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The Effect of Employer Branding on Job Application Intention in State-Owned Enterprises: The Mediating Role of Corporate Reputation among Final-Year Students and Fresh Graduates in Yogyakarta

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Abstract: This study examines whether corporate reputation mediates the effect of employer branding on job application intention toward Indonesian state-owned enterprises (SOEs) among final-year students and fresh graduates in the Special Region of Yogyakarta. A cross-sectional quantitative survey was conducted with 100 respondents selected through purposive non-probability sampling. Eligible respondents were final-year students enrolled at universities in Yogyakarta or graduates who had completed their degrees within the preceding 12 months. Data were collected through an online questionnaire in 2025 and analyzed using partial least squares structural equation modeling with SmartPLS 4.1.0.9. Employer branding had a positive effect on job application intention ($\beta = 0.272$, $t = 2.080$, $p = 0.038$) and corporate reputation ($\beta = 0.789$, $t = 16.266$, $p < 0.001$). Corporate reputation also positively affected job application intention ($\beta = 0.492$, $t = 3.675$, $p < 0.001$) and significantly mediated the employer branding-job application intention relationship (indirect $\beta = 0.388$, $t = 3.611$, $p < 0.001$). Because the direct and indirect effects remained significant and had the same direction, corporate reputation functioned as a complementary partial mediator; the indirect pathway accounted for approximately 58.8% of the total effect. The model explained 62.3% of the variance in corporate reputation and 52.7% of the variance in job application intention. The findings show that employer branding attracts young talent not only directly but also by strengthening the perceived reputation of SOEs. Theoretically, the study refines signaling theory by demonstrating that employer-controlled messages and socially validated reputation operate as distinct but complementary signals in early career decision-making.

Keyword: Corporate Reputation, Employer Branding, Final-Year Students, Fresh Graduates, Job Application Intention, State-Owned Enterprises.

INTRODUCTION

Competition for young professional talent has intensified as organizations increasingly recruit through digital channels and prospective applicants compare employment opportunities through career websites, social media, employee reviews, and public information. For Indonesian state-owned enterprises (SOEs), attracting final-year students and fresh graduates is strategically important because these applicants offer emerging skills and long-term workforce potential. At the same time, SOEs compete with private and technology-based firms that are often perceived as more flexible, innovative, and responsive to younger job seekers.

Employer branding is the deliberate effort to communicate the functional, economic, and psychological benefits of employment and to position an organization as a distinctive and desirable place to work (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Theurer et al., 2018). From the applicant perspective, employer attractiveness includes interest, social, economic, development, and application values (Berthon et al., 2005). Together, these values provide information about innovation, relationships, compensation, security, training, career development, and opportunities to use one's skills. Consistent communication of these attributes can strengthen organizational attractiveness and encourage job pursuit.

Corporate reputation is related to, but conceptually distinct from, employer branding. Employer branding is a company-controlled promise about employment experience, whereas corporate reputation is a broader, accumulated evaluation formed through organizational performance, public conduct, and stakeholder judgments (Wartick, 2002; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). Signaling theory explains why this distinction matters in recruitment: because applicants have limited direct knowledge of working conditions, they use observable signals to infer unobservable job and organizational attributes (Spence, 1973). Employer branding supplies a deliberate signal, while reputation supplies external validation of whether that promise appears credible. A favorable reputation can also increase the pride applicants anticipate from organizational membership (Cable & Turban, 2003).

International evidence generally shows that employer attractiveness and employer branding increase intention to apply (Jiang & Iles, 2011; Stariņeca, 2015; Prasetyaningtyas et al., 2022), while corporate reputation reduces perceived employment risk and signals employer quality (Williamson et al., 2010). These relationships may operate differently in public enterprises, where employment messages are evaluated alongside highly visible organizational performance, governance, and public-service responsibilities. The SOE setting therefore provides a useful context for examining whether a controlled recruitment signal becomes more persuasive when it is supported by a broader stakeholder-based reputation.

In Indonesia, SOEs are associated with employment stability, national development roles, and broad career opportunities, although some are also perceived as formal or bureaucratic. Earlier research documented differences between human resource management in Indonesian state-owned and private enterprises (Sutiyono, 2007), and later reviews emphasized the need for public enterprises to adapt their employment systems to changing labor-market expectations (Xiao & Cooke, 2020). Recent evidence from the Indonesian energy sector also confirms the relevance of employer branding and career-related perceptions for younger job seekers (Hakam et al., 2024). Nevertheless, mediation findings remain inconsistent. Soeling et al. (2022), for example, found that organizational reputation did not mediate the employer attractiveness-intention relationship among final-year students from Indonesian public universities. This inconsistency suggests that the role of reputation may depend on ownership context, respondent characteristics, and the local labor market.

Yogyakarta is a relevant setting because it is a major higher-education center with a large and diverse pool of final-year students and recent graduates. Young people in the region navigate the transition from university to work while comparing public, private, and

entrepreneurial career paths (Kuslarassakti & Sutopo, 2020). Examining SOEs in this localized talent market can therefore reveal how prospective applicants combine employer promises with broader organizational standing before entering a recruitment process.

The novelty of this study lies in both its context and its theoretical specification. Empirically, it tests the employer branding-corporate reputation-job application intention mechanism specifically in Indonesian SOEs and among final-year students and fresh graduates in Yogyakarta, a localized graduate labor market that has received limited attention. Theoretically, the study separates two signals that are often treated as overlapping: employer branding as a controllable organizational message and corporate reputation as a socially validated evaluation. Testing complementary partial mediation therefore advances signaling theory by showing not only whether an employer message is attractive, but also whether its influence depends on credibility acquired through wider stakeholder judgments. The analysis further quantifies the direct and indirect pathways and the proportion of the total effect transmitted through reputation.

Based on this framework, four hypotheses were tested: H1, employer branding positively affects job application intention; H2, employer branding positively affects corporate reputation; H3, corporate reputation positively affects job application intention; and H4, corporate reputation mediates the effect of employer branding on job application intention.

METHOD

Research Design, Population, and Sample

This study used a cross-sectional quantitative survey design. The target population comprised final-year students enrolled at universities in the Special Region of Yogyakarta and fresh graduates who had completed their degrees within the preceding 12 months. A complete cross-university list of all eligible individuals was not available; therefore, the study did not treat an estimated regional population total as a probability-sampling denominator.

Purposive non-probability sampling was used because no complete sampling frame containing all eligible final-year students and recent graduates was available. Respondents were eligible when they (1) were enrolled in the final year of a university program in the Special Region of Yogyakarta or had graduated within the preceding 12 months, (2) voluntarily consented to participate, and (3) completed all questionnaire items required for analysis. The questionnaire was administered online through Google Forms in 2025, and data collection yielded 100 valid responses.

Sample adequacy was evaluated as a retrospective sensitivity check rather than through the Slovin formula, which is not appropriate for claiming a probability-based margin of error under purposive sampling. Using the inverse square root method for directional PLS-SEM hypotheses at $\alpha = 0.05$ and power = 0.80, the smallest significant structural coefficient in the model ($|\beta|_{min} = 0.272$) implied a minimum sample of 84 observations: $N_{min} = \text{ceil}[(2.486/0.272)^2]$ (Kock & Hadaya, 2018). The final sample of 100 exceeded this benchmark. This check addresses statistical sensitivity only and does not establish population representativeness.

The sampling approach creates potential selection bias. An online voluntary survey can overrepresent respondents with reliable internet access, stronger engagement with employment topics, or pre-existing interest in SOEs. In this sample, 89% of respondents stated that they were interested in applying to an SOE, suggesting that the findings may be more representative of SOE-oriented job seekers than of all final-year students and recent graduates in Yogyakarta. The results should therefore be interpreted as explanatory evidence for the surveyed group rather than as population estimates. The retrospective sample-sensitivity calculation does not remove this limitation.

Measurement of Variables

The questionnaire measured employer branding, corporate reputation, and job application intention using agreement-based items adapted from established constructs. Employer branding was represented by ten items covering the five employer-attractiveness dimensions proposed by Berthon et al. (2005). Corporate reputation was represented by ten items derived from the multidimensional reputation perspective of Fombrun et al. (2000) and recruitment-reputation research (Williamson et al., 2010). Job application intention was represented by four behavioral-intention items consistent with organizational-pursuit measures (Highhouse et al., 2003). The wording was adapted to the SOE context.

Table 1. Operationalization of Employer Branding

Dimension	Statement
Interest value	The company offers innovative products/services and supports employee creativity.
Interest value	The company provides a stimulating work environment and opportunities to learn.
Social value	I expect good working relationships with colleagues.
Social value	The company demonstrates concern for employees and the surrounding community.
Economic value	The company provides compensation that is appropriate for the work performed.
Economic value	I would feel secure and comfortable working for the company.
Development value	The company provides opportunities to develop my skills and career.
Development value	The company provides training and professional development opportunities.
Application value	The company provides opportunities to apply and demonstrate my skills.
Application value	The company recognizes and makes use of the skills I possess.

Table 2. Operationalization of Corporate Reputation

Dimension	Statement
Emotional appeal	I would feel proud to be associated with this company.
Emotional appeal	I have positive feelings about this company.
Products and services	The products/services offered by this company are of high quality.
Products and services	This company is known for innovation in its products/services.
Workplace environment	This company treats its employees fairly and respectfully.
Workplace environment	The work environment supports employee development.
Social responsibility	The company demonstrates commitment to social and environmental responsibility.
Social responsibility	The company actively contributes to activities that benefit the community.
Financial performance	This company has stable and profitable financial performance.
Financial performance	This company is recognized as financially successful.

Table 3. Operationalization of Job Application Intention

Indicator	Statement
Information search	I actively seek information about employment opportunities in this company.
Contact initiation	I intend to make initial contact or submit an application to this company.
Recruitment-process readiness	I am willing to complete the recruitment process for this company.
Offer consideration	If I receive an offer, I will seriously consider joining this company.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using PLS-SEM in SmartPLS version 4.1.0.9. The reflective measurement model was assessed using indicator loadings, average variance extracted (AVE), Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, and composite reliability (rho_C). Indicator loadings of at least 0.70, AVE values above 0.50, and reliability values above 0.70 were treated as acceptable. Discriminant validity was evaluated using the heterotrait-monotrait ratio (HTMT), with values below 0.85 indicating adequate construct distinctiveness (Henseler et al., 2015). Because all variables were obtained from a single self-report questionnaire, potential common method bias was examined through a full-collinearity variance inflation factor (VIF) assessment; values below 3.3 were treated as evidence that common-method

variance was unlikely to materially distort the model (Kock, 2015). The structural model was evaluated using R^2 values, path coefficients, and bootstrapped t statistics and p values. A relationship was considered statistically significant when $t > 1.96$ and $p < 0.05$. Mediation was assessed from the significance and direction of the direct and indirect effects (Abdillah & Hartono, 2015; Hair et al., 2022).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

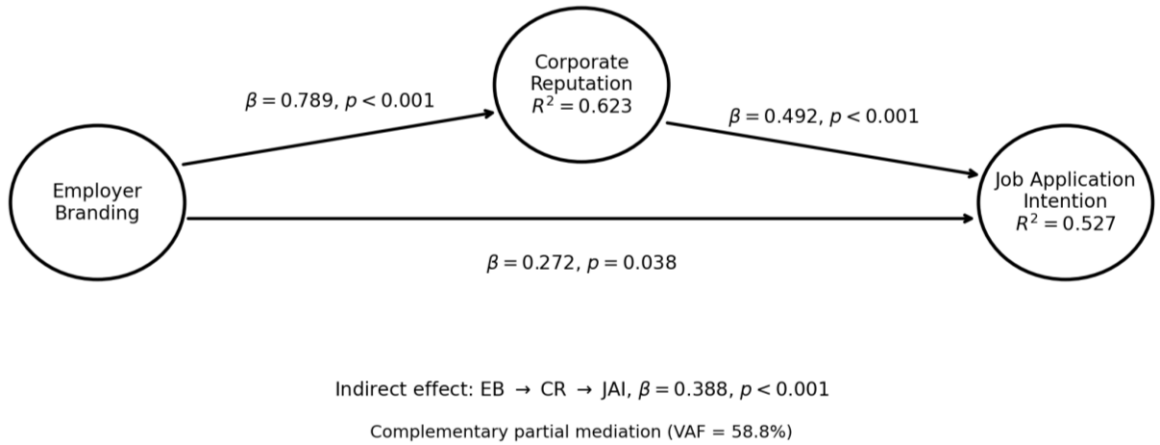
Respondent Characteristics

Table 4. Respondent Profile (N = 100)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	58	58%
Gender	Female	42	42%
Age	20 years	5	5%
Age	21-23 years	61	61%
Age	24-26 years	29	29%
Age	>27 years	5	5%
Educational status	Final-year student	50	50%
Educational status	Fresh graduate	50	50%
Interested in applying to an SOE	Yes	89	89%
Interested in applying to an SOE	No	11	11%

The respondents were predominantly male (58%) and aged 21-23 years (61%). Final-year students and fresh graduates were equally represented. Most respondents (89%) reported an existing interest in applying to an SOE; this distribution is relevant when interpreting the selection-bias limitation discussed in the method and limitations sections.

Measurement Model



Source: SmartPLS output processed by the authors, 2025.

Figure 1. Structural Model and Standardized Path Coefficients

Table 5. Indicator Loadings

Indicator	Construct	Loading
EB1	Employer Branding	0.837
EB2	Employer Branding	0.776
EB3	Employer Branding	0.798
EB4	Employer Branding	0.841
EB5	Employer Branding	0.811
EB6	Employer Branding	0.804
EB7	Employer Branding	0.806

Indicator	Construct	Loading
EB8	Employer Branding	0.767
EB9	Employer Branding	0.861
EB10	Employer Branding	0.868
CR1	Corporate Reputation	0.840
CR2	Corporate Reputation	0.759
CR3	Corporate Reputation	0.757
CR4	Corporate Reputation	0.832
CR5	Corporate Reputation	0.898
CR6	Corporate Reputation	0.841
CR7	Corporate Reputation	0.872
CR8	Corporate Reputation	0.861
CR9	Corporate Reputation	0.871
CR10	Corporate Reputation	0.861
JAI1	Job Application Intention	0.849
JAI2	Job Application Intention	0.840
JAI3	Job Application Intention	0.916
JAI4	Job Application Intention	0.829

All indicator loadings exceeded 0.70, ranging from 0.757 to 0.916. The indicators therefore demonstrated adequate reliability and convergent validity at the item level.

Table 6. Construct Reliability and Convergent Validity

Construct	AVE	Cronbach's α	rho_A	rho_C
Employer Branding	0.668	0.945	0.948	0.953
Corporate Reputation	0.706	0.953	0.954	0.960
Job Application Intention	0.738	0.881	0.882	0.918

AVE values ranged from 0.668 to 0.738 and exceeded the 0.50 criterion. Cronbach's alpha, rho_A, and composite reliability values were also above 0.70. Thus, the three constructs met the criteria for internal consistency and convergent validity.

Table 7. Heterotrait-Monotrait Ratio (HTMT)

Construct	EB	CR	JAI
Employer Branding (EB)	—		
Corporate Reputation (CR)	0.789	—	
Job Application Intention (JAI)	0.660	0.707	—

The HTMT values were 0.789 for employer branding-corporate reputation, 0.660 for employer branding-job application intention, and 0.707 for corporate reputation-job application intention. All values were below the strict threshold of 0.85, supporting discriminant validity among the three constructs.

Common Method Bias Assessment

The full-collinearity VIF values were 2.804 for employer branding, 3.164 for corporate reputation, and 2.116 for job application intention. Each value was below the 3.3 criterion, indicating that severe common method bias was unlikely to account for the observed relationships. This statistical check complements the procedural safeguards used in the questionnaire, including voluntary participation, standardized instructions, and neutral item wording.

Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Table 8. Coefficient of Determination

Endogenous Construct	R^2	Adjusted R^2	Interpretation
Corporate Reputation	0.623	0.619	Moderate
Job Application Intention	0.527	0.517	Moderate

Employer branding explained 62.3% of the variance in corporate reputation. Employer branding and corporate reputation jointly explained 52.7% of the variance in job application intention. Both values indicate moderate explanatory power.

Table 9. Direct and Indirect Effects

Hypothesis	Path	β	t	p	Decision
H1	Employer Branding → Job Application Intention	0.272	2.080	0.038	Supported
H2	Employer Branding → Corporate Reputation	0.789	16.266	<0.001	Supported
H3	Corporate Reputation → Job Application Intention	0.492	3.675	<0.001	Supported
H4	Employer Branding → Corporate Reputation → Job Application Intention	0.388	3.611	<0.001	Supported

All four hypotheses were supported. Employer branding had a positive direct effect on job application intention and a strong positive effect on corporate reputation. Corporate reputation also had a positive effect on job application intention. The indirect effect of employer branding through corporate reputation was significant. The total effect of employer branding on job application intention was 0.660 (0.272 + 0.388), and the indirect effect represented approximately 58.8% of the total effect. Because both direct and indirect effects were significant and had the same direction, the result indicates complementary partial mediation.

Discussion

1. The Effect of Employer Branding on Job Application Intention

Employer branding had a positive direct effect on job application intention (β = 0.272), confirming that interest, social, economic, development, and application values shape applicants' early evaluations of an employer. These messages reduce uncertainty about working conditions and career opportunities before direct experience is available (Spence, 1973) and are consistent with the theory of planned behavior, in which favorable evaluations contribute to behavioral intention (Ajzen, 1991). However, the direct effect was smaller than the effect of corporate reputation, indicating that attractive employer claims alone are not the strongest basis for application decisions.

2. The Effect of Employer Branding on Corporate Reputation

Employer branding strongly predicted corporate reputation (β = 0.789). Consistent messages about innovation, employee development, fair treatment, social contribution, and financial stability can therefore shape a broad organizational evaluation rather than only a recruitment image. This finding extends employer-brand equity arguments (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Theurer et al., 2018) by positioning employer branding as an antecedent of reputation among external labor-market audiences. In SOEs, credible employer communication may be especially important for updating pre-existing perceptions of bureaucracy or limited flexibility, provided that the messages are supported by observable practices.

3. The Effect of Corporate Reputation on Job Application Intention

Corporate reputation positively influenced job application intention (β = 0.492) and exerted a stronger effect than the direct employer-branding pathway. This pattern is theoretically plausible in the SOE context for three reasons. First, reputation aggregates

multiple externally visible signals—organizational performance, governance, employee treatment, social responsibility, and contribution to public value—whereas employer branding is recognized as company-controlled communication. Second, the public ownership and high visibility of SOEs expose their conduct to broader stakeholder scrutiny, allowing reputation to function as third-party validation of employment promises. Third, final-year students and fresh graduates generally possess limited firsthand employment information and may therefore rely more heavily on a credible organizational track record to reduce career risk and anticipate membership pride (Cable & Turban, 2003). The high proportion of respondents already interested in SOEs may also have increased their attention to reputational information when evaluating whether to apply.

4. The Mediating Role of Corporate Reputation

Corporate reputation functioned as a complementary partial mediator. Employer branding influenced application intentions directly by communicating attractive employment benefits and indirectly by strengthening the reputation through which applicants assessed the credibility of those benefits. The indirect pathway accounted for 58.8% of the total effect, showing that validation through reputation was a substantial part of the recruitment mechanism. This result differs from Soeling et al. (2022), who found no mediating effect among final-year students from Indonesian public universities. The contrast suggests that reputation is context-dependent and may vary with organizational ownership, local labor-market conditions, respondent composition, and measurement choices.

5. Theoretical Contribution

The study advances signaling-based recruitment theory by specifying a two-stage validation process. Employer branding represents the signal intentionally transmitted by the organization, while corporate reputation represents the socially accumulated assessment that validates, weakens, or reframes that signal. The significant direct and indirect effects demonstrate that signal attractiveness and signal credibility operate simultaneously rather than as interchangeable explanations. Moreover, the 58.8% indirect share indicates that much of employer branding's influence is realized only after the message is translated into a favorable stakeholder-based evaluation. This distinction extends prior employer-branding research beyond confirming a simple positive relationship and shows how signaling operates in a highly visible public-enterprise context.

6. Practical Implications

SOE human resource managers should manage employer branding and corporate reputation as an integrated system. Recruitment communication should emphasize career development, training, fair rewards, innovative work, psychological safety, and opportunities to contribute to public value. These claims should be supported by transparent career pathways, employee testimonials, consistent recruitment procedures, visible innovation programs, and documented social and environmental performance. Because reputation was more strongly related to application intention than the direct employer-brand pathway, promotional campaigns unsupported by employee experience, governance, and public performance are unlikely to remain persuasive.

7. Limitations and Future Research

The findings are subject to several limitations. Purposive, online, and voluntary sampling may have produced self-selection bias, and the high proportion of respondents already interested in SOEs may have increased average intention scores. Although the sample exceeded the retrospective inverse-square-foot sensitivity benchmark, the absence of probability sampling and the use of only 100 respondents from one region limit external validity. The full-collinearity VIF results did not indicate severe common method bias, but the cross-sectional, self-reported design still prevents strong causal inference and cannot eliminate all method-related effects. The study also measured intention rather than actual

application behavior. Future research should use larger probability-based or stratified samples across regions, collect longitudinal or multi-source data, include actual application outcomes, and test differences by university type, gender, field of study, prior SOE exposure, and digital recruitment engagement.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study demonstrates that employer branding positively influences job application intention both directly and indirectly through corporate reputation among final-year students and fresh graduates in Yogyakarta. Employer branding strongly predicted corporate reputation, and reputation in turn increased intention to apply. Corporate reputation functioned as a complementary partial mediator and accounted for approximately 58.8% of the total effect. The findings refine signaling theory by showing that an employer-controlled promise becomes more persuasive when it is validated through a favorable stakeholder-based reputation. For SOEs, attracting young talent therefore requires alignment between recruitment communication and credible evidence of employee development, fairness, innovation, social responsibility, governance, and organizational performance. Because the data were obtained through purposive online sampling and most respondents already expressed interest in SOE employment, the conclusions should be interpreted within the surveyed context rather than generalized to the entire graduate population.

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