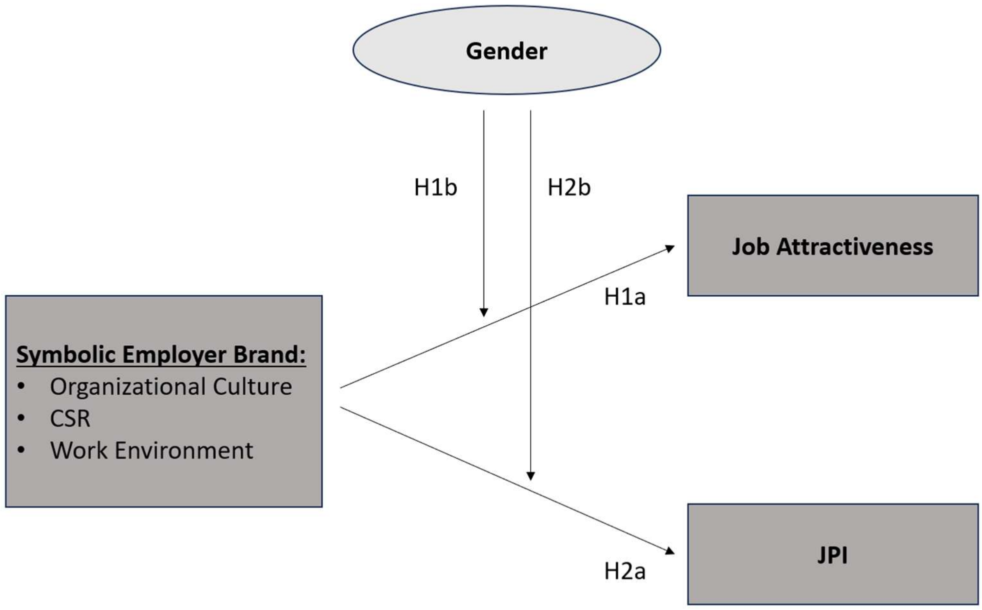
6.1. Research Question 1 and Hypotheses

Research Question 1 (RQ1) of this thesis addresses the compensatory potential of symbolic employer brand dimensions in the context of monetary trade-offs.

RQ1: Do symbolic employer brand dimensions have the power to compensate for moderately lower salary in terms of Job Attractiveness and JPI?

To empirically investigate this question a conceptual research model was developed. Within the model, the symbolic employer brand dimensions of CSR, Organizational Culture and Work Environment are expected to positively influence Generation Z's perceptions of Job Attractiveness and their intentions to pursue an employment opportunity with an organization, even under conditions of moderately lower financial compensation. The research model incorporates gender as a moderator. Figure 1 provides an overview of the proposed research model underlying RQ1.

Figure 1: Research Model RQ1



Based on this model and the existing state of research presented in previous chapters, the following four Hypotheses were derived.

H1a: The presence of symbolic employer brand dimensions can compensate for moderately lower salary in terms of Job Attractiveness.

Prior research has shown, that non-financial and symbolic attributes play an increasingly important role in shaping how attractive an employment opportunity is perceived to be (Schlechter et al., 2015; Valet et al., 2021). On top of that, studies demonstrate that the presence of a strong employer brand has the power to lower salary expectations (Bussin & Mouton, 2019; Fairfax et al., 2023; Kucherov et al., 2019; Tavassoli et al., 2014). Nevertheless, research is not entirely in agreement about the power of non-financial employer brand attributes and dimensions. Some research findings also show the dominance of financial rewards over the effect an employer brand has on a potential employee, as well as the motivational strength financial rewards supposedly have on Generation Z (Dzhulai et al., 2022; Mahmoud et al., 2021; Schlechter et al., 2014; Styśko-Kunkowska & Kwinta, 2020).

H1b: The compensatory effect of symbolic employer brand dimensions on Job Attractiveness is stronger for women than men.

The rationale for this hypothesis stems from observed gender differences in work value orientations and salary expectations. Empirical research indicates that women often assign significantly higher importance to non-financial and symbolic attributes, such as Social Value, Company Reputation and Work-Life Balance, compared to men (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Valet et al., 2021). This is further supported by experimental evidence demonstrating that the presence of non-financial rewards has a statistically more pronounced, positive effect on Job Attractiveness for women than for men (Schlechter et al., 2015). Furthermore, evidence suggests that women frequently report lower initial salary expectations while placing a higher value on intrinsic job qualities (Silva & Carvalho, 2021). This distinct preference structure provides a theoretical basis for the assumption that symbolic employer brand dimensions may more effectively offset lower financial compensation for female candidates than for male ones. Consequently, it is hypothesized that gender acts as a moderator in this compensatory relationship.

H2a: The presence of symbolic employer brand dimensions can compensate for moderately lower salary in terms of JPI.

Extending the compensatory effect to action-related recruitment outcomes, H2a focuses on JPI. Research suggests that employer brand dimensions, such as Growth Opportunities, Work-Life Balance and Organizational Ethics significantly increase an individual’s intention to join an organization (Sharma & Prasad, 2018). Specifically for the younger generation, quantitative evidence indicates that symbolic dimensions exert a significant positive influence on application intentions, whereas Economic Value, including above-average salary, is often a less significant predictor (Santiago, 2019). Furthermore, qualitative findings confirm that Generation Z talents prioritize intangible and symbolic attributes over instrumental ones regarding JPI (Nguyen Ngoc et al., 2022). This suggests that symbolic attributes can effectively offset less competitive pay levels in driving JPI.

H2b: The compensatory effect of symbolic employer brand dimensions on JPI is stronger for women than men.

Building on the gender-specific moderation for Job Attractiveness, H2b examines whether these differences in the hypothesized compensatory effect translate into action-oriented behavior. The established psychological link between organizational attitude and behavioral intent suggests that the same drivers influencing perceived attractiveness also shape an individual’s decision to actively pursue a position (Schlechter et al., 2015; Sharma & Prasad, 2018; Valet et al., 2021). Given that women demonstrate a significantly higher responsiveness to symbolic cues and non-financial rewards compared to men, it is hypothesized that symbolic employer brand dimensions offset moderately lower financial compensation more effectively for female candidates when forming JPI. Furthermore, this contributes to conceptual consistency in examining the role of gender within the scope of this study.

6.2. Research Question 2 and Hypotheses

While RQ1 examines the compensatory potential of symbolic employer brand dimensions in the context of monetary trade-offs, Research Question 2 (RQ2) shifts the focus towards the relative importance of the individual symbolic employer brand dimensions for Generation Z. Given the generational specificity of work values and employer expectations, understanding which symbolic dimensions are perceived as most and least important by Generation Z is essential for both, theoretical differentiation and practical employer brand strategies. Accordingly, the second research question is formulated as follows.

RQ2: Which symbolic employer brand dimensions are most important to Generation Z?

Just like for the first research question the investigated symbolic employer brand dimensions are Organizational Culture, CSR and Work Environment (see Chapter 3.2.). Based on the existing state of research the following hypotheses were derived.

H3a: Organizational Culture is the most important symbolic employer brand dimension to Generation Z.
H3b: CSR is the least important symbolic employer brand dimension to Generation Z.

Existing research largely suggests that Organizational Culture represents the most critical symbolic employer brand dimension for Generation Z, while CSR is often perceived as less decisive in direct employer evaluations. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that a positive working atmosphere, supportive interpersonal relationships and a strong team culture, frequently operationalized as Social Value, are rated higher than other symbolic dimensions by young job seekers (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Silva & Carvalho, 2021). In contrast, CSR-related attributes are frequently ranked at the lower end of employer brand dimensions, indicating that societal and humanitarian orientations, although positively perceived, are not the primary drivers of employer choice for Generation Z (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Ružić & Benazić, 2023). Nevertheless, research does not present a uniform hierarchy of these dimensions. Several studies indicate that Interest Value, referring to the inherent nature of creativity and excitement of tasks, can be ranked similarly to or even above Social Value regarding its motivational impact on Generation Z (Lukić Nikolić & Lazarević, 2023; Mahmoud et al., 2021). Furthermore, the conceptualization of the employer brand remains inconsistent across the literature, as dimensions like CSR are not treated as independent factors in all research models (Mahmoud et al., 2021; Silva & Carvalho, 2021). By investigating the relative weights of those dimensions, this thesis aims to address these existing discrepancies and provide a clearer understanding of the specific preference structure of Generation Z.

Beyond the overall ranking of symbolic employer brand dimensions, research suggests that gender-specific work value orientations significantly influence how Generation Z job seekers prioritize the individual dimensions. Previous studies indicate that women and men differ in the importance assigned to social and ethical aspects, justifying the inclusion of gender as a differentiating factor (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Valet et al., 2021). Specifically female talents tend to assign higher importance to social and relational aspects of work than male potential employees (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Silva & Carvalho, 2021;). Similar patterns exist for CSR-related dimensions and ethical orientations, which are valued higher by women (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Valet et al., 2021). In contrast, the valuation of Interest Value, referring to the creativity and excitement of tasks, is frequently found to be gender-neutral, reflecting a shared desire for stimulating work across this cohort (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023). Based on these findings the last three hypotheses of this thesis were derived.

H3c: The symbolic employer brand dimension of Organizational Culture is valued higher by women than men.
H3d: The symbolic employer brand dimension of CSR is valued higher by women than men.
H3e: The symbolic employer brand dimension of Work Environment is valued equally by men and women.

7. Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach used to investigate the research questions and hypotheses of this study. The objective was two-sided. First, the study examined whether symbolic employer brand dimensions could compensate for a moderately lower salary level in terms of Job Attractiveness and JPI. Second, Generation Z's preferences on symbolic employer brand dimensions were investigated. The chapter provides a detailed overview on research design, experimental structure and operational framework of the conducted study.

7.1. Study Design and Experimental Setup

The study employed a quantitative, cross-sectional research design implemented through an online survey. The survey software used was SoSci Survey. Within the online questionnaire, two complementary methodological approaches were integrated. To examine RQ1, so potential compensatory effects between symbolic employer brand dimensions and salary level, the study utilized an experimental vignette methodology. This method allowed the systematic manipulation of specific attributes within a realistic scenario, while holding all other elements constant (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). To address RQ2 and analyze the relative importance of symbolic employer brand dimensions among Generation Z, a within-subject preference assessment was conducted in a separate section of the questionnaire. Although both components were administered within the same survey, they followed distinct methodological logics. The full questionnaire is provided in Appendix A.

After passing the initial eligibility screening of the online survey, participants were first presented a standardized vignette scenario. They were asked to imagine that they had recently completed a degree in Business Administration or a closely related field and were about to evaluate a job advertisement from a fictitious company. This introductory scenario was included to place all respondents in a comparable cognitive frame and to ensure that subsequent evaluations were made from a similar perspective. Such standardization is especially important in between-person experimental designs, as it provides a similar contextual background for all participants and helps to ground responses contextually. It reduces uncontrolled variance coming from differing personal situations (Aguinis & Bradley, 2014). Following this vignette introduction, participants were shown one job advertisement for the position of a Junior Business Analyst. The role was intentionally designed as an entry-level position with a broad responsibility scope and non-technical requirements to ensure relevance for a wide range of respondents. The company described in the advertisement was fictitious in order to eliminate potential confounding effects related to prior familiarity, reputation or pre-existing brand perceptions.

The experimental setup followed a 2x2 factorial between-subjects design. Two independent variables were manipulated within the job advertisement. First, symbolic employer brand information was either present or absent. In the conditions, where it was present, a paragraph described the organization as socially responsible, characterized by a positive Organizational Culture and providing an innovative Work Environment. In the other conditions, this descriptive paragraph was not embedded into the job description. Second, salary level was manipulated by describing the offered remuneration as either benchmarked according to industry standards or moderately above them. This structure resulted in four distinctive versions of the job description (see Appendix B). Each participant was randomly assigned to one of the four conditions using the randomization function of SoSci Survey. This randomization procedure was implemented to strengthen internal validity (Keele et al., 2012). As each respondent evaluated only one version of the job advertisement, the experimental component followed a between-subjects design for the data collection of RQ1. After carefully reading the job description, participants were asked to evaluate it in terms of Job Attractiveness and JPI. Furthermore, attention and manipulation checks were implemented to ensure data quality and verify that the experimental manipulations were perceived as intended.

Upon completion of the experimental evaluation, participants proceeded to a clearly separated section of the survey. They were explicitly instructed that the following questions and statements referred to their general expectations regarding a potential employer and should be answered independently of the fictitious job advertisement they just evaluated. In this section, all participants rated the importance of statements representing the symbolic employer brand dimensions of Organizational Culture, CSR and Work Environment. Because each respondent evaluated all three dimensions, this part of the study followed a within-subject design. This structure enabled direct comparison of the relative importance of different symbolic employer brand dimensions within individuals and allowed the identification of preference patterns within Generation Z. The final section of the survey included demographic and control variables.

Overall, the study design combined experimental manipulation for testing compensatory effects with a within-subject preference assessment for identifying generational employer brand priorities while maintaining a coherent and logically structured survey design.

7.2. Sample and Data Collection

The target population of this study were members of Generation Z. In line with commonly used definitions, Generation Z was defined as individuals born from 1995 until the early 2010s

(Dzhulai et al., 2022; Fairfax et al., 2023; Kapuściński et al., 2022; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Pandita, 2022; Silva & Carvalho, 2021). To ensure that all participants were adults from a legal perspective at the time of data collection, eligibility was restricted to individuals aged 18 to 30 years. Participants outside this age range were not able to proceed with the survey.

Data was collected by using the online research platform Prolific, which provides access to pre-screened participant pools and allows researchers to define specific eligibility criteria. Prolific has been shown to provide high quality data comparable to or exceeding other online panels in terms of reliability and attention rates (Palan & Schitter, 2018; Peer et al., 2017). Therefore, the use of Prolific was considered appropriate for recruiting a targeted and diverse sample of Generation Z respondents. Within Prolific, pre-screening filters were set to restrict participation to individuals currently residing in Germany or Austria and aged between 18 and 30 years. Geographic restriction was implemented to ensure a comparable labor market context across participants, as salary perceptions, employment standards and employer brand norms may vary substantially across countries. Limiting the sample to two culturally and economically similar countries enhanced internal validity by reducing uncontrolled cross-national variance. At the time of data collection, 4.183 eligible and recently active participants matched these criteria on Prolific.

To participate in the study, respondents were required to provide informed consent before accessing the questionnaire. Participation was entirely voluntary and respondents could withdraw at any time without penalty. All responses were collected anonymously and no personally identifiable information was recorded. Participants were compensated with 0.65 pounds for completing the survey, in accordance with Prolific's compensation standards. After accepting the study on Prolific, participants were redirected via an external survey link to the questionnaire hosted on SoSci Survey. The survey followed a structured sequence beginning with eligibility screening and concluding with demographic questions (see Appendix A). Additional eligibility criteria and data quality procedures were implemented within the survey to ensure the integrity and validity of the collected data. A detailed description of these procedures and the applied exclusion criteria is provided in section 7.4. of this thesis.

7.3. Measurement Instruments

All constructs were measured using established scales adapted to the context of job advertisement evaluation and employer preference research. Unless otherwise stated, responses were recorded using 5-point Likert scales.

Job Attractiveness was measured using a five-item scale adapted from the organizational attraction scale developed by Highhouse et al. (2003) and later applied in recruitment research for instance by Schlechter et al. (2014). The items were reformulated to refer specifically to the construct of Job Attractiveness rather than to organizational attractiveness in general.

JPI were assessed using a five-item scale, again originally developed by Highhouse et al. (2003), to measure applicant's intentions to pursue employment with an organization. The scale captures action-oriented intentions related to applying for and accepting a job and has been widely applied in employer brand research (Santiago, 2019; Sharma & Prasad, 2018). The items were adapted to refer specifically to the construct of JPI based on the presented fictitious job description rather than intentions to pursue an attractive organization in general.

The measurement of the three symbolic employer brand dimensions was primarily based on the Employer Attractiveness Scale developed by Berthon et al. (2005), a widely established instrument in employer brand research. To ensure conceptual completeness and incorporate more recent developments in employer brand measurement, selected items were complemented using the validated scale by Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. (2022), particularly for the dimension of CSR.

CSR was measured using five items derived from Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. (2022). Organizational Culture was assessed using six items, mainly based on Berthon et al. (2005) and supplemented with additional items from Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. (2022). Work Environment was measured using five items primarily derived from Berthon et al. (2005) and complemented where conceptually appropriate with items from Nanjundeswaraswamy et al. (2022).

7.4. Data Quality Assurance

To ensure data integrity and internal validity, several procedural controls were put in place. These included automatic exclusion mechanisms within the survey, additional exclusion criteria applied during data cleaning and a pilot study conducted prior to the main data collection.

Within the survey, respondents were automatically screened out if they did not provide informed consent, indicated an age outside the predefined range of 18 to 30 years, reported less than an intermediate English proficiency or failed an instructional attention check. Any of the just recalled criteria resulted in immediate termination of the survey.

Further exclusion criteria were applied during the data cleaning process. First, manipulation checks were implemented to verify whether participants perceived the experimental manipulations as intended. Two separate items assessed the perceived presence of symbolic employer brand information and the perceived salary level. Participants who failed to perceive the experimental manipulation as intended were excluded from further analyses. Second, responses were removed if participants indicated a country of residence other than Austria or Germany, despite the Prolific pre-screening criteria. Third, participants selecting “diverse” or “prefer not to say” for the gender control variable were excluded from the final analytical sample. As gender was specified as a moderating variable in the research model and corresponding hypotheses, a binary categorization into female and male respondents was required to ensure statistical comparability between groups.

Prior to the main study, a pilot test was conducted with 14 participants to evaluate clarity, structure and technical functionality of the survey instrument. Feedback from the pretest led to minor orthographic corrections, a shortening and neutral reformulation of the introduction text to reduce potential priming effects, and the activation of backward navigation to allow participants revisiting the fictitious job advertisement. Suggestions to remove potentially redundant measurement items were not implemented, as the study relied on established and validated scales and conceptual consistency was prioritized.

8. Results and Data Analysis

The following chapter outlines the empirical results of the conducted study. It begins with a description of the final sample and subsequently presents the statistical analyses performed to test the proposed hypotheses for RQ1 and RQ2.

8.1. Sample Description

A total of 214 cases were initially imported into SPSS. Of those, 11 cases contained no valid responses due to automatic termination within the survey flow, resulting in 203 cases eligible for data cleaning. After applying the predefined exclusion criteria described in section 7.4., 62 more cases needed to be excluded during the data cleaning. The final analytical sample for RQ1 therefore consisted of N = 141 respondents. The demographic characteristics of this final sample are presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Sample Characteristics

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Female	44	31,2
	Male	97	68,8
Country	Austria	6	4,3
	Germany	135	95,7
Education	High School Diploma	50	35,5
	Bachelor’s degree	51	36,2
	Master’s degree	32	22,7
	Doctoral degree	4	2,8
	Other	4	2,8
Work experience	None	21	14,9
	Less than 1 year	33	23,4
	1-3 years	49	34,8
	More than 3 years	38	27,0
Age		**M** = 24,79	**SD** = 3,42

The sample consisted of 68.8% male and 31.2% female respondents. The majority of participants resided in Germany, with a smaller proportion from Austria. The mean age was 24.79 years, which is consistent with the defined Generation Z age range. With regard to education, most respondents held either a Bachelor’s degree or a High School Diploma, followed by a smaller proportion with a Master’s degree. In terms of professional experience, the majority of participants reported between one and three years of experience, while only a small share had no prior work experience.

8.2. Data Analysis Research Question 1

8.2.1. Preliminary Analysis

Prior to hypothesis testing, preliminary analyses were conducted to examine the distribution of participants across experimental conditions, the reliability of the measurement scales, the descriptive statistics of the dependent variables and the manipulation checks via an independent samples t-test.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions following the 2x2 factorial design. The distribution across conditions was relatively balanced, as presented in Table 7. The comparable group sizes indicate successful random assignment.

Table 7: Distribution of Participants Across Experimental Conditions

Variable	Category	N	%
Condition	C1 (strong employer brand & strong salary)	44	31,2
	C2 (strong employer brand & weak salary)	36	25,5
	C3 (weak employer brand & strong salary)	30	21,3
	C4 (weak employer brand & weak salary)	31	22,0

An additional cross-tabulation analysis of gender and experimental condition confirmed that both male and female participants were represented across all four conditions. In condition 1, 27 male and 17 female respondents were assigned. In condition 2, 23 male and 13 female respondents and in condition 3, 26 male and 4 female respondents completed the survey. For condition 4, 21 male and 10 female individuals participated successfully. Although the overall sample comprised more male participants, gender was distributed across all experimental groups.

The construct variables Job Attractiveness (JAT) and Job Pursuit Intentions (JPI) were computed as mean indices by averaging the respective five scale items for each respondent. Thus, each participant's scale score for JAT and JPI represents the arithmetic mean of the corresponding items, resulting in a continuous measure ranging from one to five. The aggregation of multiple items into a single scale score is standard practice in construct measurement, as multi-item scales reduce random measurement error and provide a more reliable representation of the underlying construct compared to single-item measures. Prior to scale computation, one negatively worded item within the Job Attractiveness scale was reverse-coded (JAT_2_R) to ensure directional consistency.

The internal consistency of both scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, based on the final cleaned sample (N = 141). Evaluating reliability before proceeding to hypothesis testing is recommended to ensure that items consistently measure the same latent construct. Job Attractiveness demonstrated excellent reliability with α = 0.89 and JPI likewise showed excellent internal consistency (α = 0.89). In both cases, all items contributed adequately to the respective scale, and no item removal was necessary. Job Attractiveness yielded a mean of M = 3.52, while JPI showed a mean of M = 3.41. Table 8 provides an overview of the descriptive statistics for both scale scores.

Table 8: Descriptive Statistics of Job Attractiveness and Job Pursuit Intentions

Construct	Items	M	SD	α
Job Attractiveness (JAT)	5	3,52	0,77	0,89
Job Pursuit Intentions (JPI)	5	3,41	0,83	0,89

To further verify the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations, independent samples t-tests were conducted for both manipulated factors. Although participants who did not perceive the manipulations as intended had already been excluded during the data cleaning process, additional statistical tests were performed to confirm that the manipulations produced systematic differences in perceived employer brand strength and salary level between the respective experimental groups. Demonstrating these differences at the group level is necessary to establish the internal validity of the experimental design prior to hypothesis testing.

To examine the employer brand manipulation (MC_EB), perceived symbolic employer brand strength was compared between the weak and strong employer brand conditions. Participants in the strong employer brand condition reported significantly higher perceived symbolic employer brand characteristics (M = 4.26; SD = 0.55) than participants in the weak condition (M = 2.41; SD = 0.62), t (139) = 18.90, $p < 0.001$. The effect size was large (Cohen's d = 3.21), indicating a strong manipulation effect.

A second independent sample t-test was conducted to assess the salary manipulation (MC_SAL). Participants in the strong salary condition perceived the salary level as significantly higher (M = 4.34; SD = 0.73) than participants in the weak salary condition (M = 2.34; SD = 0.73), t (139) = 16.25, $p < 0.001$. The effect size was likewise very large (Cohen's d = 2.74), confirming a strong and clearly perceived manipulation.

Taken together, the results demonstrate that both manipulations were successful and that the experimental conditions differed significantly in the intended direction. The data therefore provide a valid basis for the subsequent factorial analyses.

8.2.2. Hypothesis Testing

To examine RQ1 and test the corresponding Hypotheses, a two-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted for H1a and H2a. For the analysis of H1a, Job Attractiveness (JAT) served as the dependent variable, while employer brand condition (EB_COND) and salary condition (SAL_COND) were entered as independent factors. The analysis aimed to assess whether symbolic employer brand dimensions compensate for a moderately lower salary level in terms of Job Attractiveness. The described compensation logic would have been reflected in a significant interaction effect between employer brand and salary.

Prior to interpreting the ANOVA results, the assumption of homogeneity of variances was tested using the Levene's test. The test was not significant, $F(3, 137) = 2.44$, $p = 0.067$, indicating that the assumption of equal variances was not violated. Furthermore, an overview of the descriptive statistics for H1a across the experimental conditions is presented in Table C1 (Appendix C).

The ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of Employer Brand, $F(1, 137) = 4.78$, $p = 0.031$, $\eta^2p = 0.034$. Job descriptions, in which the employer was described as having a strong symbolic employer brand, were perceived as more attractive overall compared to those with a weak employer brand. The effect size indicates a small effect. The main effect of salary was not statistically significant, $F(1, 137) = 1.29$, $p = 0.258$, $\eta^2p = 0.009$, suggesting that salary level alone did not significantly influence Job Attractiveness in this sample. Most importantly, the interaction effect between employer brand and salary was not significant, $F(1, 137) = 0.08$, $p = 0.783$, $\eta^2p = 0.001$ (see Table C2 in Appendix C). This indicates that the effect of employer brand on Job Attractiveness did not differ depending on salary level. In other words, symbolic employer brand dimensions did not compensate for a moderately lower salary in influencing Job Attractiveness. Accordingly, Hypothesis H1a was not supported.

To examine whether the compensatory effect of symbolic employer brand dimensions on Job Attractiveness differed by gender (H1b), a three-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted with employer brand condition (EB_COND), salary condition (SAL_COND) and gender (GENDER_BIN) as independent variables.

Levene's test indicated a violation of the homogeneity of variance assumption, with $F(7, 133) = 2.77$, $p = 0.010$. However, given the relatively balanced group sizes and the robustness of ANOVA to moderate violations of this assumption, the analysis was considered sufficiently robust for interpretation. The three-way interaction between employer brand, salary and gender was not statistically significant, $F(1, 133) = 2.32$, $p = 0.130$, $\eta^2 p = 0.017$. This indicates that the interaction between employer brand and salary did not differ significantly between women and men. Accordingly, no statistically reliable evidence was found for a gender-specific compensatory effect of symbolic employer brand dimensions on Job Attractiveness. Although inspection of the cell means revealed a crossover pattern among female participants, this pattern did not translate into a statistically significant interaction effect (see Table C3 and Table C4 in Appendix C). Therefore, the proposed moderation of the compensation mechanism by gender (H1b) was not supported.

To test H2a, another two-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted with Job Pursuit Intentions (JPI) as the dependent variable and employer brand condition (EB_COND) and salary condition (SAL_COND) as independent factors. Analogous to H1a, the analysis examined whether symbolic employer brand dimensions compensate for a moderately lower salary in terms of JPI, which would be reflected in a significant interaction effect. An overview of the descriptive statistics for JPI across experimental conditions is presented in Table C5 (Appendix C).

Prior to interpreting the ANOVA results, a Levene's test was conducted and revealed that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met, $F(3, 137) = 0.33$, $p = 0.805$. The ANOVA revealed no significant main effect of employer brand, $F(1, 137) = 2.06$, $p = 0.154$, $\eta^2 p = 0.015$, indicating that JPI did not differ significantly between strong and weak employer brand conditions. Therefore, in contrast to H1a, where a significant main effect of employer brand on Job Attractiveness was observed, no such effect emerged for the more action-oriented outcome variable of JPI. Likewise, the main effect of salary was not statistically significant, $F(1, 137) = 2.29$, $p = 0.132$, $\eta^2 p = 0.016$, suggesting that salary level alone did not significantly influence participant's intentions to pursue a job. Most importantly, the interaction effect between employer brand and salary was not significant, $F(1, 137) = 0.01$, $p = 0.919$, $\eta^2 p < 0.001$ (see Table C6 in Appendix C). Accordingly, symbolic employer brand dimensions did not compensate for lower salary in influencing JPI. H2a was not supported.

In order to determine whether gender moderates the interplay between symbolic employer brand dimensions and salary in predicting JPI hypothesized in H2b, a three-way between-subjects ANOVA was conducted. Employer brand condition (EB_COND), salary condition

(SAL_COND) and gender (GENDER_BIN) were entered as independent variables, with Job Pursuit Intentions (JPI) as the dependent variable. Descriptive Statistics for H2b can be seen in Table C7 (Appendix C).

Levene's test was not significant, $F(7, 133) = 1.60$, $p = 0.141$, indicating that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was satisfied. The analysis revealed a significant three-way interaction between employer brand, salary and gender, $F(1, 133) = 6.08$, $p = 0.015$, $\eta^2p = 0.044$. This finding suggests that the interaction between employer brand and salary in influencing JPI differed significantly between male and female participants (see Table C8 in Appendix C). In addition, a significant main effect of gender was observed, $F(1, 133) = 6.26$, $p = 0.014$, $\eta^2p = 0.045$, indicating overall differences in JPI between male and female participants. A closer inspection of the estimated marginal means revealed distinct patterns across genders. Among male respondents, JPI were primarily higher when the salary was strong, largely independent of whether the Employer Brand was described as strong or weak. In other words, a strong employer brand did not offset the negative effect of a weak salary for men. The pattern suggests that salary was the more decisive factor in shaping men's JPI. For female participants, however, a crossover interaction emerged. When salary was weak, a strong symbolic employer brand increased JPI compared to a weak employer brand. Conversely, under strong salary conditions, JPI was higher in the weak employer brand condition than the strong employer brand condition (see Table C9 in Appendix C). Thus, the way employer brand and salary jointly influence JPI differed between women and men.

However, it should be noted that some subgroup sizes among female participants were relatively small. Although the three-way interaction reached statistical significance, these cell sizes warrant cautious interpretation of the gender-specific patterns. Nevertheless, the results for H2b overall indicate that gender significantly moderates the interaction between employer brand and salary in predicting JPI. Accordingly, H2b was supported.

In summary, the findings for RQ1 indicate that no compensatory effect of symbolic employer brand dimensions on moderately lower salary was observed for Job Attractiveness (H1a) or JPI (H2a) in the overall sample. Moreover, no gender differences were found for Job Attractiveness (H1b), whereas a significant gender-specific interaction effect emerged for JPI (H2b).

8.3. Data Analysis Research Question 2

8.3.1. Preliminary Analysis

To prepare for the analysis of RQ2, the measurement properties and descriptive characteristics of the three symbolic employer brand dimensions Organizational Culture, CSR and Work Environment were examined.

Each dimension was measured using multiple items, and construct-level variables (EB_OC, EB_CSR, EB_WE) were computed as mean indices of the respective items, consistent with the scale construction procedure described in Chapter 8.2.1. The internal consistency of the scales was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha based on the final cleaned dataset (N = 141). Reliability coefficients indicated acceptable levels of internal consistency across all three dimensions with EB_OC $\alpha = 0.77$, EB_CSR $\alpha = 0.72$ and EB_WE $\alpha = 0.71$. Further inspection of "alpha if item was deleted" values suggested no meaningful improvement in reliability through item removal. Consequently, all items were retained for further analyses.

Initial descriptive statistics indicated relatively high mean ratings across all three symbolic employer brand dimensions, suggesting that respondents overall perceived these attributes as relevant. Table 9 provides an overview of the descriptive statistics and reliability coefficients.

Table 9: Descriptive Statistics of Symbolic Employer Brand Dimensions

Employer Brand Construct	Items	M	SD	α
Organizational Culture (EB_OC)	6	4.08	0.53	0,77
Corporate Social Responsibility (EB_CSR)	5	3.71	0.60	0,72
Work Environment (EB_WE)	5	3.59	0.60	0,71

However, as RQ2 aims to identify the relative prioritization of these dimensions within individuals rather than to compare absolute mean levels across respondents, raw scale scores were not seen as sufficient for hypothesis testing. The use of Likert scales generally differs across individuals, meaning that some respondents tend to assign consistently higher or lower importance rating across all dimensions (Fischer, 2004; Van Vaerenbergh & Thomas, 2013). To account for such response tendencies and to enable meaningful within-person comparisons, additional transformation steps were implemented prior to hypotheses testing.

Specifically, a within-participant standardization procedure was applied. In a first step, an individual baseline importance score (EB_PersonalAvg) was computed for each respondent by averaging the three symbolic employer brand dimension scores.

$$EB\ PersonalAvg_i = \frac{EB\ OC_i + EB\ CSR_i + EB\ WE_i}{3}$$

This value represents the respondent's overall average importance assigned to symbolic employer brand dimensions and serves as an individual reference point.

In a second step, the degree to which each respondent differentiated between the three dimensions was calculated as the within-person standard deviation (EB_PersonalSpread).

$$EB\ PersonalSpread_i = \sqrt{\frac{(EB\ OC_i - EB\ PersonalAvg_i)^2 + (EB\ CSR_i - EB\ PersonalAvg_i)^2 + (EB\ WE_i - EB\ PersonalAvg_i)^2}{3}}$$

This indicator reflects the extent to which a participant differentiates between the symbolic employer brand dimensions. Higher values indicate greater differentiation, whereas values close to zero indicate that the dimensions were rated almost identically.

In a final step, relative importance scores were derived by standardizing each dimension score within person (RelImp_OC, RelImp_CSR, RelImp_WE) using the z-transformation formula.

$$RelImp\ OC_i = \frac{EB\ OC_i - EB\ PersonalAvg_i}{EB\ PersonalSpread_i}$$

$$RelImp\ CSR_i = \frac{EB\ CSR_i - EB\ PersonalAvg_i}{EB\ PersonalSpread_i}$$

$$RelImp\ WE_i = \frac{EB\ WE_i - EB\ PersonalAvg_i}{EB\ PersonalSpread_i}$$

These standardized scores indicate whether a given dimension was rated above or below the respondent's own average importance level, thereby capturing the relative importance of each dimension within individuals. Two respondents exhibited no variance across the three symbolic employer brand dimensions, which meant EB_PersonalSpread = 0, resulting in undefined standardized z-scores. As relative prioritization cannot be determined in those cases, these respondents were excluded from subsequent within subject analyses. The final analytical sample for RQ2 therefore comprised N = 139 participants.

8.3.2. Hypothesis Testing

To examine whether symbolic employer brand dimensions differ in their relative importance among Generation Z (H3a & H3b), a one-way repeated measures ANOVA was conducted. “Dimension” served as the within-subject factor and the standardized relative importance scores (RelImp_OC, RelImp_CSR, RelImp_WE) were entered as dependent variables. As mentioned in the subchapter 8.3.1., the analysis was based on N = 139 respondents.

Table 10: Descriptive Statistics of Relative Importance Scores

Descriptive Statistics H3a & H3b

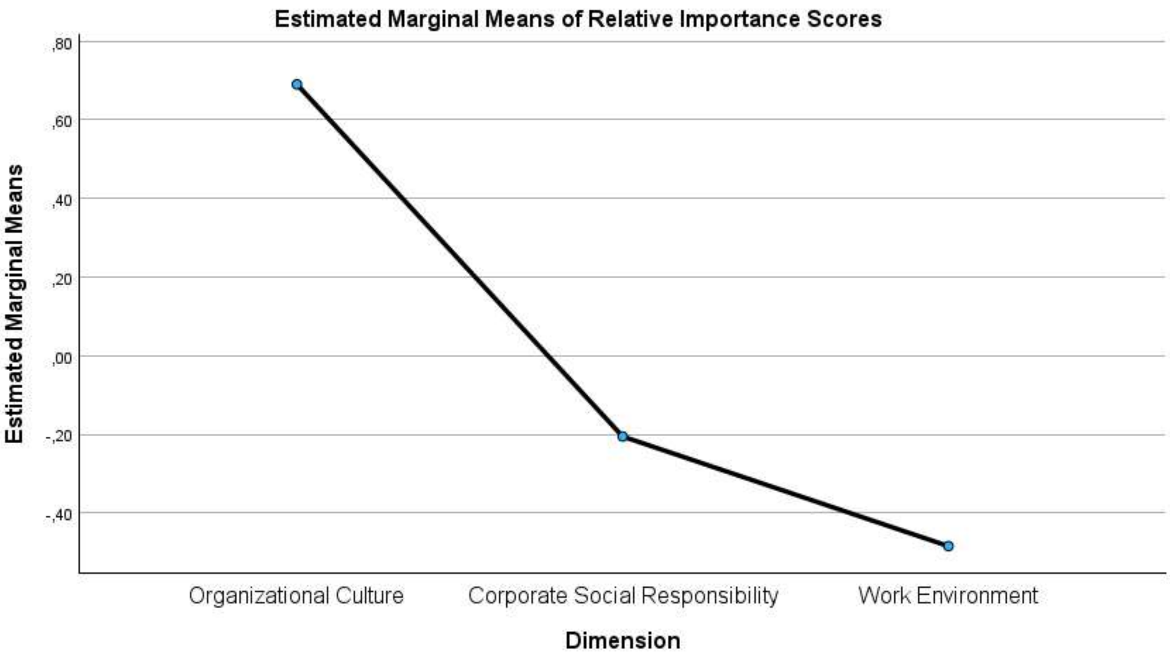
	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
RelImp_OC	,6903	,76305	139
RelImp_CSR	-,2057	,88789	139
RelImp_WE	-,4846	,94445	139

As shown in Table 10, Organizational Culture exhibited the highest relative importance, followed by CSR, while Work Environment was rated lowest.

Before interpreting the ANOVA results, the assumption of sphericity was assessed. Mauchly’s test was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 8.23$, $p = 0.016$, indicating a violation of the sphericity assumption. Therefore, Greenhouse-Geisser corrected results are reported.

The repeated-measures ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of “Dimension”, $F\ (1.89, 260.80) = 46.30$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 p = 0.25$ (see Table D1 in Appendix D). The effect size indicates a large difference in relative importance across symbolic employer brand dimensions. Inspection of the estimated marginal means suggests a clear prioritization pattern (see Figure 2). Organizational Culture emerged as the most strongly prioritized symbolic dimension, whereas Work Environment was evaluated as least important relative to respondents’ individual baselines.

Figure 2: Estimated Marginal Means of Relative Importance Scores



Overall, the results indicate that symbolic employer brand dimensions differ significantly in their relative importance within Generation Z. Accordingly, Hypothesis H3a was supported, as Organizational Culture emerged as the strongest prioritized dimension. In contrast, Hypothesis H3b was not supported, as CSR did not represent the least important dimension, with Work Environment being rated lowest.

To investigate whether women and men differ in how they prioritize symbolic employer brand dimensions (H3c – H3e), a mixed-design ANOVA was performed. In this analysis, “Dimension” served as the within-subject factor, while “Gender” was included as a between-subject factor. The standardized relative importance indices (RelImp_OC, RelImp_CSR, RelImp_WE) were entered as dependent variables. The analysis was based on N = 139 respondents.

Before interpreting the model results, the assumption of sphericity for the within-subject factor was assessed. Mauchly’s test was significant, $\chi^2(2) = 8.15$, $p = 0.017$, indicating a violation of the sphericity assumption. Consequently, Greenhouse-Geisser corrected results were reported for all within-subject effects in the following.

Descriptive statistics by gender are displayed in Table 11. Both men and women assigned highest relative importance to Organizational Culture. Men showed slightly higher standardized scores than women. For CSR, women exhibited slightly positive relative importance scores, whereas men rated this dimension below their personal average. Work

Environment was evaluated below individual baseline levels by both groups. Here, women reported stronger de-prioritization than men. However, these observed differences required inferential testing to determine their statistical relevance.

Table 11: Descriptive Statistics of Relative Importance Scores by Gender

Descriptive Statistics H3c - H3e

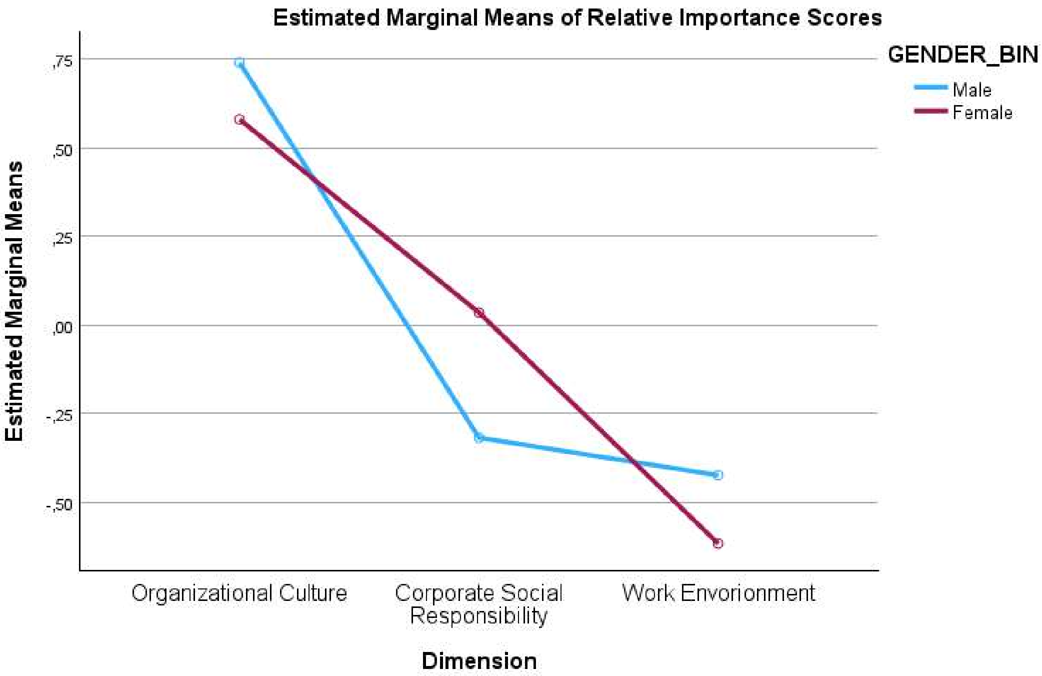
	GENDER_BIN	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
RelImp_OC	Male	,7410	,73323	95
	Female	,5809	,82181	44
	Total	,6903	,76305	139
RelImp_CSR	Male	-,3174	,88947	95
	Female	,0356	,84462	44
	Total	-,2057	,88789	139
RelImp_WE	Male	-,4236	,93011	95
	Female	-,6165	,97236	44
	Total	-,4846	,94445	139

The mixed-design ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of "Dimension", $F(1.89, 258.95) = 39.08$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2p = 0.222$. This finding replicates the pattern observed in H3a and H3b and confirms that the three symbolic employer brand dimensions differ substantially in their relative importance. Nevertheless, the interaction between Dimension and Gender was not statistically significant, $F(1.89, 258.95) = 2.52$, $p = 0.086$, $\eta^2p = 0.018$ (see Table D2 in Appendix D). This indicates that the overall prioritization pattern across Organizational Culture, CSR and Work Environment did not significantly differ between women and men.
With regard to Hypothesis H3c, which proposed that Organizational Culture would be valued more strongly by women than by men, the results did not provide empirical support. Contrary to this expectation, descriptive statistics indicated slightly higher relative importance scores for men compared to women. However, this difference did not reach statistical significance, as reflected in the non-significant Dimension × Gender interaction.

Similarly, H3d predicted that women would attribute greater relative importance to CSR compared to men. While the descriptive pattern was consistent with this expectation, the absence of a significant interaction effect indicated that this difference cannot be interpreted statistically meaningful. Therefore, H3d was not supported.

Last but not least, H3e hypothesized that Work Environment would be valued equally by women and men. Given the lack of a significant interaction and the highly comparable relative importance scores across genders, this hypothesis was supported. The interaction plot displayed in Figure 3 visually illustrates the comparable trends across genders.

Figure 3: Estimated Marginal Means of Relative Importance Scores (Dimension x Gender)



Taken together, the Results for RQ2 indicate that Generation Z differentiates significantly between symbolic employer brand dimensions in terms of their relative importance. Organizational Culture emerged as the most strongly prioritized dimension, followed by CSR, while Work Environment was rated lowest. With regard to gender differences, no statistically significant variation in prioritization patterns was observed. The non-significant interaction between Dimension and Gender suggests that the relative importance of symbolic employer brand dimensions is largely consistent across women and men.

9. Discussion

This chapter discusses the empirical findings in relation to the theoretical framework and existing literature on employer brand attractiveness with a focus on Generation Z. It further derives theoretical contributions and practical implications, before outlining the study's limitations and directions for future research.

9.1. Compensation Power of Symbolic Employer Brand Dimensions

One objective of this thesis was to contribute to the literature on employer brands by examining the extent to which symbolic employer brand dimensions can compensate for a moderately lower salary level. In this context, H1a and H2a examined the potential compensatory role of symbolic employer brand dimensions for Job Attractiveness and JPI. The findings indicate that symbolic employer brand dimensions positively influence attitudinal evaluations of a job opportunity, but show limited capacity to compensate for weaker financial incentives.

First, the findings suggest a positive effect of symbolic employer brand dimensions on Job Attractiveness (see Table C2 in Appendix C). This implies that job postings of organizations characterized by strong symbolic attributes, such as an appealing organizational culture, a positive social environment, or a clear societal contribution, are perceived as more attractive than those lacking these attributes. This finding is consistent with a substantial body of employer brand literature, which highlights the relevance of non-financial attributes in shaping employer attractiveness. Prior studies emphasize that values such as social environment, purpose, development opportunities and innovative work surroundings play a central role in how potential applicants evaluate employers, especially for younger Generations (Fairfax et al., 2023; Kucherov et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Schlechter et al., 2015).

However, it is important to note that studies examining non-financial attributes often include elements such as Career Development Opportunities or Work-Life Balance arrangements, which were not part of the symbolic employer brand manipulation in the present study. Within the conceptual framework of this thesis, such attributes were classified as utilitarian job characteristics, as they are directly related to job conditions and therefore conceptually distinct from symbolic employer brand attributes. Notably, the positive effect observed in this study emerged even in the absence of these commonly examined non-financial incentives, suggesting that purely symbolic signals, like culture, social environment, and organizational purpose, are sufficient to enhance perceived Job Attractiveness.

When extending the analysis to JPI, a different pattern emerged. In contrast to the attitudinal effects observed for Job Attractiveness, symbolic employer brand dimensions did not appear to influence individuals' intentions to actively pursue a job opportunity (see Table C6 in Appendix C). This finding contrasts with previous research that identified employer brand attributes as important predictors of application intentions. For example, Sharma & Prasad (2018) and Santiago (2019) report that both symbolic and relational employer brand dimensions can positively influence individuals' intention to apply. However, these studies focus on Generation Y or Millennials, whereas the present study examines Generation Z, suggesting that generational differences could partly explain the divergence in findings.

One possible explanation for this discrepancy lies in the frequently discussed attitude-behavior gap in recruitment research. While Job Attractiveness reflects a general evaluative perception of an organization, JPI represents a more concrete behavioral step, reflecting an individual's active progression within the recruitment process for a specific position. As a result, individuals may perceive an job as attractive without translating this perception into application behavior. Prior research suggests that employer communication can enhance perceived attractiveness without necessarily motivating candidates to pursue employment, particularly when the position does not fully align with their expectations or appears beyond their perceived reach (Uggerslev et al., 2012).

A similarly nuanced pattern emerged when examining the role of salary. Contrary to expectations derived from classical job choice models, salary did not appear to play a decisive role in shaping either Job Attractiveness or JPI (see Table C2 and Table C6 in Appendix C). Existing literature provides mixed evidence regarding the role of financial incentives in recruitment evaluations. While some studies suggest that younger generations increasingly prioritize intangible organizational attributes over economic incentives, others highlight the continued importance of monetary rewards. For instance, Santiago (2019) found that most employer brand dimensions significantly influenced application intentions, whereas Economic Value did not. Similarly, Nguyen Ngoc et al. (2022) show that Generation Z tends to focus more strongly on intangible attributes such as Workplace Atmosphere and Ethical Standards. At the same time, financial components such as Remuneration and Benefits have been shown to significantly influence Job Attractiveness (Schlechter et al., 2014).

Most importantly, the findings of the present study do not support the existence of a general compensation mechanism at the overall sample level. Strong symbolic employer brand dimensions do not appear to offset a weaker salary condition when individuals evaluate job opportunities (see Table C2 and Table C6 in Appendix C). The moderating role of gender in this relationship is discussed separately in chapter 9.2.

These results deviate from the frequently discussed compensatory mechanism in employer brand research, which posits that symbolic brand strength can serve as a non-financial reward and an offset for pay (Fairfax et al., 2023; Kucherov et al., 2019; Tavassoli et al., 2014). A significant body of literature has previously indicated that job seekers are willing to trade income for intangible benefits. For instance, Kucherov et al. (2019) observed that young professionals often tolerate lower wage levels in exchange for the reliability and status associated with a strong employer brand. Similarly, established evidence from executive recruitment and prosocial job contexts suggests that organizations can leverage strong employer brands or a meaningful organizational purpose to reduce payroll costs, as employees derive psychological value or self-enhancement from these organizational associations (Fairfax et al., 2023; Tavassoli et al., 2014; Wilmers & Zhang, 2022).

However, the lack of a general compensatory effect in the present study aligns with a more nuanced strand of research that questions the universal strength of such trade-offs. In their study design, Styśko-Kunkowska & Kwinta (2020) found that participants frequently preferred job offers from weaker employer brands with attractive salary conditions over offers from stronger brands paying less. Their findings suggest that when individuals directly compare job opportunities, financial incentives remain a decisive factor that an employer brand cannot easily compensate for. Notably, while their study required participants to directly choose between competing job offers, participants in the present study evaluated single job postings. This implies that participants did not face an explicit side-by-side comparison of alternatives, making the absence of a compensatory effect even more noteworthy. This is consistent with experimental evidence highlighting that financial remuneration remains the most influential predictor of Job Attractiveness, often exerting a main effect that symbolic or non-financial benefits cannot fully mitigate. For instance, Schlechter et al. (2014) demonstrated that Remuneration has the largest impact on Job Attractiveness and that other reward elements are not sufficient to mitigate a low remuneration offer. The findings of the present study therefore support the notion that for Generation Z, while symbolic dimensions are valued, they may function as supplementary attractions rather than effective instruments for offsetting moderately lower compensation at a general sample level.

Several explanations help to interpret why the expected compensation mechanism did not emerge in the present study. One possible explanation relates to individual value orientations. Previous research suggests that higher levels of materialism reduce the likelihood that individuals prefer strong employer brands when salary levels are lower, as financial rewards remain a central evaluation criterion (Styśko-Kunkowska & Kwinta, 2020). However, this explanation should be interpreted cautiously, as salary did not show a significant main effect on either Job Attractiveness nor JPI in the present study. In addition, compensation effects may depend on the extent to which individuals identify with an organization's employer brand and the proposed job opportunity in the experimental scenario. Tavassoli et al. (2014) argue that the willingness to accept lower pay in exchange for strong brand associations is contingent on the perceived relevance of the organization to one's self-concept. Finally, differences in how symbolic and financial attributes are cognitively processed may also contribute to the observed pattern. While an employer brand often represents abstract and future-oriented benefits such as culture or purpose, salary information means a concrete and immediate job characteristic. Within the context of experimental evaluation, the concrete weighting of salary may therefore dominate more abstract symbolic signals (Dhar & Kim, 2007).

9.2. Gender Differences in Compensation Mechanisms

Building on the general compensation mechanism discussed in the previous section, this subchapter focuses on the moderating role of gender in the relationship between symbolic employer brand dimensions, salary, and job evaluations. While no gender differences emerged at the level of attitudinal job evaluations, meaningful differences became apparent when considering behavioral intentions towards an employment opportunity.

At the level of Job Attractiveness, gender did not emerge as a meaningful differentiating factor. Notably, the previously observed positive effect of symbolic employer brand dimensions on Job Attractiveness in the overall sample was no longer evident once gender was included as a moderating variable. This suggests that the initial effect does not hold consistently across gender groups and becomes weaker when gender differences are taken into account. At the same time, gender itself did not exert a direct influence on Job Attractiveness (see Table C4 in Appendix C).

This finding is consistent with several previous studies demonstrating that demographic characteristics such as gender often do not significantly influence general perceptions of employer attractiveness or employer brand signals (Bussin & Mouton, 2019; Schlechter et al., 2014; Tavassoli et al., 2014). However, this result contrasts with a body of research that reports significant gender-related differences in the valuation of non-financial job attributes. For instance, Schlechter et al. (2015) found that the presence of non-financial job attributes increased Job Attractiveness more strongly for women than for men, reporting a significant main effect of gender. Similar gendered prioritizations are supported by Eger et al. (2019) and Lassleben and Hofmann (2023), who found that women consistently assign higher importance to social and relational aspects than men.

Furthermore, the absence of a significant Gender × Employer Brand × Salary interaction for Job Attractiveness suggests that the previously identified compensation pattern remains stable across gender groups. In other words, the lack of a compensatory effect between employer brand and salary is consistent for both men and women at the level of attitudinal job evaluations.

A different picture emerged, however, when shifting the focus to JPI as the action-oriented component of job evaluations. While neither employer brand nor salary independently shaped application intentions, gender appears to play a more relevant role at this stage. The findings indicate that men and women differ in their willingness to actively pursue a job opportunity, pointing to gender-specific dynamics in the transition from evaluation to action (see Table C8 in Appendix C).

Importantly, this gender effect extends beyond overall differences in intentions and also shapes how employer brand and salary jointly influence an individuals' willingness to actively pursue a job opportunity. The results indicate that the compensatory role of symbolic employer brand dimensions differs between male and female potential employees. Specifically, a compensation pattern emerged among female participants, for whom a strong employer brand increased JPI under weaker salary conditions. In contrast, male participants' intentions remained more closely aligned with salary levels and showed little sensitivity to employer brand signals.

This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that gender differences often become more visible when individuals move from general evaluations of employers to action related recruitment decisions. Studies focusing on behavioral choice or application intentions have identified gender specific patterns in JPI. Kucherov et al. (2019) for instance show that the amount of compensation candidates were willing to sacrifice in order to work for a preferred employer was significantly higher for female students than for male students. Although Valet et al. (2021) primarily examined the attractiveness of job attributes, their discrete choice experiment required respondents to actively choose between alternative job offers. Methodologically, this design also captured behavioral intentions and not just purely passive evaluations. Therefore, it provides relevant insights into the action related stage of organizational evaluation and is mentioned here as well. Their results revealed gendered preference structures in the active choices, with women prioritizing attributes such as scheduling flexibility and organizational reputation, while men place greater emphasis on high earnings and permanent contracts. Notably, attributes such as organizational reputation are closely related to the symbolic employer brand characteristics examined in the present study, supporting the observed gender differences in JPI.

A complementary explanation for the observed gender-specific patterns can be derived from research on gender differences in work value preferences, often grounded in social role theory. This perspective suggests that men and women are socialized to prioritize different job attributes, leading to systematic differences in how employment opportunities are evaluated. While men tend to place greater emphasis on extrinsic rewards such as Salary and Job Security, women are more likely to value intrinsic and relational aspects of work environments, including Organizational Culture, Social Climate, and Purpose (Konrad et al., 2000). In line with this perspective, women may place relatively greater weight on symbolic attributes, which becomes especially relevant when financial conditions are less favorable. In the context of the present study, these differences in value prioritization provide a plausible explanation for the observed interaction effect in JPI. When salary conditions are less favorable, symbolic employer brand dimensions served as a compensatory signal particularly for female applicants, as these attributes aligned more closely with their underlying work values. For male applicants, however, financial incentives appeared to remain the primary decision criterion when forming JPI, resulting in a weaker responsiveness to symbolic employer brand signals under constrained salary conditions (see Table C9 in Appendix C).

9.3. Preference Hierarchy of Symbolic Employer Brand Dimensions

The present study examined the relative importance of the three symbolic employer brand dimensions Organizational Culture, CSR and Work Environment among potential employees of Generation Z. The results revealed a significant main effect of the factor “Dimension”, indicating that symbolic employer brand dimensions are not evaluated uniformly but differ systematically in their perceived importance. The large effect size further suggested that this prioritization reflects a meaningful preference structure rather than a marginal statistical variation (see Table D1 in Appendix D). Specifically, the findings indicate a clear hierarchy, with Organizational Culture ranked highest, followed by CSR, while Work Environment received the lowest relative importance.

This differentiated evaluation of employer dimensions is consistent with prior research in the employer attractiveness literature. Previous studies similarly demonstrate that job seekers do not perceive employer-related attributes as equally relevant but instead form structured preference hierarchies (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Ružić & Benazić, 2023; Silva & Carvalho, 2021). The present findings therefore reinforce the understanding that employer brand preferences are multidimensional and that individual dimensions contribute unequally to overall evaluations.

The prioritization of Organizational Culture observed in the present study aligns with a shared view in recent international research focusing on Generation Z. Across diverse geographic and cultural contexts, ranging from Germany over the Czech Republic to Portugal and Croatia, attributes conceptually associated with Social Value consistently appear among the primary drivers of employer attractiveness for this cohort (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Ružić & Benazić, 2023; Silva & Carvalho, 2021). The fact that Organizational Culture, which centers on interpersonal relations and team atmosphere, was ranked significantly higher than CSR or Work Environment reinforces the argument that the quality of social integration and supportive relationships with colleagues and supervisors constitute the most salient symbolic signals in organizational evaluations for Generation Z (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Silva & Carvalho, 2021).

This preference structure appears to be remarkably stable across demographic boundaries. The absence of a significant interaction effect between Gender and Dimension indicates a uniform preference hierarchy, with the relative ranking of symbolic attributes remaining consistent across male and female participants (see Table D2 in Appendix D). Notably, several studies examining employer attractiveness and employer brand attributes have not explicitly considered gender as a moderating variable (e.g., Ružić & Benazić, 2023; Lukić Nikolić & Lazarević, 2023; Dzhulai, 2022; Mahmoud et al., 2020). Against this background, the present study contributes to a more differentiated understanding of gender in recruitment research. While prior studies report gender-related differences in the valuation of specific employer brand attributes (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Silva & Carvalho, 2021), such differences were not reflected in the overall preference structure observed here. However, descriptive patterns suggest a slight tendency for male participants assigning higher importance to the dimension of Organizational Culture. Although not statistically significant, this trend contrasts with prior findings that typically report higher importance ratings among female respondents (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023).

CSR occupies an intermediate position within the identified preference hierarchy. Although its relative importance score falls below respondents' individual average importance levels (see Table 10), this does not indicate low relevance. Descriptive results show that CSR is generally evaluated favorably (see Table 9), suggesting that the observed pattern reflects a relative rather than an absolute de-prioritization.

This positioning indicates that while value-related organizational signals, like ethical conduct and societal contribution, are appreciated by Generation Z, they are less decisive for the evaluation of employer attractiveness than more central attributes, particularly those related to interpersonal relations and Organizational Culture. Within the research landscape, CSR-related attributes also got characterized as secondary components of an employer brand (Dzhulai et al., 2022). Cross-cultural studies consistently place humanitarian and socially responsible signals at the lower end of preference hierarchies, often superseded by Social Value or utilitarian employer attributes like Career Development Opportunities (Dzhulai et al., 2022; Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Ružić & Benazić, 2023). In the present study, CSR appears to function as a supportive determinant that complements the overall employer image without acting as the primary driver of attractiveness.

A compelling explanation for this pattern is that CSR increasingly represents a normative baseline or hygiene factor rather than a differentiating employer attribute (Pandita, 2022). Current research suggests that Generation Z may simply "[take] sustainability for granted" (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023, p. 555), expecting ethical conduct as a standard requirement. Consequently, while the presence of CSR initiatives contributes to a positive and stable image, it does not substantially enhance relative attractiveness compared to other factors because it is viewed as a necessary prerequisite. In this view, organizations are evaluated based on their ethics and social impact as a foundational element, but the actual prioritization is dominated by different employer dimensions.

Regarding gender, no significant interaction effect was found, indicating that the relative prioritization of CSR remains stable across male and female participants. This pattern is consistent with the overall uniform preference structure observed in the present study. However, it contrasts with prior research suggesting that women tend to assign higher importance to employer brand attributes related to prosocial and ethical considerations (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Silva & Carvalho, 2021). Nevertheless, the descriptive trend in the current sample, where female participants assigned higher importance to CSR than the male ones (see Table 11), aligns with the direction of effects reported in this prior research. While these differences did not reach statistical significance at the interaction level, the descriptive alignment reinforces the indication that women in Generation Z possess a slightly higher sensitivity to ethical organizational conduct.

Work Environment emerges as the least central symbolic employer brand dimension in the identified preference hierarchy. While its relative importance scores indicate a clear de-prioritization compared to Organizational Culture and CSR (see Table 10), the absolute evaluation suggests that it is still perceived as moderately important (see Table 9). This pattern points to a lower relative importance rather than low absolute relevance, suggesting that while attributes related to innovation and creativity are valued by Generation Z, they appear less decisive in shaping the overall employer preference structure.

The observation of Work Environment ranking below Organizational Culture aligns with a consistent trend in recruitment literature. Recent research confirms that Social Value consistently supersedes interest-related attributes like an exciting or innovative work environment (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023; Ružić & Benazić, 2023). However, the finding that CSR is prioritized over Work Environment reveals a notable divergence from several prior studies. Existing research typically identifies interest-related signals and workplace innovation as more influential than humanitarian or ethical attributes (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023). In contrast, the present results suggest that ethical organizational conduct is perceived as more salient than the symbolic appeal of a creative work environment. This indicates that the examined sample exhibits distinct nuances in employer attribute prioritization, thereby deviating from the preference hierarchies commonly reported for this cohort.

Regarding gender, the absence of a significant interaction effect points to a largely uniform evaluation pattern. Although men assigned slightly higher importance to Work Environment than women, both groups rated the dimension below their individual average importance levels. This aligns with prior research indicating that innovation- and creativity-related attributes tend to be perceived similarly across genders (Eger et al., 2019; Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023), reinforcing the view that Work Environment represents a comparatively gender-neutral dimension within the employer attractiveness framework.

A broader theoretical explanation for the absence of significant gender differences lies in the concept of Gender Convergence, which postulates an increasing alignment of work value orientations between men and women (Lassleben & Hofmann, 2023). This interpretation is anchored in foundational cross-cultural research, which established nearly two decades ago, that sex differences in basic value priorities are generally small and typically explain significantly less variance than factors such as culture or age (Schwartz & Rubel, 2005). Within Generation Z, employer preferences therefore appear to be shaped more by shared generational experiences than by traditional gendered expectations. Accordingly, the uniform preference hierarchy observed in this study supports the view of increasingly convergent workplace expectations that go beyond gender-specific valuation patterns.

9.4. Theoretical Contributions to Academic Research

The findings of this study contribute to several streams of research, particularly employer brand literature, recruitment decision-making and studies on Generation Z's employer preferences. First, the study contributes to employer brand literature by examining the compensatory potential of symbolic employer brand dimensions in relation to financial incentives. The results show that symbolic employer brand dimensions significantly increase Job Attractiveness but do not generally compensate for lower salary levels. Notably, this finding emerged even though the experimental design employed only a moderately lower salary level, reflecting the idea that salary often functions as a threshold criterion in job evaluations. No interaction effect between employer brand and salary was found for either Job Attractiveness or JPI in the overall sample, highlighting limits to the commonly assumed compensation effect of immaterial employer brand attributes.

Second, the study contributes to recruitment research by distinguishing between attitudinal and behavioral outcomes of employer evaluations. While employer brand signals influenced Job Attractiveness, they did not directly translate into stronger JPI at the general sample level. However, a gender-specific compensation mechanism emerged for JPI. Symbolic employer brand dimensions increased behavioral intentions among female participants particularly under weaker salary conditions. This conditional compensation effect is consistent with the frequently discussed assumption that younger generations may place relatively greater emphasis on intangible organizational attributes, while also indicating that such effects emerge primarily under specific conditions rather than universally across applicant groups.

Third, the study contributes to research on Generation Z by providing empirical evidence on relative prioritization of symbolic employer attributes. The results indicate a clear preference hierarchy in which Organizational Culture is most important, followed by CSR and Work Environment attributes. In addition, the analysis of potential gender differences revealed no substantial moderation effects, suggesting that employer preferences within Generation Z may be shaped more strongly by shared generational expectations than by traditional demographic characteristics such as gender. This finding contributes to the ongoing discussion on the increasing heterogeneity within younger generations and highlights that individual-level factors may play a more important role in shaping employer evaluations than classical demographic variables.

9.5. Practical Implications

The findings of this study provide several implications for organizations seeking to attract Generation Z talent through the development and communication of a strong employer brand.

The results highlight the importance of Organizational Culture as a central element of the employer brand. Since culture-related attributes represent the most influential symbolic dimension, organizations should emphasize aspects such as supportive leadership, positive team dynamics and a collaborative working atmosphere when communicating their employer brand. Presenting a positive social environment and strong interpersonal relationships therefore represents an effective approach to strengthening employer attractiveness among Generation Z applicants.

Beyond Organizational Culture, the results show that CSR and Work Environment should be positioned as complementary rather than central elements of an employer brand. Although both dimensions rank lower in the relative preference hierarchy, their absolute evaluations suggest that they remain moderately important to Generation Z. This implies that ethical conduct, societal contribution, as well as innovative and creative work characteristics are valued, but are less decisive in shaping employer attractiveness compared to interpersonal and relational attributes. Therefore, Organizations should not neglect these dimensions, but integrate them strategically into a coherent employer branding narrative. Resource allocation should primarily focus on strengthening Organizational Culture, while CSR and Work Environment are best utilized as reinforcing signals that support, rather than drive, employer attractiveness.

From a compensation perspective, the results show that a strong employer brand does not substitute competitive financial incentives. Although symbolic employer brand dimensions increase Job Attractiveness, they do not compensate for a lower salary level in the overall sample. Organizations should therefore treat employer brand development as a complement to competitive compensation rather than as a replacement for financial incentives when designing recruitment strategies. From an economic standpoint, this implies that investments in employer brand initiatives should support rather than replace competitive salary structures when allocating recruitment budgets. At the same time, the gender specific findings show that employer brand signals influence JPI differently across applicant groups. This means, Organizations should consider differences in applicant motivations when allocating recruitment resources and designing employer brand communication strategies.

9.6. Limitations and Future Research

Despite the contributions of this study, several limitations should be acknowledged that provide opportunities for future research.

The study relied on an experimental vignette design in which participants evaluated hypothetical job descriptions. While this approach allows for controlled manipulation of employer brand signals and salary condition, it does not fully capture the complexity of real labor market decisions. Participants assessed fictional job scenarios and a fictitious organization, which was necessary to avoid legal and reputational issues associated with using real company brands. Future research could therefore examine the effects of employer brand signals and salary conditions on Job Attractiveness and JPI in real job search contexts, for instance by analyzing authentic job advertisements or by conducting field studies in collaboration with organizations where real employer brand signals are present.

Another limitation relates to the fact that participants were not necessarily actively engaged in a real job search at the time of the survey. Although the vignette scenario instructed respondents to imagine that they had just completed their degree and were currently looking for a job, this simulated decision context may differ from the psychological mindset of individuals who are actively seeking employment. Real job seekers face immediate career consequences and financial considerations, which may influence how they evaluate salary conditions and employer attributes. Future research could therefore examine similar job evaluation structures among individuals who are actively engaged in the job market in order to better understand how real job search contexts influence job opportunity assessments.

The uneven distribution of male and female respondents represents an additional limitation. Although the overall sample size was sufficient for the conducted analyses, the imbalance between gender groups may affect the robustness of interaction effects involving gender. Future studies could therefore ensure more balanced subgroup sizes to further investigate gender related differences.

Finally, the present study intentionally focused on the three symbolic employer brand dimensions Organizational Culture, CSR and Work Environment. While this design allowed for a focused analysis of symbolic employer brand attributes, employer attractiveness research has examined a broader range of non-financial organizational characteristics such as Career Development Opportunities or Work-Life Balance. Future research could therefore extend the present approach by comparing the symbolic employer brand dimensions examined in this study with additional non-financial employer attributes within a unified framework. Such an extension would allow a more comprehensive assessment of the preference hierarchy of immaterial employer signals among Generation Z and provide further insights into which non-financial attributes most strongly influence job evaluations. In addition, examining these attributes jointly could reveal whether certain immaterial employer characteristics are able to compensate for weaker salary conditions in ways that were not observable within the more focused attribute set of the present study.

10. Conclusion

This study examined the role of symbolic employer brand dimensions in shaping job evaluations among Generation Z. Particular focus was put on their compensatory potential and relative importance in employer preference formation. By combining theoretical insights with experimental evidence, this thesis contributes to a more differentiated understanding of how intangible employer attributes influence early career decisions.

Overall, the results suggest that symbolic employer brand dimensions represent a relevant but limited mechanism in recruitment. While intangible attributes such as Organizational Culture, CSR and Work Environment contribute positively to job evaluations, their influence is neither uniform nor sufficient to offset financial disadvantages in a generalizable way when evaluating an employment opportunity. Instead, their effectiveness appears to be context-dependent, varying across evaluation stages and applicant groups.

At the same time the study highlights that Generation Z does not perceive symbolic employer attributes as equally important. Rather, a structured preference hierarchy emerges with relational and social aspects of the employer brand being prioritized over more value-based or experiential work characteristics. This pattern appears to be largely stable across genders, indicating that shared generational expectations play a more decisive role than traditional demographic differences in shaping employer preferences.

Taken together, the findings underline that work arrangement evaluations and employer attractiveness are best understood as the result of an interplay between symbolic and instrumental factors. Symbolic employer brand dimensions can enhance job evaluations and strengthen employer perceptions, but they do not function as a standalone driver of applicant behavior. Their role is therefore complementary, reinforcing rather than replacing the importance of competitive compensation.

In conclusion, this study demonstrated that the effectiveness of symbolic employer brand dimensions does not lie in their ability to compensate for structural disadvantages, but in their capacity to shape how organizations are perceived within a broader decision context. For both research and practice, this implies that an employer brand should be considered as part of an integrated approach to talent attraction, where intangible and financial attributes jointly determine employer and work arrangement attractiveness.

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Appendix

Appendix A: Survey Instrument (Questionnaire)

A1. Survey introduction and Consent

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in this study. You are invited to take part in scientific research project conducted as part of a Master's thesis at the University of Vienna.

What will you do?

In this survey, you will be shown one job advertisement. Following this, you will rate several statements related to this job. In a section detached from the job advertisement, you will rate statements regarding your general employer preference. The survey takes approximately 6-8 minutes.

Voluntary participation & confidentiality:

Participation is entirely voluntary. You may withdraw at any time by closing the survey. Your responses are anonymous and cannot be linked to you personally. The data will be used for research purposes only. If you have questions about this study, please contact please contact the researcher (personal contact information has been removed to ensure anonymity).

Do you agree to participate in the following survey?

- I do agree to participate.
- I do not agree to participate.

A2. Screening Questions

What is your age group?

- Below 18 years
- 18 – 30 years
- Above 30 years

How would you rate your English proficiency?

- Basic
- Intermediate
- Advanced
- Native

A3. Vignette Scenario

Please imagine the following situation:

You have recently completed a degree in Business Administration or a closely related field. On the next page, you will see a job advertisement from a fictitious company. Please read it carefully, as you will be asked to evaluate statements related to this job advertisement afterwards.

There are no right or wrong answers, please respond based on your honest impression.

A4. Experimental Stimulus

Item:

- Fictitious job description for a Junior Business Analyst (one of four experimental conditions; randomized; see Appendix B for full versions)

A5. Attention Check

Scale: Five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)

Item:

- To show that you are paying attention, please select “Agree” for this statement.

A6. Manipulation Checks

Scale: Five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)

Items:

- The job advertisement described the company as having strong employer brand characteristics of Organizational Culture, Work Environment and Corporate Social Responsibility.
- The salary offered in the job advertisement is moderately above the average market level.

A7. Measurement of Job Attractiveness

Scale: Five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)

Items:

- I think this would be a good job.
- I would not be interested in this job, except as a last resort.
- I think this job is an attractive employment opportunity.
- I am interested in learning more about this job.
- I think this job is very appealing.

A8. Measurement of JPI

Scale: Five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree)

Items:

- I would accept a job offer for the advertised job.
- For me, this job would be one of my first choices as an employment arrangement.
- If I got invited to a job interview for the advertised position, I would go.
- I would exert a great deal of effort to get this job.
- I would send an application for the advertised job.

A9. Transition Instruction (Employer Preference Section)

The next questions refer to what you generally value in an employer, independent of the job advertisement you saw and evaluated.

Please answer the following statements based on your personal preferences and expectations regarding a potential employer in general.

A10. Measurement of Organizational Culture

Scale: Five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all important; 5 = extremely important)

Items:

- The employing organization fosters good relationships among colleagues.
- The employing organization promotes positive relationships between employees and their supervisors.
- The employing organization provides a supportive and encouraging social environment among employees.
- The employing organization offers a fun work atmosphere.
- The employing organization provides a happy and pleasant work atmosphere.
- The employing organization values employee’s opinions and suggestions.

A11. Measurement of CSR

Scale: Five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all important; 5 = extremely important)

Items:

- The employing Organization has a strong commitment to Corporate Social Responsibility.
- Working for the organization would make me feel good about myself.
- The organization is humanitarian and gives back to society.
- The organization actively supports ethical values.
- Employees are treated fairly and without discrimination.

A12. Measurement of Work Environment

Scale: Five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all important; 5 = extremely important)

Items:

- The employing organization produces innovative products and services.
- The employing organization applies novel and forward-thinking work practices.
- The employing organization values and makes use of their employee’s creativity.
- The employing organization produces high-quality products and services
- The employing organization accepts new ideas and provides employees with support to execute them.

A13. Demographic Variables

What is your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Non-binary/ diverse
- Prefer not to say

How old are you? (open numeric response; restricted to values between 18 and 30)

What is your country of residence?

- Austria
- Germany
- Other countries
- Prefer not to say

What is the highest level of education you have completed or are currently completing?

- Upper secondary education (High School Diploma)
- Bachelor’s degree

- Master’s degree
- Doctoral degree
- Other

Do you currently have work experience beyond internships?

- No
- Yes, less than 1 year
- Yes, 1-3 years
- Yes, more than 3 years

A12. Debriefing

Thank you for completing this survey!

This study examined how employer brand dimensions (Organizational Culture, Corporate Social Responsibility, Work Environment) influence job evaluation in terms of Job Attractiveness and Job Pursuit Intentions. Furthermore, general employer preferences of Generation Z are investigated.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact the researcher (personal contact information has been removed to ensure anonymity). You may now close this survey.

Appendix B: Stimulus Material (Experimental Conditions)

Note: The manipulated elements are visually highlighted for clarity but were not present in the actual survey

B1. Job Advertisement Condition 1 (strong employer brand x strong salary)

COMPANY ZY

JUNIOR BUSINESS ANALYST (ONE POSITION)

Company ZY invites applications for the position of Junior Business Analyst within its head office.

The organization is known for its strong sense of **Corporate Social Responsibility**, ethical conduct and fair treatment of employees and actively contributes to society beyond its core business. It offers a positive and **supportive Organizational Culture** characterized by respectful relationships, open communication and a team-oriented working atmosphere. In addition, the organization provides an innovative and **forward-thinking Work Environment** that values creativity and encourages new ideas.

We seek candidates that are motivated for the following key responsibilities:

- Supporting the analysis of business processes, market developments and performance indicators
- Preparing reports, presentations and decision-making documents for management
- Assisting in the evaluation of strategic initiatives and improvement projects
- Collaborating with cross-functional teams (e.g. Marketing, Finance, Operations)
- Supporting data-driven decision-making across the organization
- Contributing to the continuous improvement of internal processes and structures

Our ideal candidate will possess the following qualifications, skills and experiences:

- Analytical and conceptual thinking skills
- Solid knowledge of MS Office applications (Excel, PowerPoint)
- Basic experience with data analysis or business intelligence tools is an advantage
- Good communication and interpersonal skills
- A structured, proactive and reliable working style
- Ability to work independently as well as part of a team

Remuneration:

A competitive **salary package moderately above industry standards** is offered.

To apply:

Candidates who are interested and meet the above requirements should submit a detailed CV and a one-page motivation letter explaining their interest in the position to XXXX.

B2. Job Advertisement Condition 2 (strong employer brand x weak salary)

COMPANY ZY

JUNIOR BUSINESS ANALYST (ONE POSITION)

Company ZY invites applications for the position of Junior Business Analyst within its head office.

The organization is known for its strong sense of **Corporate Social Responsibility**, ethical conduct and fair treatment of employees and actively contributes to society beyond its core business. It offers a positive and **supportive Organizational Culture** characterized by respectful relationships, open communication and a team-oriented working atmosphere. In addition, the organization provides an innovative and **forward-thinking Work Environment** that values creativity and encourages new ideas.

<u>We seek candidates that are motivated for the following key responsibilities:</u>

- Supporting the analysis of business processes, market developments and performance indicators
- Preparing reports, presentations and decision-making documents for management
- Assisting in the evaluation of strategic initiatives and improvement projects
- Collaborating with cross-functional teams (e.g. Marketing, Finance, Operations)
- Supporting data-driven decision-making across the organization
- Contributing to the continuous improvement of internal processes and structures

<u>Our ideal candidate will possess the following qualifications, skills and experiences:</u>

- Analytical and conceptual thinking skills
- Solid knowledge of MS Office applications (Excel, PowerPoint)
- Basic experience with data analysis or business intelligence tools is an advantage
- Good communication and interpersonal skills
- A structured, proactive and reliable working style
- Ability to work independently as well as part of a team

<u>Remuneration:</u>

A competitive **salary package benchmarked according to industry standards** is offered.

<u>To apply:</u>

Candidates who are interested and meet the above requirements should submit a detailed CV and a one-page motivation letter explaining their interest in the position to XXXX.

B3. Job Advertisement Condition 3 (weak employer brand x strong salary)

COMPANY ZY

JUNIOR BUSINESS ANALYST (ONE POSITION)

Company ZY invites applications for the position of Junior Business Analyst within its head office.

<u>We seek candidates that are motivated for the following key responsibilities:</u>

- Supporting the analysis of business processes, market developments and performance indicators
- Preparing reports, presentations and decision-making documents for management
- Assisting in the evaluation of strategic initiatives and improvement projects
- Collaborating with cross-functional teams (e.g. Marketing, Finance, Operations)
- Supporting data-driven decision-making across the organization
- Contributing to the continuous improvement of internal processes and structures

<u>Our ideal candidate will possess the following qualifications, skills and experiences:</u>

- Analytical and conceptual thinking skills
- Solid knowledge of MS Office applications (Excel, PowerPoint)
- Basic experience with data analysis or business intelligence tools is an advantage
- Good communication and interpersonal skills
- A structured, proactive and reliable working style
- Ability to work independently as well as part of a team

<u>Remuneration:</u>

A competitive **salary package moderately above industry standards** is offered.

<u>To apply:</u>

Candidates who are interested and meet the above requirements should submit a detailed CV and a one-page motivation letter explaining their interest in the position to XXXX.

B4. Job Advertisement Condition 4 (weak employer brand x weak salary)

COMPANY ZY

JUNIOR BUSINESS ANALYST (ONE POSITION)

Company ZY invites applications for the position of Junior Business Analyst within its head office.

We seek candidates that are motivated for the following key responsibilities:

- Supporting the analysis of business processes, market developments and performance indicators
- Preparing reports, presentations and decision-making documents for management
- Assisting in the evaluation of strategic initiatives and improvement projects
- Collaborating with cross-functional teams (e.g. Marketing, Finance, Operations)
- Supporting data-driven decision-making across the organization
- Contributing to the continuous improvement of internal processes and structures

Our ideal candidate will possess the following qualifications, skills and experiences:

- Analytical and conceptual thinking skills
- Solid knowledge of MS Office applications (Excel, PowerPoint)
- Basic experience with data analysis or business intelligence tools is an advantage
- Good communication and interpersonal skills
- A structured, proactive and reliable working style
- Ability to work independently as well as part of a team

Remuneration:

A competitive **salary package benchmarked according to industry standards** is offered.

To apply:

Candidates who are interested and meet the above requirements should submit a detailed CV and a one-page motivation letter explaining their interest in the position to XXXX.

Appendix C: Statistical Outputs for RQ1

C1. Descriptive Statistics for Job Attractiveness by Employer Brand and Salary Condition

Descriptive Statistics H1a

Dependent Variable: Job Attractiveness

EB_COND	SAL_COND	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Weak EB	Weak Salary	3,2710	,86186	31
	Strong Salary	3,4533	,88658	30
	Total	3,3607	,87164	61
Strong EB	Weak Salary	3,5889	,70580	36
	Strong Salary	3,7000	,61379	44
	Total	3,6500	,65487	80
Total	Weak Salary	3,4418	,79203	67
	Strong Salary	3,6000	,74097	74
	Total	3,5248	,76701	141

C2. Two – Way ANOVA Results for Job Attractiveness (Employer Brand x Salary)

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects H1a

Dependent Variable: Job Attractiveness

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	3,649[a]	3	1,216	2,117	,101	,044
Intercept	1691,434	1	1691,434	2943,901	<,001	,956
EB_COND	2,746	1	2,746	4,779	,031	,034
SAL_COND	,742	1	,742	1,291	,258	,009
EB_COND * SAL_COND	,044	1	,044	,076	,783	,001
Error	78,714	137	,575			
Total	1834,200	141				
Corrected Total	82,363	140				

a. R Squared = ,044 (Adjusted R Squared = ,023)

C3. Descriptive Statistics for Job Attractiveness by Employer Brand, Salary and Gender

Descriptive Statistics H1b

Dependent Variable: Job Attractiveness

EB_COND	SAL_COND	GENDER_BIN	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Weak EB	Weak Salary	Male	3,1810	,88522	21
		Female	3,4600	,82219	10
		Total	3,2710	,86186	31
	Strong Salary	Male	3,3846	,92766	26
		Female	3,9000	,34641	4
		Total	3,4533	,88658	30
	Total	Male	3,2936	,90492	47
		Female	3,5857	,73365	14
		Total	3,3607	,87164	61
Strong EB	Weak Salary	Male	3,4000	,75318	23
		Female	3,9231	,47285	13
		Total	3,5889	,70580	36
	Strong Salary	Male	3,7630	,60520	27
		Female	3,6000	,63246	17
		Total	3,7000	,61379	44
	Total	Male	3,5960	,69457	50
		Female	3,7400	,58286	30
		Total	3,6500	,65487	80
Total	Weak Salary	Male	3,2955	,81667	44
		Female	3,7217	,67350	23
		Total	3,4418	,79203	67
	Strong Salary	Male	3,5774	,79582	53
		Female	3,6571	,59378	21
		Total	3,6000	,74097	74
	Total	Male	3,4495	,81344	97
		Female	3,6909	,63018	44
		Total	3,5248	,76701	141

C4. Three – Way ANOVA for Job Attractiveness (Employer Brand x Salary x Gender)

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects H1b

Dependent Variable: Job Attractiveness

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	7,647[a]	7	1,092	1,945	,067	,093
Intercept	1254,899	1	1254,899	2233,805	<,001	,944
EB_COND	,887	1	,887	1,578	,211	,012
SAL_COND	,716	1	,716	1,275	,261	,009
GENDER_BIN	2,043	1	2,043	3,637	,059	,027
EB_COND * SAL_COND	,559	1	,559	,995	,320	,007
EB_COND * GENDER_BIN	,289	1	,289	,515	,474	,004
SAL_COND * GENDER_BIN	,310	1	,310	,552	,459	,004
EB_COND * SAL_COND * GENDER_BIN	1,304	1	1,304	2,322	,130	,017
Error	74,716	133	,562			
Total	1834,200	141				
Corrected Total	82,363	140				

a. R Squared = ,093 (Adjusted R Squared = ,045)

C5. Descriptive Statistics for Job Pursuit Intentions by Employer Brand and Salary Condition

Descriptive Statistics H2a

Dependent Variable: Job Pursuit Intentions

EB_COND	SAL_COND	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Weak EB	Weak Salary	3,1742	,84655	31
	Strong Salary	3,4000	,87257	30
	Total	3,2852	,85981	61
Strong EB	Weak Salary	3,3889	,82524	36
	Strong Salary	3,5864	,75992	44
	Total	3,4975	,79109	80
Total	Weak Salary	3,2896	,83578	67
	Strong Salary	3,5108	,80692	74
	Total	3,4057	,82529	141

C6. Two – Way ANOVA Results for Job Pursuit Intentions (Employer Brand x Salary)

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects H2a

Dependent Variable: Job Pursuit Intentions

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	3,109[a]	3	1,036	1,539	,207	,033
Intercept	1581,336	1	1581,336	2348,517	<,001	,945
EB_COND	1,385	1	1,385	2,058	,154	,015
SAL_COND	1,543	1	1,543	2,292	,132	,016
EB_COND * SAL_COND	,007	1	,007	,010	,919	,000
Error	92,247	137	,673			
Total	1730,760	141				
Corrected Total	95,355	140				

a. R Squared = ,033 (Adjusted R Squared = ,011)

C7. Descriptive Statistics for Job Pursuit Intentions by Employer Brand, Salary and Gender

Descriptive Statistics H2b

Dependent Variable: Job Pursuit Intentions

EB_COND	SAL_COND	GENDER_BIN	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Weak EB	Weak Salary	Male	3,1714	,87244	21
		Female	3,1800	,83506	10
		Total	3,1742	,84655	31
	Strong Salary	Male	3,2846	,88031	26
		Female	4,1500	,19149	4
		Total	3,4000	,87257	30
	Total	Male	3,2340	,86910	47
		Female	3,4571	,83548	14
		Total	3,2852	,85981	61
Strong EB	Weak Salary	Male	3,1217	,86074	23
		Female	3,8615	,49923	13
		Total	3,3889	,82524	36
	Strong Salary	Male	3,5852	,72308	27
		Female	3,5882	,83806	17
		Total	3,5864	,75992	44
	Total	Male	3,3720	,81517	50
		Female	3,7067	,71387	30
		Total	3,4975	,79109	80
Total	Weak Salary	Male	3,1455	,85656	44
		Female	3,5652	,73522	23
		Total	3,2896	,83578	67
	Strong Salary	Male	3,4377	,81056	53
		Female	3,6952	,78643	21
		Total	3,5108	,80692	74
	Total	Male	3,3052	,84018	97
		Female	3,6273	,75402	44
		Total	3,4057	,82529	141

C8. Three – Way ANOVA for Job Pursuit Intentions (Employer Brand x Salary x Gender)

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects H2b

Dependent Variable: Job Pursuit Intentions

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	10,251[a]	7	1,464	2,289	,031	,108
Intercept	1196,912	1	1196,912	1870,520	<,001	,934
EB_COND	,211	1	,211	,329	,567	,002
SAL_COND	2,485	1	2,485	3,884	,051	,028
GENDER_BIN	4,007	1	4,007	6,262	,014	,045
EB_COND * SAL_COND	1,223	1	1,223	1,911	,169	,014
EB_COND * GENDER_BIN	,026	1	,026	,041	,840	,000
SAL_COND * GENDER_BIN	,022	1	,022	,035	,853	,000
EB_COND * SAL_COND * GENDER_BIN	3,893	1	3,893	6,084	,015	,044
Error	85,104	133	,640			
Total	1730,760	141				
Corrected Total	95,355	140				

a. R Squared = ,108 (Adjusted R Squared = ,061)

C9. Estimated Marginal Means for Job Pursuit Intentions (Employer Brand x Salary x Gender)

EB_COND * SAL_COND * GENDER_BIN

Dependent Variable: Job Pursuit Intentions

EB_COND	SAL_COND	GENDER_BIN	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	95% Confidence Interval Upper Bound
Weak EB	Weak Salary	Male	3,171	,175	2,826	3,517
		Female	3,180	,253	2,680	3,680
	Strong Salary	Male	3,285	,157	2,974	3,595
		Female	4,150	,400	3,359	4,941
Strong EB	Weak Salary	Male	3,122	,167	2,792	3,452
		Female	3,862	,222	3,423	4,300
	Strong Salary	Male	3,585	,154	3,281	3,890
		Female	3,588	,194	3,204	3,972

Appendix D: Statistical Outputs for RQ2

D1. Repeated Measures ANOVA Results

Tests of Within-Subjects Effects H3a & H3b

Measure: MEASURE_1

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Dimension	Sphericity Assumed	104,765	2	52,382	46,303	<,001	,251
	Greenhouse-Geisser	104,765	1,890	55,435	46,303	<,001	,251
	Huynh-Feldt	104,765	1,915	54,699	46,303	<,001	,251
	Lower-bound	104,765	1,000	104,765	46,303	<,001	,251
Error(Dimension)	Sphericity Assumed	312,235	276	1,131			
	Greenhouse-Geisser	312,235	260,801	1,197			
	Huynh-Feldt	312,235	264,311	1,181			
	Lower-bound	312,235	138,000	2,263			

D2. Mixed – Design ANOVA Results for Relative Importance Scores (Dimension x Gender)

Tests of Within-Subjects Effects H3c - H3e

Measure: MEASURE_1

Source		Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Dimension	Sphericity Assumed	87,466	2	43,733	39,083	<,001	,222
	Greenhouse-Geisser	87,466	1,890	46,276	39,083	<,001	,222
	Huynh-Feldt	87,466	1,930	45,326	39,083	<,001	,222
	Lower-bound	87,466	1,000	87,466	39,083	<,001	,222
Dimension * GENDER_BIN	Sphericity Assumed	5,638	2	2,819	2,519	,082	,018
	Greenhouse-Geisser	5,638	1,890	2,983	2,519	,086	,018
	Huynh-Feldt	5,638	1,930	2,922	2,519	,084	,018
	Lower-bound	5,638	1,000	5,638	2,519	,115	,018
Error(Dimension)	Sphericity Assumed	306,598	274	1,119			
	Greenhouse-Geisser	306,598	258,945	1,184			
	Huynh-Feldt	306,598	264,372	1,160			
	Lower-bound	306,598	137,000	2,238			

Declaration of Authorship

I hereby declare that this master's thesis has been written independently and without the use of any unauthorized assistance. All ideas, text passages, and arguments derived from other sources, whether quoted directly or paraphrased, have been clearly identified and cited accordingly. This applies to all sources used. Full references have been provided, including DOIs where applicable.

AI-based tools (including ChatGPT) were used as supportive instruments during the preparation of this thesis. Their use was limited to language refinement, structural clarification, and general guidance in organizing and presenting content, as well as minor technical assistance related to the use of analytical tools and software, including SPSS and SoSci Survey. All substantive content, analysis, and interpretations presented in this thesis are the result of the author's own work.

This thesis has not been submitted to any other examination body and has not been published elsewhere.