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Questioning Sustainability from the Workers' Perspective: Career Attractiveness in Retail

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Abstract - *Recent developments have led to a dramatic shift in the retail industry, marked by the rise and fall of major corporations. This study intends to investigate the level of attractiveness of the retail industry for career development of the current workforce. Moreover, analyzing each construct at the dimensional level—Individual, Instrumental, and Symbolic—contributes valuable insights to the employer branding literature in emerging markets like Indonesia, particularly regarding the challenge of maintaining sustainable talent in the retail sector amid high turnover, market volatility, and increasing digitalization.*

Keywords - *branding strategy, motivation, perception, instrumental, symbolic, work intention.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Retail sustainability is one of the most prevailing issues in emerging markets. In May 2024, [1] reported that wholesale and retail trade is a dominant sector that contributed to the GDP growth at a rate of 4.58%, which included the vehicle repair businesses. Consequently, the retail industry is pivotal in expanding employment opportunities for the workforce.

According to BPS data, from February 2025, 3.59 million new individuals entered the workforce out of a total labor force increase of 367 million, resulting in a high absorption rate of 97,7% [2]. Job absorption occurred across various sectors, with the manufacturing industry and informal trade standing out. This highlights the critical role of the informal and retail sectors in expanding job opportunities and supporting economic stability.

Recent developments have led to a dramatic shift in the retail industry, marked by the rise and fall of major corporations. As of May 2025, GS Supermarket officially announced the closing of the ten stores across the country, following Giant's closure in 2021 [3]. Considering these conditions, there is a question about how workers perceive career development in the retail sector.

Indonesia's working-age population grew from approximately 206.7 million in 2021 to 215.4 million in 2024, reflecting a significant expansion of the productive labor force [4]. The labor force participation rate also increased, from 67.8% to 70.6%, signaling stronger engagement in formal and informal employment sectors [5] As of February 2025, 3.67 million individuals entered the labor force, and 97.7% (around 3.59 million) were successfully absorbed into employment [6]. This data showed not only high labor absorption but also poses a challenge for various sectors, such as retail, to compete for the best talent and not merely fill job quotas.

The wholesale and retail trade sector added around 980,000 jobs in February 2025, making it a key contributor to national labor absorption [7] As of March 2025, the Ministry of Manpower reported 3,186 active job openings in the Retail & Consumer Goods subsector, out of 62,102 total job vacancies nationwide [8]. APRINDO projected modern retail growth in 2024 to be only 4.1–4.2%, slowed by monetary tightening and waves of layoffs [9]. Rising uncertainties may disrupt the long-term development of qualified, productive workers, unless firms invest in adaptive HR practices such as inclusive recruitment, competency-building, and employer branding [10].

The Wholesale and retail trade sector is one of the largest employment providers in Indonesia. However, the vast number of workers in retail also creates intense competition among businesses to recruit high-quality human resources. This competition is especially prevalent in sales, managerial, and technical roles. BPS data shows that sales-related positions alone account for over 20 million workers, making it the most dominant occupational group within the sector [11].

In an increasingly competitive job market, job seekers from all generations consider many factors

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@2025.The 9th International Conference on Management in Emerging Markets (ICMEM)
Published by Unit Research and Knowledge-School of Business and Management-Institut Teknologi Bandung   1

before deciding to apply to a company. Empirical studies have shown that compensation significantly affects employee satisfaction and financial performance, which in turn contributes to improving the overall value of the company [12]. Through these initiatives, a company can build a positive reputation, which further influences employee commitment and engagement.

Moreover, organizational values and company reputation are non-financial attributes that significantly influence how attractive a company is in the eyes of current and potential employees [13]. This not only attracts investors but also reinforces employee loyalty, as they feel connected to an organization with a greater purpose beyond profit. Therefore, to retain high-quality talent, companies must establish a strong balance between fair compensation, a supportive work environment, and a positive corporate reputation rooted in shared values [13].

The decision to apply for a job is influenced by various internal and external factors that can be classified into three main groups: individual traits (motivation and perception), instrumental attributes (work environment, remuneration, and work-life balance), and symbolic attributes (company reputation, values, and image) [14]. However, not many have explicitly explored the mediating role of symbolic attributes. Studies by [15] in a global context also emphasized that symbolic attributes play a role as a mediator between job seekers' expectations and application decisions.

As reported in published reports, major retail corporations such as Alfamart, Indomaret, and the like offer benefits such as clear career paths, job stability, and flexible work systems. However, job seekers also consider the company's reputation and values in deciding to apply, such as sustainability, social care, and employer branding. [16]. Therefore, it is important to examine how these three factors play a role in influencing job application intentions at retail companies.

This study intends to investigate the level of attractiveness of the retail industry for career development of the current workforce. Based on a quantitative approach using Smart-PLS, the study is focused on investigating the extent of intention to work in retail among 106 respondents. Latent variables operationalized in this research include Individual Traits, Instrumental Attributes, and Symbolic Attributes, which have been identified as the precursors to positive and high intention to work in particular fields.The dimensions of each latent variable were designed to provide deeper insights specific to the retail industry [17].

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Intention to Work

Intention to work in retail refers to a potential job seeker's deliberate cognitive and affective inclination to pursue employment within the retail industry. This concept
differs from general job pursuit intention, focusing on sector-specific motivations, which are shaped by individual perceptions of the retail work environment, career progression potential, and organizational characteristics.

According to [18], retail job seekers are influenced not only by general employment conditions but also by factors unique to the retail industry, such as irregular work schedules, limited career advancement opportunities, and high turnover culture, which directly impact their motivation and decisions to apply or stay. Carr's [18] findings reinforce the idea that intention to work in retail is strongly tied to retention strategies, including competitive pay, job enrichment, leadership quality, and work-life balance, demonstrating that the perceived quality of the sector influences entry and retention simultaneously [18].

Retail employment is often perceived as fast-paced, customer-oriented, and operationally intensive. According to [19], Intention to work in a specific sector like retail is influenced not only by job characteristics but also by perceptions of corporate social responsibility, values alignment, and brand personality. Furthermore, in the post-pandemic context, job seekers are increasingly concerned with job security, ethical values, and personal fulfillment in choosing a workplace [20]

The attractiveness of the retail sector depends on how organizations communicate their identity, opportunities for advancement, and how well they manage perceptions through branding and recruitment efforts [21]. These perceptions are filtered through individual differences and shaped by the tangible and symbolic attributes associated with retail employers.

B. Individual Traits

Individual traits are enduring psychological and dispositional characteristics that influence how people perceive, evaluate, and act upon career-related information. These include personality dimensions (e.g., Big Five traits), value orientation (e.g., self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence), career adaptability, and proactive personality [22]. In [23], the authors emphasized that job seekers' values significantly impact their job preferences. For instance, individuals with strong prosocial or environmental values are more inclined to seek employers with aligned CSR values.

Similarly, traits like openness to experience and conscientiousness can make individuals more

receptive to complex work environments such as retail, which demands adaptability, multitasking, and interpersonal interaction [23]. Furthermore, career adaptability and proactive personality are two crucial components that strengthen the link between individual characteristics and resilience in facing dynamic work environments. In sectors such as retail, which are highly dynamic and require direct interaction with customers, the ability to anticipate change, take initiative, and actively solve work-related problems becomes a valuable asset. Individuals with a proactive personality typically demonstrate higher levels of engagement and persistence, which positively impact performance and organizational commitment [23].

In addition, the alignment between personal values and organizational values serves as a strong predictor for job satisfaction and intention to stay. When employees perceive harmony between their values, such as fairness, integrity, and sustainability, and the organization's practices, they are more likely to develop a deep emotional attachment to the company [24]. In this context, employer branding that emphasizes a commitment to social responsibility and ethics can be a strong attractor, particularly for job seekers with a self-transcendent value orientation. Therefore, understanding individual psychological traits is not only essential in the recruitment process but also in designing targeted retention strategies [24].

In the Southeast Asian contexts, value congruence and collectivist orientations also shape responses to organizational attributes, particularly in career-related decision making. Collectivist cultures, which emphasize social harmony, group loyalty, and family considerations, lead job seekers to evaluate personal and organizational value alignment more deeply [25]. In [26], the authors observed that in collectivist societies, personal and family values are considered when assessing company fit, rather than focusing solely on material incentives. This implies that personality traits such as agreeableness and relational orientation may exert a stronger influence on job intentions in people-centered industries like retail.

Supporting this, cross-cultural studies have shown that in societies with high collectivist values, such as Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, person-organization fit, especially concerning ethical and social values, is a significant predictor of job application intention and retention [19]. Therefore, in the retail sector, which requires interpersonal interaction, customer service, and teamwork, individual traits that facilitate social relationships are critical assets. This highlights the importance of integrating psychological and cultural perspectives in recruitment and employer branding strategies to align with the values held by local job seekers.

Previous literature has shown the significance of Individual Traits in affecting the intention to work in certain industries. Based on a wide range of studies related to workers' perceptions, the two dimensions were examined for Individual Traits were Motivation and Perception (adapted from [27], [28]). Hence, the following hypothesis was proposed:

Hypothesis 1: Individual Traits strongly influence the Intention to work in Retail

C. Instrumental Attributes

Instrumental attributes refer to the objective, utilitarian features of a company that offer practical value to employees, such as salary, job security, promotion prospects, training, location, and flexible working arrangements. According to [29], these attributes serve as tangible cues that prospective employees use to evaluate the functional value of a job. According to signaling theory, these features act as direct indicators of job quality. When employers prominently advertise such attributes, they communicate aspects like organizational reliability and opportunity for professional growth, making the role more attractive to potential applicants. Also, instrumental attributes, specifically competitive compensation and favorable working conditions, are confirmed to be the key determinants in enhancing employer attractiveness, as they signal an employer's commitment to employee well-being and career development [29].

Retail companies often struggle with employer image due to misconceptions about low pay, limited career progression, or long working hours. However, recent studies suggest that transparent communication about training, performance-based promotion, and structured career paths significantly improves the intention to work in the sector [30]

Moreover, as digitalization advances, the adoption of e-recruitment platforms and social media branding provides new arenas where instrumental attributes are highlighted. Millennials and Gen Z applicants, in particular, expect quick access to job information, clear expectations, and employer responsiveness. Companies that fail to signal these instrumental qualities risk losing high-potential candidates [21]. Therefore, instrumental attributes not only influence intention directly but also shape how candidates perceive symbolic elements, such as employer reputation and cultural fit.

As Instrumental attributes continue to shape perceptions, three dimensions were included in this research, which are Work Environment, Remuneration, and Work-life Balance adapted from [31] [15]. Hence, the following hypothesis was posed:

Hypothesis 2: Instrumental Attributes strongly influence the Intention to work in Retail.

D. Symbolic Attributes

Symbolic attributes refer to intangible, socially constructed meanings associated with an organization. These include perceptions of organizational prestige, CSR involvement, innovativeness, warmth, and personality, often anthropomorphized by job seekers [13]. Previous research studies on the relationship between symbolic attributes and work intentions include, for example, an empirical study on transformational leadership, employee engagement, commitment, and work motivation [32]; company branding, prestige, and intention to apply work [33] In retail, symbolic attributes play a crucial role, especially as employer brands attempt to differentiate themselves from stereotypical low-value perceptions.

A study by [34] demonstrated that corporate social responsibility positively affects symbolic image, which in turn enhances intention to work. This mediation occurs because symbolic attributes trigger identity-based attraction in job-seekers who want to work for companies that reflect their self-concept and aspirations. Moreover, the symbolic value of a company compensates for lower instrumental attractiveness. For example, a company offering modest financial rewards may still be highly desirable if it is perceived as innovative, ethical, or socially progressive [13]. In retail, where symbolic differentiation is crucial, values such as customer obsession, diversity, and sustainability become strong brand markers.

Symbolic attributes are also shaped by how individual traits filter information. For example, [35] found that individuals high in openness may find "creative" or "fun" brands more appealing, while conscientious individuals may be drawn to "structured" or "reliable" employer identities. For this particular analysis, three dimensions of Symbolic attributes included: Company Reputation, Company Values, and Corporate Image (adapted from [35], and [36]). In turn, three hypotheses were posed in this research related to Symbolic Attributes, which are:

Hypothesis 3: Symbolic attributes strongly influence Intention to work in retail.
Hypothesis 4: Symbolic attributes mediate the relationship between Individual Traits and Intention to work in retail.
Hypothesis 5 Symbolic Attributes mediate the relationship between Instrumental Attributes and Intention to work in retail.

Specifically, the Symbolic Attributes examined in this study consist of three dimensions, namely, company reputation, values, and image. In line with a previous study by [37], the symbolic attribute of company reputation was found to have positively mediated in the relationship between remuneration, work

environment, and career development, with intention to apply. Considering the tendency for symbolic attributes to enhance individuals' perceptions and influence work intentions, this research poses the mediating effect of Symbolic Attributes for Individual Traits and Instrumental Attributes.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a quantitative research approach using a structured questionnaire survey to examine the influence of Individual Traits and Instrumental Attributes on the Intention to Work in the retail sector, as well as the mediating role of Symbolic Attributes. Data will be collected from individuals aged 17 to 38 years, selected based on heuristic sampling (guided by the HEIR—Heuristically-Informed Empirical Research—principle), targeting participants who are either actively seeking employment or open to retail job opportunities. Therefore, the survey was distributed widely, both productive age individuals currently studying and/or working, to examine attractiveness of the retail industry.

The statistical analysis technique to examine the causal relationships among multiple variables was Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM). Using the SmartPLS 4 application, the PLS-SEM was deemed to be appropriate to allow for predicting factors determining intention to work in retail. In addition, the strength of PLS-SEM lies in accommodating exploratory research (Hair et al., 2017), which is the underlying objective of this investigation. The minimum sample size applied in this study was 100 respondents, in accordance with the guideline from Hair et al. (2017) suggesting that a minimum of 100 cases is generally acceptable for PLS-SEM analysis in models of moderate complexity and predictive nature. The research model is depicted in Figure1.
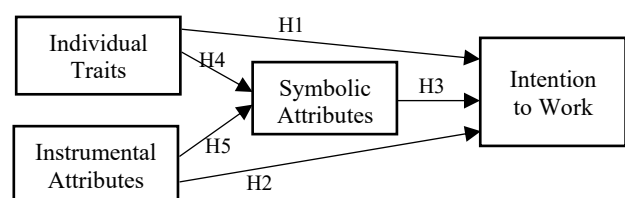

Figure 1 Hypothetical Research Model
Source: Developed by authors based on various sources.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The total number of data collected was from 106 respondents, with 53% male and 47% female. Key elements of the respondents' profiles are presented in Table 1. Most of the respondents are students or

currently finishing their bachelor's program within the age range of 17-22 years old (68%) where most are living in the Jakarta area (84%). The respondent profile was deemed appropriate to provide some extent of generalizability considering that retail industry attracts a large portion of the labor market.

Table I Measurement Model Evaluation: Instrumental Attributes

Dimensions	Indicators	Outer Loading	Cronbachs Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Work Environment (IAT1)	IAT1.1 Supportive and collaborative environment	0.739			
	IAT1.2 Healthy work environment	0.764			
	ITR1.4 Self-Development	0.746			
Remu-neration (IAT2)	IAT2.1 Competitive salary	0.675*			
	IAT2.2 BPJS or bonus	0.824	0.874	0.901	0.533
	IAT2.3 Clear salary structure	0.728			
Work-Life Balance (IAT3)	IAT3.1 Balancing work time and personal life	0.652*			
	IAT3.2 Flexible work hours	0.703			
	IAT3.3 WLB affects productivity	0.739			
	IAT2.2 BPJS or bonus	0.764			

Source: SmartPLS output (processed June 26, 2025)

The SEM-PLS analysis included two independent variables, Individual Traits (2 dimensions) and Instrumental Attributes (3 dimensions), and one mediating variable, Symbolic Attributes (3 dimensions). Initially, the research model included a total of 30 indicators. However, after the first PLS calculations, several indicators were omitted due to low EVE and factor loadings < 0.6. The final model used in this study included 7 indicators for Individual Traits, 8 indicators for Instrumental Attributes, 6 indicators for Symbolic Attributes, and 4 indicators for Intention to work, totaling 25 items included in the outer model. The Smart-PLS model used in this research is depicted in Figure 2.
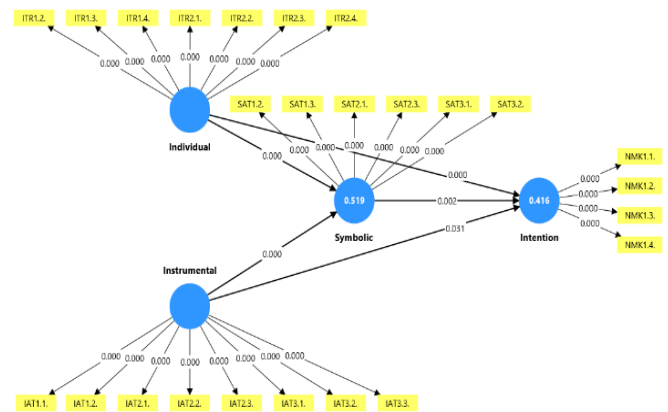

Figure 2 SmartPLS 4 Model for Career Attractiveness in Retail
Source: SmartPLS output (processed June 26, 2025)

Detailed analysis of the outer and structural models is discussed in the following sections.

A. Measurement Model Evaluation

Evaluation of the measurement model was as prescribed by [38]. Indicator loadings should ideally be 0.70 or higher. However, in exploratory research or when developing new scales, loadings between 0.40 and 0.70 can be retained, provided that AVE and composite reliability are acceptable, Cronbach's Alpha and Average Variance Extracted >= 0.50. The measurement model evaluation is presented in Tables II – V.

Table II Measurement Model Evaluation: Individual Traits

	Indicators	Outer Loading	Cronbachs Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Motivation (ITR1)	ITR1.2 Clear Goal	0.824			
	ITR1.3 Motivated to work in retail	0.745			
	ITR1.4 Self-Development	0.714			
Perception (ITR2)	ITR2.1 Positive perception of retail work	0.745	0.861	0.894	0.546
	ITR2.2 Adapt to retail work	0.75			
	ITR2.3 Consider retail promising	0.678*			
	ITR2.4 Retail provides stable employment	0.707			

Source: SmartPLS output (processed June 26, 2025)

The construct Individual Traits, which consists of two dimensions—Motivation and Perception—demonstrates strong measurement quality. All outer loadings exceed the recommended threshold of 0.70, with the exception of item ITR2.3 (loading = 0.678), which remains acceptable according to [38]as long as it contributes to content validity and the overall construct meets reliability standards. The construct

also shows high internal consistency and convergent validity, with a Composite Reliability (CR) of 0.894 and an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of 0.546. These results confirm that Individual Traits is a valid and reliable construct for capturing psychological factors that influence job application intentions in the retail sector. Moreover, the most determining dimension appears to be Motivation, with having a clear goal being the strongest indicator for influencing intention to work.

The construct Instrumental Attributes, comprising three dimensions—Work Environment, Remuneration, and Work-Life Balance—exhibits generally strong measurement properties.

Table III Measurement Model Evaluation: Symbolic Attributes

Dimension	Indicators	Outer Loading	Cronbachs Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Company Reputation (SAT1)	SAT1.2 Professionalism	0.749			
	SAT1.3 Positive image in the community	0.706			
Company Values (SAT2)	SAT2.1 Strong ethical values	0.748			
	SAT2.3 Company values important considerations.	0.723	0.887	0.922	0.749
Corporate Image (SAT3)	SAT3.1 Proud to work for a company with a positive Image	0.717			
	SAT3.2 Observe the company image	0.673*			

Source: SmartPLS output (processed June 26, 2025)

While a few indicators have loadings slightly below the 0.70 threshold (e.g., IAT2.1 = 0.675; IAT3.1 = 0.652), these values are still acceptable and can be retained if theoretically justified. The construct demonstrates adequate internal consistency and convergent validity, with a Composite Reliability (CR) of 0.901 and an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of 0.533. Overall, despite some indicators falling short of ideal values, Instrumental Attributes remains a valid construct that effectively reflects tangible job-related factors perceived by potential applicants, with Remuneration being the most dominant dimension.

The construct Symbolic Attributes, which includes three dimensions—Company Reputation, Values, and Corporate Image—demonstrates excellent measurement quality. All indicator loadings exceed 0.70, except for SAT3.2 (loading = 0.673), which is still within an acceptable range and can be retained based on theoretical relevance.

Table IV Measurement Model Evaluation: Intention

Dimension	Indicators	Outer Loading	Cronbachs Alpha	Composite Reliability	AVE
Intention (NMK1)	NMK1.1 Plan to apply soon	0.757			
	NMK1.2 Search for vacancies	0.921	0.814	0.866	0.518
	NMK1.3 Apply to a reputable retail company	0.867			
	NMK1.4 Will apply	0.906			

Source: SmartPLS output (processed June 26, 2025)

Analysis shows that Symbolic Attributes shows very strong reliability and convergent validity, with a Composite Reliability (CR) of 0.922 and an Average Variance Extracted (AVE) of 0.749. These results indicate that symbolic perceptions of the company—such as its reputation, values, and image—are measured consistently and represent a critical construct in this study. Moreover, the Company Reputation dimension indicates the strongest indicators for influencing Intention to work.

Table V Discriminant Validity: Folkner Lackner and HTMT

	Individual	Instrumental	Intention	Symbolic
Fornell Larckner criterion				
Individual	0.739			
Instrumental	0.497	0.73		
Intention	0.57	0.247	0.865	
Symbolic	0.574	0.662	0.516	0.72
Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)				
Individual				
Instrumental	0.571			
Intention	0.632	0.297		
Symbolic	0.668	0.783	0.583	

Source: SmartPLS output (processed June 26, 2025)

The measurement model satisfies the criteria for discriminant validity, as indicated by the square roots of the AVE values exceeding inter-construct correlations (Fornell–Larcker criterion) and all Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratios falling below the conservative threshold of 0.85, with the highest HTMT value being 0.783. These results confirm that the four latent constructs—Individual Traits, Instrumental Attributes, Symbolic Attributes, and Job Application Intention—are conceptually distinct and non-overlapping, supporting the model's ability to capture separate and non-redundant dimensions of the studied phenomena. Additionally, the model meets the requirements for internal reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Each indicator demonstrates the highest loading on its respective construct, with no evidence of

substantial cross-loading on other constructs. This indicates that the indicators uniquely represent their intended latent variables and do not simultaneously measure multiple constructs in a dominant way. Therefore, discriminant validity at the indicator level is also confirmed, further supporting the distinctiveness and measurement accuracy of the constructs used in the model.

Table VI Cross-Loading

	Individual	Instrumental	Intention	Symbolic
IAT1.1.	0.39	0.739	0.156	0.448
IAT1.2.	0.369	0.764	0.188	0.546
IAT2.1.	0.382	0.746	0.094	0.464
IAT2.2.	0.302	0.675	0.09	0.455
IAT2.3.	0.411	0.824	0.153	0.538
IAT3.1.	0.342	0.728	0.246	0.494
IAT3.2.	0.356	0.652	0.239	0.418
IAT3.3.	0.347	0.703	0.259	0.485
ITR1.2.	0.824	0.384	0.525	0.474
ITR1.3.	0.745	0.264	0.431	0.344
ITR1.4.	0.714	0.369	0.375	0.282
ITR2.1.	0.745	0.389	0.436	0.498
ITR2.2.	0.75	0.383	0.395	0.449
ITR2.3.	0.678	0.344	0.315	0.419
ITR2.4.	0.707	0.425	0.439	0.457
NMK1.1.	0.342	-0.011	0.757	0.215
NMK1.2.	0.559	0.244	0.921	0.504
NMK1.3.	0.514	0.26	0.867	0.512
NMK1.4.	0.521	0.294	0.906	0.49
SAT1.2.	0.46	0.428	0.397	0.749
SAT1.3.	0.566	0.401	0.42	0.706
SAT2.1.	0.453	0.53	0.379	0.748
SAT2.3.	0.366	0.48	0.312	0.723
SAT3.1.	0.307	0.565	0.362	0.717
SAT3.2.	0.305	0.457	0.35	0.673

Source: SmartPLS output (processed June 26, 2025)

B. Structural Model Evaluation

All Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values are below the threshold of 3.3, indicating the absence of multicollinearity issues among the predictor constructs. The resulted VIF suggests that the relationships between latent variables can be examined reliably without the risk of bias or distortion due to overlapping variance, thereby ensuring the stability and accuracy of the structural model estimates.

C. Symbolic Attributes as Mediator

The structural model analysis reveals that Individual Traits have a significant direct effect on Job Application Intention (β = 0.594, p < 0.001), with a medium effect size (f^2 = 0.228), indicating that personal characteristics such as motivation and perception directly drive individuals' intention to apply. In contrast, Instrumental Attributes do not have a significant direct effect on intention (β = –0.048, p > 0.05), but they exert a strong and significant influence on Symbolic Attributes (β = 0.501, f^2 = 0.392), suggesting that tangible job features enhance symbolic perceptions of the company. Additionally, both Individual Traits (β = 0.326) and Symbolic Attributes (β = 0.429) significantly influence intention. These findings suggest that Symbolic Attributes function as a key mediator, translating both personal and instrumental perceptions into actual intention to apply.

Table VII Path Coefficients, P-values, Confidence Intervals, and f-square

	Path Coeff.	P values	Confidence Intervals		f-Square
			Lower Limit	Upper Limit	
Individual -> Intention	0.594	0.000	0.407	0.778	0.228
Individual -> Symbolic	0.326	0.000	0.171	0.485	0.166
Instrumental -> Intention	-0.048	0.572	-0.188	0.137	0.064
Instrumental -> Symbolic	0.501	0.000	0.312	0.654	0.392
Symbolic -> Intention	0.429	0.002	0.144	0.695	0.152

Source: SmartPLS output (processed June 26, 2025)

Based on the results of the data analysis presented in the table, it can be concluded that Symbolic Attributes play a crucial bridging role in translating both individual and instrumental perceptions into job application intention. The indirect effect of Individual Traits on Intention through Symbolic Attributes is significant (β = 0.140, p = 0.008), while the direct effect remains significant as well, suggesting partial mediation. In contrast, the indirect effect of Instrumental Attributes on Intention through Symbolic Attributes is also significant (β = 0.215, p = 0.011), but the direct effect is not, indicating full (complementary) mediation. This implies that Symbolic Attributes serve as an essential mechanism by which tangible job characteristics—such as compensation and work environment—must first be internalized as perceptions of company image, values, and reputation before influencing behavioral intentions.

Table VIII Mediation Effects

	Path Coeff.	P values	Confidence Intervals	
			Lower Limit	Upper Limit
Individual -> Symbolic -> Intention	0.140	0.008	0.042	0.249
Instrumental -> Symbolic -> Intention	0.215	0.011	0.062	0.4

Source: SmartPLS output (processed June 26, 2025)

The explanatory power of the model is considered moderate, with the coefficient of determination (R^2) for Intention at 0.416 and Symbolic Attributes at 0.519, indicating that the independent variables explain a substantial portion of variance in the dependent constructs [39]. In terms of model fit, the Standardized Root Mean Square Residual (SRMR) is 0.089, which is slightly above the ideal 0.08 but still acceptable for complex models [40][41]. Additionally, discrepancy measures such as Unweighted Least Squares Discrepancy, Geodesic Discrepancy, and χ^2 do not indicate any severe model misspecification. These results suggest that the structural model provides a reliable basis for hypothesis testing and interpretation.

The hypothesis testing results confirm that the proposed model is valid, with Symbolic Attributes serving as the key mediating variable. Hypotheses H1, H3, H4, and H5 are supported, while H2 is rejected, indicating that Instrumental Attributes do not directly influence Job Application Intention, but their effect is fully mediated through Symbolic Attributes. Among all constructs, Individual Traits exert the strongest direct influence on intention, highlighting the importance of personal motivation and perception in driving job application decisions. These findings emphasize the dual importance of both internal (individual) and symbolic factors in shaping employment preferences in the retail sector.

D. Critical Interpretations

The findings indicate that Individual Traits are the strongest direct driver of intention to work in retail, while Instrumental Attributes influence intention only indirectly via Symbolic Attributes. This suggests that tangible job characteristics—such as remuneration, benefits, and work environment—are insufficient to directly motivate application decisions unless they are embedded within a symbolic framework of organizational values, reputation, and image [13] [34].

Critically, this highlights both an opportunity and a risk. On one hand, retail employers can leverage symbolic cues—such as ethical values, CSR involvement, and positive reputation—to enhance the appeal of their instrumental offerings, particularly for younger cohorts like Gen Z [16] [19]. On the other hand, this dependency creates reputational fragility: if symbolic perceptions deteriorate due to reputational crises, inconsistency between espoused values and actual practices, or CSR failures, instrumental benefits alone may fail to sustain job seeker interest [33] [35].

The full mediation of Instrumental Attributes by Symbolic Attributes raises important questions about long-term sustainability and authenticity. While the model confirms that symbolic appeal is an effective gateway for translating tangible benefits into application intention, prolonged misalignment between perceived symbolic value and actual working conditions could erode employee engagement and increase turnover—precisely the sustainability challenges faced by the retail sector [18] [24]. This points to the risk of an employer branding authenticity gap [15].

E. Practical Dilemmas

From a practical perspective, several dilemmas emerge:

1. Balancing Substance and Image
   Overemphasis on branding without matching improvements in working conditions risks disillusionment and attrition [30]. Symbolic messaging must be backed by genuine HR policies to maintain trust.

2. Segmented Messaging vs. Unified Culture
   While Gen Z may prioritize flexibility, purpose, and personal development, older cohorts often value stability and remuneration [20]. Recruitment segmentation can enhance targeting but risks cultural fragmentation unless anchored in shared organizational values.

3. Managing Symbolic Perceptions in Real Time
   Symbolic attributes—being socially constructed—are volatile and can be influenced by external narratives, social media discourse, or publicized incidents [19]. Employers must develop agile communication strategies and continuous monitoring to preserve reputational equity.

4. Economic Constraints and Brand Promise
   In economic downturns, cost-cutting measures such as layoffs or benefit reductions may undermine the symbolic values previously promoted [9]. Maintaining credibility under such constraints requires transparent communication and value-consistent decision-making.

In essence, while symbolic attributes are a potent mediator in attracting retail talent, they also constitute a strategic vulnerability if not aligned with operational realities. Achieving sustainable talent attraction therefore requires integrating authentic symbolic messaging with resilient instrumental support—ensuring that the values presented externally are reinforced by consistent employee experiences internally

V. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the PLS-SEM analysis, Individual Traits emerged as the strongest predictor of job application intention in the retail sector, while Instrumental Attributes did not exert a direct effect but significantly influenced intention through the mediation of Symbolic Attributes. For the respondents, the Motivation dimension—such as having clear career goals and being driven to work in retail—was the strongest indicator within the Individual Traits construct, compared to the Perception dimension. For Symbolic Attributes, the Company Reputation and Values dimensions contributed more significantly than Corporate Image, suggesting that Gen Z places greater trust in ethical values and reputation than in visual or promotional elements alone.

Structurally, Individual Traits showed the strongest direct influence on application intention, whereas Instrumental Attributes significantly shaped Symbolic Attributes, which in turn directly impacted intention. Mediation analysis confirmed that the Individual → Symbolic → Intention path reflected partial mediation, while the Instrumental → Symbolic → Intention path demonstrated full mediation. These results suggest that symbolic attributes particularly reputation and values serve as a crucial bridge that transforms tangible benefits into psychological appeal for potential candidates.

Theoretically, this study extends the dual-path employer attractiveness model [13] by positioning individual traits as an antecedent that shapes symbolic perceptions and ultimately influences application intention. Moreover, analyzing each construct at the dimensional level—Individual, Instrumental, and Symbolic—contributes valuable insights to the employer branding literature in emerging markets like Indonesia, particularly regarding the challenge of maintaining sustainable talent in the retail sector amid high turnover, market volatility, and increasing digitalization.

Practically, this study emphasizes the importance of a value-centric employer branding strategy, in which companies must consistently communicate their professionalism, integrity, and social contributions to strengthen positive candidate perceptions—especially among Gen Z. Recruitment messaging and organizational communication should highlight clear career pathways, opportunities for self-development, and meaningful challenges to activate the Motivation dimension, which is highly dominant among young applicants.

At the same time, it is recommended that companies integrate instrumental benefits with symbolic messages—for example, linking competitive compensation and a supportive work environment to the company's values—to enhance psychological appeal and foster early-stage loyalty. Employer branding strategies should also be tailored by age segmentation: Gen Z tends to respond more positively to flexibility, personal development, and work-life balance, whereas respondents aged over 28 (13% of the sample) are more likely to prioritize stability and clear remuneration.

In addition, organizations are advised to strengthen digital engagement platforms, such as interactive career portals and social media storytelling, which align with Gen Z's preferences for authenticity, transparency, and continuous feedback. Leveraging employee ambassadors or user-generated content that highlights real-life employee experiences may also reinforce symbolic attributes and improve employer credibility. To further increase engagement, HR professionals should design pre-employment experiences (e.g., internships, job simulations, virtual tours) that reflect the organization's values and culture.

For future research, it is recommended to conduct multi-group analysis by generation (e.g., Gen Z vs. Millennials) using the MICOM and Permutation-MGA approaches to examine differences in structural paths across groups. Additionally, developing a second-order model that consolidates Instrumental and Symbolic dimensions into an overarching Employer Attractiveness construct may provide a more comprehensive understanding of hierarchical influences.

Considering the growing number of young individuals looking for career opportunities, the study showed evidence of the high level of attractiveness of the retail businesses for job-seekers. More importantly, this exemplifies sustainability of the retail industry due to its ability to fulfill the growing demand for employment. Overall, the integration of individual characteristics, symbolic perceptions, and consistent instrumental policies forms a strategic foundation for building a resilient, competitive, and sustainable workforce in the retail sector—one that not only attracts talent but also nurtures long-term organizational alignment and engagement.

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