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**EMPLOYER ATTRACTIVENESS,  
CORPORATE REPUTATION, AND JOB  
PURSUIT INTENTION: A STUDY OF  
EMPLOYER BRANDING IN THE  
VIETNAMESE YOUNG WORKFORCE**

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## CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. Research background and Rationale

In recent years, competition for talent has intensified in many labor markets. Organizations no longer compete only through salary, benefits, or promotion opportunities. They also compete through the reputation, attractiveness, values, and symbolic meanings they create in the minds of potential applicants. For this reason, employer-related perceptions have become an important topic in recruitment, organizational behavior, human resource management, and branding research (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Theurer et al., 2018).

This development reflects a broader change in how people search for jobs and evaluate employers. Prospective applicants can now access many organizational cues before any formal contact with an employer takes place. Company websites, social media pages, online employee reviews, digital news, peer discussion, and public employer narratives can all shape how an organization is judged as a place to work (Van Hove & Lievens, 2009; Carpentier et al., 2019; El-Menawy & Saleh, 2023). As a result, employer evaluation often begins before direct organizational experience and is influenced by both informational and symbolic cues.

This issue is particularly relevant in Vietnam. The country is experiencing continuing economic transformation, digital development, and increasing competition for skilled labor. In such a context, organizations need not only to recruit people, but also to become credible and attractive in the eyes of young talent. For employers, the challenge is not only how to offer employment opportunities, but also how to create favorable perceptions before applicants have direct work experience with the organization.

University students aged 19 to 22 form an important group in this context. At this stage, many students are approaching labor market entry, considering internships, preparing for graduate recruitment, and forming early career preferences. However, they usually do not yet have extensive direct experience inside the organizations they evaluate. Their judgments are likely to be based on public cues, digital information, peer narratives, symbolic meanings, and early comparison across employers. This is a stage at which applicant-side employer branding perceptions may already matter, even before actual application behavior takes place.

The dissertation approaches employer branding from the external, applicant-facing perspective. Although the dissertation title retains the term employer branding, the empirical focus is on how employer branding is received and interpreted by prospective applicants. More specifically, the dissertation examines applicant-side employer branding perceptions through two key constructs: corporate reputation and employer attractiveness. Corporate reputation reflects a broad evaluation of the organization's credibility, public standing, and perceived quality, while employer attractiveness reflects the extent to which the organization is perceived as a desirable place to work (Cable & Turban, 2003; Berthon et al., 2005; Walker, 2010). These two constructs are related, but they are not identical. Reputation reflects broader institutional standing, whereas attractiveness reflects a more personally filtered judgment of employment desirability.

Although previous studies have shown that employer-related perceptions can influence applicant responses, an important question remains insufficiently answered: how do early employer evaluations become meaningful enough to support job pursuit intention? Many studies have examined employer attractiveness, reputation, image, or fit as predictors of intention to apply. However, fewer studies have explained the internal motivational process through which these early perceptions become personally meaningful and behaviorally relevant. This is the main theoretical position of the dissertation.

The dissertation argues that this missing explanation can be developed through the concept of inspiration. Based on the work of Thrash and Elliot (2003, 2004) and Böttger et al. (2017), inspiration is treated not as a single broad feeling, but as a two-stage process consisting of inspired-by and inspired-to. The inspired-by stage reflects initial psychological evocation, admiration, or stimulation. The inspired-to stage reflects stronger motivational readiness to move toward action. This distinction helps explain how favorable employer perceptions may develop into job pursuit intention.

The dissertation recognizes that not all job seekers respond to the same employer evaluations in the same way. One possible reason is perceived value congruence, which refers to the extent to which individuals believe that their own values are aligned with the values associated with the organization (Cable & Judge, 1996; Cable & DeRue, 2002). When an employer is perceived as attractive and also value-consistent, its meaning may become more personal and motivationally stronger. Perceived value congruence is examined as a boundary condition that may strengthen the relationship between employer evaluations and early inspiration.

the rationale for this dissertation comes from both theoretical and practical needs. Theoretically, the literature still lacks a clear explanation of the motivational process through which applicant-side employer branding perceptions develop into job pursuit intention, especially in pre-employment settings. Practically, organizations in Vietnam need a better understanding of how young talent evaluates employers before direct organizational experience occurs. These concerns provide the foundation for the dissertation.

### 1.2. Research Significance

The dissertation is significant in several ways.

First, it contributes to the literature on employer branding perceptions and recruitment by shifting attention from direct predictor models toward a more process-based explanation. Instead of asking only whether corporate reputation or employer attractiveness is associated with job pursuit intention, the dissertation examines how these employer evaluations may become motivationally meaningful through inspiration.

Second, the dissertation introduces inspiration into the study of employer evaluation in a structured way. Although inspiration has been examined in psychology and marketing research, it has rarely been used to explain pre-employment employer response. By distinguishing between inspired-by and inspired-to, the dissertation provides a more detailed explanation of how favorable employer perceptions may develop into action-oriented motivation.

Third, the dissertation integrates Signaling Theory, Social Identity Theory, and the person–organization fit literature. Signaling Theory explains how applicants interpret employer cues under uncertainty. Social Identity Theory explains why organizational meanings can become personally relevant. The value congruence perspective further explains why the same employer evaluation may be more motivating for some applicants than for others.

Fourth, the study contributes context-specific evidence from Vietnam. Employer branding and recruitment research has developed strongly in Western contexts, while evidence from Vietnam remains more limited. By focusing on Vietnamese university students aged 19 to 22, the dissertation provides empirical evidence from a group that is highly relevant to early-career recruitment and employer positioning.

Fifth, the dissertation has practical significance. The findings can help organizations, recruiters, and employer-brand managers understand how young

talent forms employer-related judgments and why some evaluations become more behaviorally meaningful than others. This can support more effective recruitment communication, value-based employer positioning, and early-career talent attraction strategies in Vietnam.

### 1.3. Research objectives

The dissertation pursues the following objectives:

- To examine the associations among corporate reputation, employer attractiveness, and early inspirational response within a perception-based employer branding framework
- To examine the proposed sequential role of inspiration, represented through being inspired by and being inspired to, in explaining how employer branding perceptions are associated with job pursuit intention
- To investigate whether perceived value congruence functions as a condition that strengthens the relationship between employer branding perceptions and early inspirational response
- To derive context-sensitive managerial implications for organizations seeking to strengthen corporate reputation, employer attractiveness, and early-career recruitment communication among Vietnamese student job seekers

### 1.4. Research questions

To address these objectives and respond to the identified research gaps, this dissertation seeks to answer the following questions:

- How are corporate reputation and employer attractiveness associated with early inspiration and job pursuit intention among Vietnamese university students aged 19 to 22?
- How does the two-stage construct of inspiration, represented by being inspired by and being inspired to, help explain the process through which employer branding perceptions are associated with job pursuit intention?
- To what extent does perceived value congruence strengthen the relationship between employer branding perceptions and early inspirational response?
- What implications can be derived for organizations seeking to attract Vietnamese student job seekers through reputation building, employer attractiveness, and recruitment communication

### 1.5. Research gap

Although employer branding, employer attractiveness, and job pursuit intention have attracted increasing attention, several research gaps remain.

First, much of the existing literature has focused on direct relationships. Many studies have examined employer attractiveness, employer image, corporate reputation, organizational fit, or corporate social responsibility as predictors of application intention or job pursuit intention. However, fewer studies have examined the internal psychological process that links early employer evaluation to stronger behavioral intention (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Theurer et al., 2018). This means that the question of how employer evaluation becomes motivationally meaningful remains underdeveloped.

Second, inspiration has not been sufficiently used in employer branding and recruitment research. Inspiration has been discussed in psychology as a state involving evocation, transcendence, and approach motivation (Thrash & Elliot, 2003, 2004). It has also been operationalized in consumer research through the distinction between inspired-by and inspired-to (Böttger et al., 2017). However, this two-stage structure has rarely been applied to explain the movement from employer evaluation to job pursuit intention. As a result, one potentially useful motivational mechanism remains underused in the employer evaluation literature.

Third, there is a need for clearer conceptual distinction among related constructs in employer evaluation research. Corporate reputation, employer attractiveness, employer image, organizational prestige, and job pursuit intention are related, but they should not be treated as interchangeable. Corporate reputation reflects a broader social and institutional evaluation, while employer attractiveness reflects a more personal employment-related judgment. Similarly, inspired-to and job pursuit intention are conceptually close, but they differ because inspired-to reflects motivational readiness, whereas job pursuit intention reflects stated behavioral intention.

Fourth, although value congruence and person–organization fit have been widely studied, they are often treated as direct predictors of attraction or choice. Fewer studies have examined perceived value congruence as a selective boundary condition that may strengthen specific links within a motivational sequence. This creates room for a more precise interpretation of how fit-related judgments operate in pre-employment contexts (Cable & Judge, 1996; Cable & DeRue, 2002; Kristof-Brown et al., 2023).

Fifth, much employer branding research has been conducted in Western settings. There is still a need for more evidence from emerging economies and from contexts in which young people form employer perceptions mainly through indirect and digital information. Vietnamese evidence is growing, but it remains limited, especially in studies that combine corporate reputation, employer attractiveness, inspiration, perceived value congruence, and job pursuit intention in one framework (Nguyen & Hoang, 2022; Thang et al., 2023; Thanh et al., 2024; Thang & Trang, 2024).

### 1.6. Scope and Limitation

This dissertation examines employer branding from the external, applicant-facing perspective. Within this broad domain, it focuses on the perceptual outcomes through which employer branding is received and interpreted by prospective applicants. Specifically, corporate reputation and employer attractiveness are treated as two key applicant-side employer branding perceptions. The dissertation also examines inspiration as a motivational mechanism and perceived value congruence as a boundary condition in the relationship between these evaluations and job pursuit intention.

The population scope is limited to Vietnamese university students aged 19 to 22. These respondents are treated as prospective student job seekers who are approaching labor market entry and engaging in early employer evaluation. This focus is appropriate because it allows the dissertation to examine employer-related perceptions before they are substantially shaped by long-term organizational experience. However, the findings may not generalize directly to older job seekers, experienced employees, or applicants whose career priorities and information sources differ.

The geographic scope is limited to Vietnam. This setting is relevant because it enables the dissertation to examine employer branding perceptions within a transitional and digitally developing labor-market context. However, this national focus limits the direct generalizability of the findings to other cultural, institutional, and economic settings.

Methodologically, the study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. This design is appropriate for examining structural associations within a relatively large sample, but it does not permit strong causal inference. In addition, the reliance on self-reported data introduces possible limitations such as common method bias and social desirability bias, although procedural and statistical remedies were applied.

The measurement scope should also be noted. The dissertation uses shortened and context-adapted measures informed by prior literature. The measures

are not presented as direct replications of the original scales. Corporate reputation is measured as applicant-perceived reputation, employer attractiveness is measured through a concise set of selected indicators, perceived value congruence is measured as subjective alignment, and inspiration is adapted from a customer-inspiration framework to the job-seeker context. These choices are appropriate for the research setting, but they also require cautious interpretation of the findings.

Within these boundaries, the dissertation seeks to provide a defensible and context-sensitive explanation of how employer evaluations become linked to inspiration and job pursuit intention among Vietnamese university students approaching labor market entry.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Employer branding, employer brand and related constructs

Employer branding has become an important topic in recruitment, organizational behavior, human resource management, and marketing. In general, employer branding refers to the strategic process through which an organization develops and communicates a distinctive identity as an employer (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Employer brand, meanwhile, refers to the set of meanings, associations, and perceptions that current or prospective employees hold about an organization as a place to work (Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Theurer et al., 2018).

Although the title of this dissertation uses the term employer branding, the empirical focus is on applicant-side employer branding perceptions. This is appropriate because the respondents are Vietnamese university students who are approaching labor market entry but have limited direct organizational experience. At this stage, employer-related judgments are formed mainly through public information, recruitment communication, social media, peer discussion, organizational visibility, and symbolic cues rather than through long-term internal work experience. The dissertation does not measure the full range of employer-branding activities conducted by organizations. Instead, it examines how employer branding is received and interpreted by prospective applicants.

Within this applicant-side perspective, the dissertation focuses on two employer evaluations: corporate reputation and employer attractiveness. Corporate reputation refers to a broad evaluation of the organization's credibility, public standing, and perceived quality (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Walker, 2010). In recruitment contexts, corporate reputation can operate as a reputation perception that helps prospective

applicants reduce uncertainty about the organization (Cable & Turban, 2003). Employer attractiveness refers to the perceived benefits and desirability that a potential employee associates with working for a particular organization (Berthon et al., 2005). It reflects a more personal employment-related judgment about whether the organization is seen as a desirable place to work.

The distinction between corporate reputation and employer attractiveness is important. Corporate reputation is broader and more socially shared. It reflects the organization's standing, credibility, legitimacy, and public regard. Employer attractiveness is more personal and employment-specific. It reflects whether the organization appears desirable and relevant to the individual's career expectations. A company may have a strong public reputation but may not be equally attractive to all job seekers. Similarly, an organization may be attractive to a particular group of applicants even if its wider public reputation is less dominant.

The dissertation also includes inspiration, perceived value congruence, and job pursuit intention. Inspiration is treated as a two-stage motivational process consisting of inspired-by and inspired-to. Inspired-by refers to the initial state of being stimulated, interested, or psychologically evoked by the employer. Inspired-to refers to the stronger motivational readiness to move toward the employer. Perceived value congruence refers to the respondent's perceived alignment between personal values and the values associated with the organization (Cable & Judge, 1996; Cable & DeRue, 2002). Job pursuit intention refers to the respondent's stated intention or willingness to pursue employment with the organization (Highhouse et al., 2003).

### 2.2. Literature review on inspiration

Inspiration has traditionally been studied in psychology rather than recruitment research. Thrash and Elliot (2003, 2004) conceptualized inspiration as a motivational state involving evocation and movement toward action. This means that inspiration is not only a positive feeling. It involves being mentally stimulated by something and then becoming motivated to move toward a possibility or goal.

Böttger et al. (2017) later operationalized inspiration in consumer research as a two-stage construct consisting of inspired-by and inspired-to. Inspired-by reflects the state of being evoked by an external stimulus, while inspired-to reflects the motivation to act. This distinction is useful for the dissertation because job seekers may first feel interested in or stimulated by an employer, but that early response must develop into stronger motivational readiness before it becomes closely linked to job pursuit intention.

In employer evaluation, inspiration is relevant because employer perceptions often contain symbolic and aspirational meanings. A reputable or attractive

employer may not only be evaluated positively, but may also evoke admiration, aspiration, or a sense of future possibility. This is especially important for students who are approaching labor market entry and are still forming professional identity and career expectations. The dissertation uses inspiration as a motivational mechanism linking employer evaluations with job pursuit intention.

Inspired-by and inspired-to are related, but they are not identical. Inspired-by reflects the initial cognitive-affective activation caused by the employer. Inspired-to reflects the action-oriented motivational state that follows. This distinction allows the dissertation to explain how favorable employer perceptions may move from evaluation to motivation and then to job pursuit intention.

### **2.3. Perceived value congruence as a boundary condition**

Value congruence is rooted in the person–organization fit literature. It refers to the extent to which an individual perceives alignment between personal values and organizational values (Cable & Judge, 1996; Cable & DeRue, 2002; Kristof-Brown et al., 2023). In recruitment contexts, perceived value congruence matters because applicants often evaluate whether an organization appears compatible with who they are, what they value, and what kind of professional identity they want to develop.

In this dissertation, value congruence is treated as perceived value congruence rather than as objective or profile-based congruence. This distinction is important because the respondents are prospective student job seekers who do not yet have direct internal experience with the organizations they evaluate. What can reasonably be measured in this context is their perceived alignment with the employer’s values, culture, and mission, not an objective match between their values and the organization’s actual internal values.

The dissertation treats perceived value congruence as a boundary condition rather than as the main motivational mechanism. The logic is that similar employer evaluations may not produce the same level of inspiration for all respondents. When students perceive that an employer’s values are aligned with their own, favorable employer evaluations may become more personally meaningful. Perceived value congruence is expected to strengthen the relationship between employer evaluations and the inspired-by state.

### **2.4. Theoretical foundation**

The dissertation is grounded mainly in Signaling Theory, Social Identity Theory, and Inspiration Theory, with person–organization fit literature supporting the role of perceived value congruence.

Signaling Theory explains how individuals interpret observable cues under uncertainty (Spence, 1973; Connelly et al., 2011). In recruitment settings, prospective applicants usually lack direct knowledge of the employer’s internal reality. They rely on available cues, such as reputation-related information, public image, employer communication, and perceived employment attractiveness, to infer what the organization may be like as a workplace. In this dissertation, corporate reputation and employer attractiveness are treated as employer evaluations formed from such cues.

Social Identity Theory explains why organizational meanings can become personally relevant (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Ashforth & Mael, 1989). People do not evaluate organizations only in functional terms. They may also be attracted to organizations that represent desirable values, status, identity, or future self-image. This helps explain why employer evaluations may evoke inspiration rather than only rational assessment.

Inspiration Theory explains the movement from evocation to motivation. It supports the proposed sequence in which employer evaluations first contribute to inspired-by, inspired-by then contributes to inspired-to, and inspired-to contributes to job pursuit intention. This theory is central to the dissertation because the main contribution of the study lies in explaining how favorable employer perceptions become action-oriented motivation.

Person–organization fit literature supports the role of perceived value congruence. When students perceive stronger alignment between their own values and those associated with the employer, employer evaluations may become more personally meaningful and more capable of evoking inspiration.

### **2.5. Research hypotheses and research model**

Based on the literature and theoretical foundation, the dissertation proposes a model in which corporate reputation and employer attractiveness are core employer brand perceptions, inspiration operates as a two-stage mechanism, and value congruence functions as a moderator.

Corporate reputation is hypothesized to have a positive association with employer attractiveness because a favorable reputation can strengthen general desirability as an employer. This expectation is consistent with the idea that reputation serves as an evaluative basis for organizational quality and legitimacy.

Corporate reputation is also hypothesized to have a positive association with inspired-by. A well-regarded organization may evoke admiration, interest, or psychological stimulation among young job seekers.

Employer attractiveness is hypothesized to have a positive association with inspired-by. If an organization is seen as desirable, it is more likely to generate early positive evocation.

Inspired-by is hypothesized to have a positive association with inspired-to. This reflects the conceptual logic of inspiration as a sequence from admiration to action-oriented movement.

Inspired-to is hypothesized to have a positive association with job pursuit intention. Once early inspiration becomes stronger motivational readiness, job pursuit intention should increase.

Finally, value congruence is hypothesized to strengthen the relationship between employer perceptions and early inspiration. More specifically, it is proposed to moderate both the relationship between corporate reputation and inspired-by, and the relationship between employer attractiveness and inspired-by.

Accordingly, the dissertation proposes the following hypotheses:

H1: Corporate reputation is positively associated with employer attractiveness.

H2: Corporate reputation is positively associated with inspired-by.

H3: Employer attractiveness is positively associated with inspired-by.

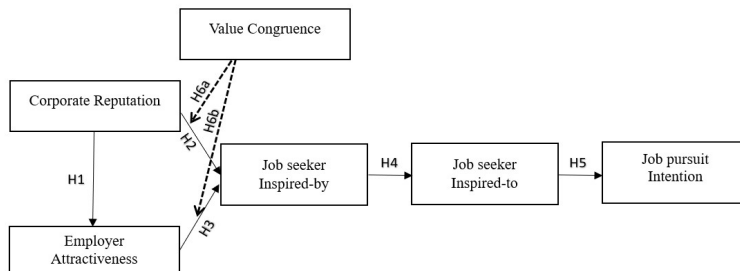
H4: Inspired-by is positively associated with inspired-to.

H5: Inspired-to is positively associated with job pursuit intention.

H6a: Value congruence positively moderates the relationship between corporate reputation and inspired-by.

H6b: Value congruence positively moderates the relationship between employer attractiveness and inspired-by.

Figure 2.1 below presents the proposed research model of the dissertation.



**Figure 2.1: A proposed research model**

*Source: author's own work*

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Research design

The dissertation adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design. This design is suitable for examining theoretically specified associations among latent constructs and for testing the proposed research model. The quantitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to assess the relationships among corporate reputation, employer attractiveness, inspiration, perceived value congruence, and job pursuit intention.

The study is positioned within a perception-based employer branding framework. All substantive constructs were measured at the individual level as self-reported perceptions, evaluations, or psychological states. This is consistent with the research objective, which is to examine how prospective student job seekers evaluate employers before direct organizational experience.

### 3.2. Research procedure

The research was conducted in several stages. First, the dissertation reviewed the literature on employer branding, corporate reputation, employer attractiveness, inspiration, perceived value congruence, and job pursuit intention. This stage helped clarify the conceptual basis, identify the research gap, and develop the research model.

Second, the conceptual model and hypotheses were developed based on Signaling Theory, Social Identity Theory, Inspiration Theory, and person–organization fit literature. Third, measurement items were selected and contextually adapted from established studies and related literature. Fourth, the questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese and then back-translated into English to improve semantic equivalence.

Fifth, a pilot test was conducted with 30 respondents to assess item clarity, wording, contextual suitability, and possible overlap among closely related constructs. Feedback from this stage was used to refine the wording and presentation of the questionnaire before the main survey. Sixth, the main survey was administered online. Finally, the collected data were screened, cleaned, and analyzed using SPSS and SmartPLS 4.

### 3.3. Research population and sampling

The target population consists of Vietnamese university students aged 19 to 22 who were approaching labor market entry. This population was selected because it fits the theoretical focus of the dissertation. The study examines early employer

evaluation in a pre-employment context, and this age group is relevant because many students are considering internships, graduate recruitment, and entry-level employment opportunities.

The study does not aim to represent all Vietnamese young people or all university students in Vietnam. Instead, it focuses on a more specific group of prospective student job seekers whose employer evaluations can reasonably be connected with near-term career preparation. This delimitation helps align the empirical sample with the conceptual model.

The survey was distributed online through student-oriented and academic channels. Respondents were recruited from different universities and educational settings in Vietnam in order to reduce over-concentration in a single institution or city. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

The survey generated 1,021 raw returns. After removing abandoned, severely incomplete, and low-quality responses, 988 usable questionnaires remained. The final analytic sample was then restricted to current university students aged 19 to 22. Respondents outside this age range were excluded in order to maintain consistency with the dissertation's target population. The final analytic sample consisted of 582 valid responses.

### **3.4. Measurement development**

The questionnaire measured six main constructs: corporate reputation, employer attractiveness, perceived value congruence, job seeker inspired-by, job seeker inspired-to, and job pursuit intention. All items were measured using a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree.

The measurement approach combined established measurement ideas from previous studies with contextual adaptation for Vietnamese university students in a pre-employment setting. The measures should be understood as shortened and context-adapted measures informed by prior literature, rather than as direct replications of the original scales.

Corporate reputation was measured as applicant-perceived corporate reputation. The item wording was primarily informed by Cable and Turban's (2003) recruitment-context measure of job seekers' reputation perceptions, while broader corporate reputation literature, including Fombrun and Shanley (1990), Fombrun et al. (2000), and Walker (2010), provided the conceptual foundation. The items captured students' perceptions of the company's market reputation, employee-related reputation, social responsibility, and public or media-based regard. The scale was not intended to reproduce a full Fortune-style or multi-attribute corporate reputation index.

Employer attractiveness was measured using a shortened and context-adapted measure informed by Berthon et al. (2005). Berthon et al.'s original EmpAt scale contains 25 items across five dimensions. In this dissertation, employer attractiveness was not examined as a separate multidimensional construct, but as one latent construct within a broader structural model. A concise five-item measure was used to capture employment benefits that were most relevant to Vietnamese student job seekers, including work environment, relationships, salary expectation, career-enhancing experience, and the application of university knowledge and skills.

Perceived value congruence was measured as subjective alignment between the respondent's personal values and the values associated with the focal organization. The items followed the direct perceived-fit approach associated with Cable and DeRue (2002), while the broader person-organization fit literature, including Cable and Judge (1996), supported the conceptual foundation. The study did not use a profile-comparison approach. Instead, it measured students' perceived fit with the organization's values, culture, and mission, which is more appropriate for respondents who do not yet have direct internal experience with the employer.

Job seeker inspired-by and job seeker inspired-to were measured using items adapted from the two-stage inspiration framework developed by Böttger et al. (2017), which builds on the psychological work of Thrash and Elliot (2003, 2004). Because the original scale was developed in a consumer and marketing context, the items were reworded for the employer evaluation and job-seeking context. Inspired-by captured the initial state of being stimulated, interested, or mentally activated by the employer. Inspired-to captured motivational readiness or desire to move toward the employer.

Job pursuit intention was measured using items informed by Highhouse et al. (2003) and related recruitment research. The construct captured respondents' stated willingness to apply for, choose, pursue, or recommend the focal employer. Because the respondents were students at an early career stage, job pursuit intention was treated as a self-reported behavioral intention rather than actual application behavior.

### **3.5. Data analysis technique**

Data screening, descriptive statistics, and preliminary analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics. The research model was then estimated using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling in SmartPLS 4. PLS-SEM was selected because the proposed model includes multiple latent constructs, a sequential motivational pathway, and moderation effects. It is also suitable for



explanatory research that focuses on estimating path relationships and explaining variance in endogenous constructs (Hair et al., 2019; Hair et al., 2021).

The analysis included assessment of both the measurement model and the structural model. The measurement model assessment examined indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Indicator reliability was assessed through outer loadings. Internal consistency reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. Convergent validity was assessed using average variance extracted. Discriminant validity was assessed mainly through the heterotrait-monotrait ratio.

The structural model assessment examined path coefficients, t-values, p-values, explanatory power, collinearity, and moderation effects. Hypothesis testing was conducted using bootstrapping in SmartPLS 4. The direct relationships, the inspired-by to inspired-to sequence, the inspired-to to job pursuit intention path, and the moderating effects of perceived value congruence were tested in line with the proposed model.

### **3.6. Statistical issues and data quality assessment**

Because the study uses cross-sectional and self-reported survey data, several data quality issues were considered.

First, the measurement properties of the constructs were assessed carefully. The initial measurement assessment identified one problematic corporate reputation item, CR4. Although CR4 was included in the official questionnaire, it showed weak performance during reliability and validity assessment and was removed from the final measurement model. The retained items showed acceptable reliability and validity indicators.

Second, discriminant validity was particularly important because several constructs in the model are conceptually close. This includes employer attractiveness and inspired-by, as well as inspired-to and job pursuit intention. The HTMT results supported the empirical distinction among the constructs, although the interpretation of inspired-to and job pursuit intention remains cautious because the two constructs are conceptually related.

Third, common method bias was considered because all substantive variables were collected from the same respondents in a single survey. Procedural remedies were applied during questionnaire design and data collection, including anonymity, clear item wording, pilot testing, and separation of questionnaire sections. In addition, collinearity-based diagnostics were examined in the PLS-SEM analysis.

The results suggested that common method bias was unlikely to be a major threat to the interpretation of the findings, although it cannot be ruled out entirely.

Fourth, collinearity among predictor constructs was examined. The results did not indicate serious multicollinearity problems, which supports the stability and interpretability of the structural estimates.

Overall, the data-quality assessment suggests that the final findings were based on acceptable measurement and statistical conditions.

## **CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH RESULTS**

### **4.1. Sample profile and descriptive statistics**

The final sample included 582 valid responses from Vietnamese university students aged 19 to 22. This sample reflects the target population of the dissertation and supports the focus on early-career employer evaluation in pre-employment settings.

The respondents represent a group that is approaching labor market entry but does not yet have extensive direct employer experience. This is important because the dissertation aims to explain how employer perceptions form and matter before direct organizational contact. In that sense, the sample is appropriate not only statistically but also conceptually.

The descriptive profile also supports the relevance of the study. University students at this stage are already beginning to search for information about employers, compare potential organizations, and form career preferences. They are an appropriate population for examining job pursuit intention as an early behavioral outcome.

Respondents were asked to evaluate a focal employer they already knew rather than an arbitrary or unfamiliar company. This strengthened the study because the assessments were grounded in meaningful employer knowledge rather than purely abstract judgment.

### **4.2. Measurement model assessment**

The measurement model was assessed before testing the structural relationships. The assessment included indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity.

Corporate reputation was measured with four items in the official questionnaire. However, one item, CR4, showed weak measurement performance during the assessment stage. Specifically, CR4 had a low outer loading and a

negative corrected item-total correlation. CR4 was removed from the final measurement model. After this adjustment, the retained corporate reputation items showed acceptable reliability and validity.

The final measurement model demonstrated satisfactory results. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.789 to 0.909, composite reliability values were above the recommended threshold, and AVE values ranged from 0.624 to 0.748. These results indicate acceptable internal consistency reliability and convergent validity.

Discriminant validity was assessed using HTMT. The HTMT values were below the recommended threshold, including the values for conceptually close constructs such as inspired-to and job pursuit intention. This supports the empirical distinction among the constructs.

**Table 4.1: Reliability and convergent validity of constructs**

	Cronbach's alpha	Composite reliability (rho_a)	Composite reliability (rho_c)	Average variance extracted (AVE)
CR	0.789	0.790	0.877	0.703
EA	0.857	0.866	0.897	0.635
JPI	0.837	0.840	0.892	0.674
JSIB	0.864	0.866	0.902	0.648
JSIT	0.849	0.849	0.892	0.624
VC	0.909	0.996	0.922	0.748

*Source: Author's calculation from survey data*

#### 4.3. Common method bias and collinearity assessment

Common method bias was considered because the study used self-reported data collected at one point in time. Procedural remedies were applied during questionnaire design and data collection, including anonymity, clear wording, pilot testing, and separation of questionnaire sections.

In addition, collinearity-based diagnostics were examined. The VIF values ranged from 1.000 to 1.224, which were below the conservative threshold. These results suggest that common method bias was unlikely to be a major threat to the interpretation of the structural relationships, although this possibility cannot be completely ruled out. Inner-model collinearity was also not a serious concern.

#### 4.4. Structural model results and hypothesis testing.

The structural model results supported all five direct hypotheses and one of the two moderation hypotheses.

Corporate reputation was positively associated with employer attractiveness, supporting H1. This indicates that students who perceived an organization as reputable were more likely to perceive it as an attractive employer.

Corporate reputation was also positively associated with inspired-by, supporting H2. Employer attractiveness was positively associated with inspired-by, supporting H3. These results suggest that both broad institutional reputation and personal employment desirability can contribute to early inspiration.

The relationship between inspired-by and inspired-to was positive and significant, supporting H4. Inspired-to was also positively associated with job pursuit intention, supporting H5. These two results provide the strongest support for the dissertation's inspiration-based logic. They suggest that early admiration or stimulation can develop into stronger motivational readiness, which is then associated with job pursuit intention.

Regarding moderation, perceived value congruence did not significantly moderate the relationship between corporate reputation and inspired-by. H6a was not supported. However, perceived value congruence significantly strengthened the relationship between employer attractiveness and inspired-by. H6b was supported. This means that employer attractiveness was more likely to evoke early inspiration when students perceived stronger value alignment with the employer.

**Table 4.2: Results of hypothesis testing in the structural model**

Hypothesis	Structural path	( $\beta$ )	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	CR $\rightarrow$ EA	0.38	9.952	< .001	Supported
H2	CR $\rightarrow$ JSIB	0.113	2.8	0.005	Supported
H3	EA $\rightarrow$ JSIB	0.143	3.207	0.001	Supported
H4	JSIB $\rightarrow$ JSIT	0.444	13.197	< .001	Supported
H5	JSIT $\rightarrow$ JPI	0.445	12.068	< .001	Supported
H6a	VC $\times$ CR $\rightarrow$ JSIB	0.041	0.801	0.424	Not supported
H6b	VC $\times$ EA $\rightarrow$ JSIB	0.269	3.849	< .001	Supported

*Source: Author's analysis from survey data*

#### 4.5. Interpretation of the main findings

The first important finding is that corporate reputation was positively associated with employer attractiveness. This result is consistent with the recruitment-signaling literature, which suggests that reputation helps reduce uncertainty and creates favorable expectations about the organization (Cable & Turban, 2003). It also aligns with the broader reputation literature, which sees reputation as a valuable organizational asset that shapes judgments of quality and legitimacy (Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Walker, 2010). In the context of the dissertation, this result suggests that Vietnamese university students treat a reputable employer as more desirable.

The second important finding is that corporate reputation was positively associated with inspired-by. This indicates that institutional standing is not only cognitively meaningful but can also have emotional or motivational influence. A well-regarded employer may evoke early admiration, attention, or aspiration.

The third important finding is that employer attractiveness was positively associated with inspired-by. This result is consistent with earlier work showing that attractiveness matters for applicant reactions (Berthon et al., 2005; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016). However, the present dissertation goes further by showing that attractiveness does not simply create favorable evaluation. It is also associated with a more immediate psychological state of inspiration.

The fourth important finding is the strong relationship between inspired-by and inspired-to. This supports the idea that inspiration is sequential. The first stage reflects psychological evocation, while the second reflects stronger movement toward action. This result is consistent with the conceptual logic of Thrash and Elliot (2003, 2004) and with the scale structure proposed by Böttger et al. (2017).

The fifth important finding is that inspired-to was positively associated with job pursuit intention. This result confirms that stronger motivational readiness is linked to stronger willingness to move toward the employer. It supports the argument that the inspired-to stage is more behaviorally relevant than inspired-by alone.

The sixth important finding concerns value congruence. The moderation result was selective rather than uniform. Value congruence did not significantly strengthen the relationship between corporate reputation and inspired-by, but it did strengthen the relationship between employer attractiveness and inspired-by.

This suggests that broad organizational prestige may generate admiration even without strong personal value alignment, while employer attractiveness becomes more powerful when it is supported by perceived value fit.

#### 4.6. Comparison with previous studies

The findings are generally consistent with earlier research that links employer-related perceptions to applicant responses. Studies in employer branding have repeatedly shown that favorable employer images and attractiveness influence intention to apply or pursue employment (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Lievens & Slaughter, 2016; Theurer et al., 2018). Vietnamese and Asian studies have also found that employer attractiveness, reputation, or CSR-related perceptions are linked to application-related intentions (Thang et al., 2023; Thanh et al., 2024; Nawakitphaitoon & Sooraksa, 2023).

At the same time, the dissertation differs from many earlier studies by focusing more directly on process. Instead of stopping at attractiveness or reputation as direct predictors, it examines how these perceptions may lead to job pursuit intention through inspiration. This is one of the main ways in which the dissertation extends previous scholarship.

The result concerning value congruence is also useful in relation to prior fit-based research. Earlier studies have generally shown that value congruence or person–organization fit matters for attraction and choice (Cable & Judge, 1996; Cable & DeRue, 2002; Kristof-Brown et al., 2023). The present dissertation supports the importance of value alignment, but in a more selective way. Rather than functioning as a universal enhancer, value congruence appears to strengthen the pathway that is already more personal, namely the pathway from employer attractiveness to inspired-by.

### CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION, CONTRIBUTIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

#### 5.1. Discussion of Key Findings

The dissertation examines how early employer evaluations are associated with job pursuit intention among Vietnamese university students aged 19 to 22 who are approaching labor market entry. Overall, the findings support a process-based explanation. Corporate reputation and employer attractiveness were positively associated with early inspiration, while inspired-by was positively associated with inspired-to, and inspired-to was positively associated with job pursuit intention.

First, the findings show that employer evaluation is not only a rational judgment. Corporate reputation and employer attractiveness matter because they are associated not only with favorable perceptions, but also with an initial inspirational response. This suggests that applicant-side employer branding perceptions can carry motivational meaning in the pre-employment stage.

Second, the results support the distinction between inspired-by and inspired-to. Inspired-by reflects early admiration, stimulation, or interest in the employer, whereas inspired-to reflects stronger motivational readiness to move toward the employer. This distinction is important because not every favorable employer impression becomes behaviorally meaningful. The dissertation shows that the movement from inspired-by to inspired-to is central to explaining job pursuit intention.

Third, the findings clarify the different roles of corporate reputation and employer attractiveness. Corporate reputation functions as a broad institutional evaluation of credibility, prestige, and legitimacy. Employer attractiveness reflects a more personal judgment of desirability as a place to work. Both constructs contribute to early inspiration, but they should not be treated as interchangeable.

Fourth, perceived value congruence operated in a selective way. It did not significantly moderate the relationship between corporate reputation and inspired-by, but it strengthened the relationship between employer attractiveness and inspired-by. This suggests that broad reputation may generate admiration even without strong value alignment, whereas employer attractiveness becomes more inspirational when it is also perceived as value-consistent.

Overall, the dissertation supports the idea that employer-brand perceptions become important not only when they are favorable, but when they also become meaningful, motivating, and connected to the job seeker's sense of self and future.

## **5.2. Theoretical contributions**

The dissertation makes several theoretical contributions.

First, the main contribution lies in applying the two-stage inspiration logic to pre-employment employer evaluation. Instead of treating job pursuit intention as a direct response to employer attractiveness or corporate reputation, the dissertation explains how favorable employer perceptions may move from inspired-by to inspired-to and then to job pursuit intention. This provides a more detailed explanation of the motivational process behind early job pursuit.

Second, the dissertation clarifies the distinction between corporate reputation and employer attractiveness. Corporate reputation is treated as a broad, socially shared evaluation of organizational standing, while employer attractiveness is treated as a more personal employment-related evaluation. This distinction improves the conceptual precision of employer branding research because it shows that job seekers do not evaluate employers through one simple global impression.

Third, the dissertation refines the role of perceived value congruence. Rather than treating value congruence only as a direct predictor, the study examines it as a boundary condition. The findings show that its role is selective: perceived value congruence strengthens the link between employer attractiveness and inspired-by, but not the link between corporate reputation and inspired-by.

Fourth, the dissertation contributes context-specific evidence from Vietnam. By focusing on Vietnamese university students approaching labor market entry, the study adds evidence from an emerging and digitally developing labor market where young applicants often form employer perceptions before direct organizational experience.

## **5.3. Practical contributions**

The findings provide several implications for organizations seeking to attract early-career talent.

First, organizations should recognize that young job seekers evaluate employers before direct contact takes place. Employer communication should not be limited to job vacancies. It should also communicate credibility, organizational values, career opportunities, and the meaning of working for the organization.

Second, organizations should manage both corporate reputation and employer attractiveness. Reputation helps create broad trust and legitimacy, while employer attractiveness helps students judge whether the organization is personally desirable as a place to work. Effective employer communication should connect these two dimensions.

Third, recruitment communication should not focus only on information. It should also help potential applicants imagine future development, meaningful work, and possible career growth. In this sense, employer communication should help move students from initial interest to stronger motivation to apply.

Fourth, organizations should communicate values clearly and credibly. The findings suggest that employer attractiveness becomes more inspirational when

students perceive stronger value alignment. Employers should avoid vague slogans and instead show values through concrete examples, such as employee stories, career development pathways, social responsibility activities, and early-career programs.

Fifth, digital and social media channels should be treated as important touchpoints for employer evaluation. Many students form employer perceptions through indirect information environments. Company websites, social media pages, campus recruitment content, and online employer narratives can all influence early perceptions of reputation, attractiveness, and fit.

#### **5.4. Limitations and future research directions**

First, the study uses a cross-sectional design. The results show associations among constructs rather than definitive causal relationships. Future research could use longitudinal or experimental designs to examine whether changes in employer perceptions lead to changes in inspiration and job pursuit intention over time.

Second, the study relies on self-reported data from a single source. Although procedural remedies and collinearity-based diagnostics were used, common method bias cannot be completely ruled out. Future studies could combine survey data with behavioral data or multi-source evidence.

Third, the sample is limited to Vietnamese university students aged 19 to 22. This group is suitable for studying early employer evaluation, but the findings may not apply directly to older job seekers, experienced applicants, or workers in different cultural and labor-market contexts.

Fourth, the respondents evaluated employers mainly from the applicant side and may not have had full internal knowledge of the organizations. Their responses may be influenced by public information, assumptions, general impressions, or halo effects. Future studies could compare student job seekers with applicants who have more direct organizational experience.

Fifth, the measures used in the dissertation were shortened and context-adapted measures informed by prior literature. They should not be interpreted as full replications of the original scales. Future research could use fuller multidimensional measures, especially for employer attractiveness, corporate reputation, and job pursuit intention.

Sixth, inspired-to and job pursuit intention are conceptually close, even though discriminant validity results supported their empirical distinction. Future

research should continue to refine the measurement of these constructs and separate motivational readiness from behavioral intention more clearly.

Finally, the proposed sequential pathway was interpreted through the pattern of constituent structural paths rather than a full retained bootstrapped indirect-effects table. Future studies should report specific indirect effects, total indirect effects, and confidence intervals to provide a more complete assessment of the proposed sequence.

#### **5.5. Conclusion**

This dissertation examines how applicant-side employer branding perceptions are associated with job pursuit intention among Vietnamese university students approaching labor market entry. The study develops and tests a model in which corporate reputation and employer attractiveness are treated as employer evaluations, inspiration is treated as a two-stage motivational process, and perceived value congruence is examined as a boundary condition.

The findings show that favorable employer perceptions matter not only because they create positive judgments, but also because they can activate inspiration. Inspired-by represents the initial response to the employer, while inspired-to represents stronger readiness to move toward the employer. This sequence helps explain how early employer evaluations become linked to job pursuit intention.

The dissertation also shows that corporate reputation and employer attractiveness play different roles. Reputation reflects broader credibility and institutional standing, while attractiveness reflects personal employment desirability. In addition, perceived value congruence strengthens the relationship between employer attractiveness and inspired-by, suggesting that employer desirability becomes more motivating when it is also value-consistent.

Within its scope and limitations, the dissertation contributes to a clearer understanding of early talent attraction in Vietnam. It suggests that young job seekers do not simply evaluate employers as external opportunities. They interpret employer information, connect it with their aspirations, and respond to it motivationally. By bringing together corporate reputation, employer attractiveness, inspiration, perceived value congruence, and job pursuit intention, the dissertation offers a more process-based explanation of how organizations become meaningful to young talent before employment entry.

## LIST OF PUBLISHED WORKS RELATED TO THE DISSERTATION

1. Nguyen, K. H. D., Ha, H. N., Nguyen, P. A., & Khong, T. T. Q. (2025), 'Employer attractiveness and corporate reputation as brand signals: A dual-stage inspiration pathway to job pursuit intention', *Edelweiss Applied Science and Technology*, 9(11), 46–56. <https://doi.org/10.55214/2576-8484.v9i11.10755>
2. Nguyen, K. H. D., & Vu, H. T. (2025, November 1), 'Corporate reputation, employer attractiveness and value congruence: Early drivers of Generation Z applications', *Strategic Human Resource Review*, Emerald Publishing Limited. <https://doi.org/10.1108/SHR-09-2025-0096>
3. Nguyen, K. H. D., & Vu, H. T. (2025), 'Employer attractiveness, corporate reputation, and value congruence as predictors of job seeker inspiration: Evidence from Vietnamese Gen Z', *Vietnam Economic & Financial Review*, 1(1), 164-168.