

(Research Article)

The Sense of Belonging as a Catalyst for Retaining Millennial Employees in the Hospitality Sector

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Abstract: High turnover rates among millennial employees remain a critical challenge for the hospitality industry. This study aims to analyze the effect of internal branding on millennial employees' retention intention with sense of belonging as a mediating variable in hotels in Semarang Regency. Using a mixed-methods sequential explanatory design, data were collected from 156 respondents through questionnaires and 14 key informants through in-depth interviews. Quantitative analysis employed PLS-SEM using SmartPLS 4.0, while qualitative data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed that internal branding has a significant positive effect on sense of belonging ($\beta=0.687$, $p<0.001$) and retention intention ($\beta=0.289$, $p<0.001$). Sense of belonging partially mediates this relationship with VAF of 56.3% and R^2 of 58.3%. Qualitative findings identified four key themes: authentic value communication, empowering leadership, meaningful career development, and supportive work community. This study contributes to the development of social identity theory in the context of hospitality internal branding and provides practical implications for millennial employee retention strategies.

Keywords: Employee Retention; Hospitality Industry; Internal Branding; Millennial Employees; Sense of Belonging

1. Introduction

The global hospitality industry faces critical challenges in retaining employees, with turnover rates consistently higher than those in other industrial sectors. This phenomenon becomes increasingly complex when dealing with millennial employees, who possess distinct characteristics, work values, and expectations compared to previous generations. According to Ghani et al. (2022), the hospitality industry experiences chronic challenges in talent acquisition and retention due to intensive employee–customer interactions, a highly dynamic labor market, and substantial physical and emotional demands. These conditions are further exacerbated by a weak employee value proposition, characterized by low wages and long, unpredictable working hours, which hinder employees' ability to achieve a satisfactory work–life balance.

Semarang Regency is one of the regions in Central Java Province endowed with abundant tourism assets, encompassing 56 tourist attractions and 74 tourism villages, particularly concentrated in the Bandungan and Ungaran areas located on the slopes of Mount Ungaran at an altitude of approximately 1,200 meters above sea level. Data from the Semarang Regency Tourism Office indicate that the number of tourist visits throughout 2023 reached 3,534,130, consisting of 3,531,786 domestic tourists and 2,344 international tourists. The growth of the tourism sector has stimulated the expansion of the hospitality industry in the region, offering a wide range of accommodation options from star-rated hotels to villas. Nevertheless, this growth also presents distinct challenges in human resource management, particularly in retaining millennial employees who constitute the backbone of hotel operations. The hotel room occupancy rate in Semarang Regency, recorded at 25.65% in June 2024, reflects

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business fluctuations that have implications for employment stability and employee job satisfaction.

Millennials, defined as individuals born between 1980 and 2000, have gradually become the dominant workforce segment within the hospitality industry. Huang et al. (2022) argue that attitudes, commitment, and motivation vary significantly across generations in the workplace and must be thoroughly understood if organizations are to implement effective internal marketing strategies. Millennial employees tend to prefer working for companies that demonstrate concern for society and are reluctant to engage with organizations that fail to practice corporate social responsibility. They place greater value on the work environment, relationships with supervisors and managers, individual responsibility, and challenging tasks than previous generations. Understanding these characteristics is therefore crucial for hotel managers in Semarang Regency in addressing challenges related to employee motivation, recruitment, and retention.

Internal branding has emerged as a strategic approach with the potential to address the issue of millennial employee retention. Park and Kim (2024) emphasize that internal branding effectively communicates organizational values to employees, strengthens motivation and a sense of belonging, and ultimately supports organizational growth. From the perspective of social identity theory, the employer brand is viewed as a social category through which organizational members seek a sense of attachment. Burmann and Zeplin (2005), as cited in Piehler et al. (2016), conceptualize brand identification as a “sense of belonging to a group that defines the brand experience and perceptions related to the fate of that group.”

The urgency of this study is grounded in several important considerations. First, a meta-analysis conducted by Kim and Park (2020) confirms that organizational commitment ($\beta = -0.62$) and job satisfaction ($\beta = -0.56$) are the strongest antecedents of turnover intention. High employee turnover generates both direct and indirect costs, including recruitment and training expenses, as well as the loss of organizational knowledge and a cohesive organizational culture. Second, the post-COVID-19 period has witnessed the phenomenon of the “great resignation,” during which many hospitality employees voluntarily left their jobs. Le et al. (2023) stress that organizations must cultivate employee-centered cultures that foster trust and teamwork while reducing stress and turnover.

Despite the growing body of research on employer branding and employee retention, significant research gaps remain. Näppä et al. (2023) identify that, in practice, service-sector organizations tend to focus more on customer experience than on reinforcing brand promises to employees. Azhar et al. (2024) note the continuing need for more empirical research to fully understand the complex relationships between employer branding dimensions and employee retention, particularly within the hospitality context. Specifically, research on internal branding in the hospitality industry located in emerging tourist destinations such as Semarang Regency remains limited.

The object of this study is millennial employees working in the hospitality industry in Semarang Regency, with a focus on how organizational values are communicated through internal branding strategies to foster a sense of belonging. Previous studies have employed various methodological approaches. Huang et al. (2022) utilized a dual-path model with panel data from millennial employees in star-rated hotels, while Abdou et al. (2022) applied structural equation modeling (SEM). The strength of quantitative methods lies in their ability to measure statistical relationships between variables with precision; however, they are limited in capturing the nuanced subjective experiences of employees. Conversely, Näppä et al. (2023) employed exploratory in-depth interviews that provided richer contextual insights but were constrained in terms of generalizability.

Based on the analysis of the research gap, the main research question is formulated as follows: how can internal branding strategies effectively communicate organizational values to enhance the sense of belonging among millennial employees in the hospitality industry in Semarang Regency, and how does this influence their retention? To address this question, a mixed-methods sequential explanatory research design is proposed, integrating quantitative analysis to examine the relationships among internal branding dimensions, sense of belonging, and retention intention, followed by qualitative exploration to understand the mechanisms of effective organizational value communication. Social identity theory will serve as the primary conceptual framework, complemented by employer branding theory to explain how hospitality organizations in Semarang Regency can develop value communication strategies that resonate with the characteristics and expectations of millennial employees.

Accordingly, this study aims to fill gaps in the existing literature by comprehensively exploring the role of internal branding as a strategy for retaining millennial employees in the

hospitality industry of Semarang Regency, with particular emphasis on the communication of organizational values and the formation of a sense of belonging. The findings are expected to contribute theoretically to the development of a contextualized internal branding model for the hospitality industry in emerging tourist destinations, as well as practically by providing strategic recommendations for hotel management in Semarang Regency to enhance millennial employee retention through effective organizational value communication.

2. Preliminaries or Related Work or Literature Review

Social Identity Theory and Internal Branding

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides a theoretical foundation for understanding how internal branding influences employees' attitudes and behaviors. This theory posits that individuals construct their self-identity through membership in social groups and internalize group characteristics as part of their self-concept (Simbula & Margheritti, 2023). In organizational contexts, organizational identification represents a specific form of social identity, defined as a perception of oneness with or a sense of belonging to the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Recent studies confirm that strong organizational identification leads to higher commitment, increased job satisfaction, and reduced turnover intention (Avanzi et al., 2023; Kim & Kim, 2023).

Internal branding is defined as a systematic organizational effort to communicate brand values to employees and to facilitate the internalization of these values into work-related behaviors (King & Grace, 2008; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Recent empirical research identifies three main dimensions of internal branding: internal brand communication, brand-oriented training, and brand-supportive leadership (Gulati et al., 2023; Piehler et al., 2016). A meta-analysis conducted by Xiong (2023) confirms that brand communication is the strongest predictor of employee brand commitment, followed by brand-oriented leadership. A study by Khairy et al. (2023) involving 385 employees of five-star hotels in Egypt demonstrates a significant relationship between internal branding, employee engagement, and organizational citizenship behavior.

Sense of Belonging and Employee Retention

Sense of belonging refers to individuals' psychological and affective attachment to the group or organization in which they work (Hagerty et al., 1992). Unlike organizational commitment, which is largely cognitive and evaluative in nature, sense of belonging emphasizes emotional and relational dimensions (Joseph, 2023). A longitudinal study by Simbula and Margheritti (2023) shows that social support and organizational identification interact positively in fostering work engagement. Research by Kim et al. (2023) in the South Korean context reveals that authentic leadership reduces turnover intention through the mediating role of organizational identification.

Employee retention in the hospitality industry has become a strategic issue due to consistently higher turnover rates compared to other sectors (Bufquin et al., 2021; Malek et al., 2018). Park and Min (2020) identify intrinsic factors such as meaningful work and career development as having a stronger influence on retention than extrinsic factors such as compensation. A study by Alonderienė and Urbelė (2024) in Lithuanian IT companies finds that internal employer branding significantly affects employee engagement and retention, explaining 25.6% of the variance ($R^2 = 25.6\%$). Ahmed et al. (2022) further confirm that internal employer branding directly contributes to talent retention through the cultivation of internal commitment.

Characteristics of Millennial Employees in the Hospitality Industry

The millennial generation (born between 1981 and 1996) now dominates the hospitality workforce and exhibits characteristics distinct from previous generations (Goh & Lee, 2018; Lu & Gursoy, 2016). Using panel data from hotel employees, Park et al. (2022) demonstrate that intrinsic work values and long-term development orientation reduce millennials' turnover intention through partial mediation by organizational identification and job satisfaction. Kim et al. (2019) find that work environment, empowerment, and relationships with managers significantly influence millennials' intention to remain in the hospitality industry. More recent research by Jena and Nayak (2023) confirms the role of job satisfaction, organizational engagement, and employee empowerment in career development and retention among millennial employees.

Research Gaps

The literature review reveals several research gaps. First, most internal branding studies in the hospitality sector employ employee engagement or organizational commitment as mediators (Khairy et al., 2023; Gulati et al., 2023), while the role of sense of belonging has not been empirically examined. Second, existing research is dominated by purely quantitative approaches, whereas mixed-methods designs could provide deeper insights into the mechanisms of internal branding (Huang et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2019). Third, the geographical context of prior studies is largely confined to hotels in developed countries, leaving internal branding dynamics in emerging tourism destinations such as Indonesia underexplored. In response to these gaps, the present study integrates sense of belonging as a mediator in the relationship between internal branding and retention intention among millennial hotel employees, employing a mixed-methods research design.

3. Materials and Method

This study adopts a **mixed-methods sequential explanatory design** that integrates quantitative and qualitative approaches in a sequential manner. According to Creswell and Creswell (2022), this design begins with the collection and analysis of quantitative data, followed by qualitative data collection to explain or elaborate on the quantitative findings. Huang et al. (2025), in their systematic review of 328 mixed-methods studies published in tourism and hospitality journals, confirm that the explanatory sequential design is particularly effective for testing relationships with established empirical evidence, providing a broad overview of the research questions, and subsequently offering deeper insights through qualitative exploration.

The first (quantitative) phase aims to examine the causal relationships among internal branding, sense of belonging, and retention intention among millennial hotel employees in Semarang Regency. The study population comprises all millennial employees (born between 1980 and 2000) working in star-rated hotels located in the Bandungan and Ungaran areas. The sample size was determined using the formula proposed by Hair et al. (2022) for PLS-SEM analysis, namely: $n \geq 10 \times$ the largest number of structural paths pointing to an endogenous construct. Given that the proposed model contains five structural paths, the minimum required sample size is 50 respondents. However, to enhance statistical power, a target sample of 150 respondents was employed using a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire measured on a five-point Likert scale and analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) with SmartPLS 4.0 software.

Based on the theoretical framework of social identity theory and prior empirical studies, the following research hypotheses were formulated.

H1: Internal branding has a positive effect on the sense of belonging of millennial employees. This hypothesis is supported by the findings of Park and Kim (2024), who confirmed that internal branding strengthens employee motivation and sense of belonging.

H2: Sense of belonging has a positive effect on the retention intention of millennial employees. Ahmed et al. (2022) developed a conceptual framework demonstrating that internal brand identification enhances talent retention.

H3: Internal branding has a positive effect on retention intention through the mediating role of sense of belonging. Alonderienė and Urbelė (2024) demonstrated that internal employer branding dimensions—such as organizational values, rewards, and internal communication—significantly influence employee engagement and retention.

Table 1. Operational Definitions of Variables

Variable	Operational Definition	Dimensions	Indicators
Internal Branding (X)	A strategic process of internalizing organizational values and vision among employees (Park & Kim, 2024)	1. Organizational value communication 2. Organizational management culture 3. Recognition and rewards	- Clarity of mission and vision - Consistency of internal messages - Leadership support - Performance appreciation - Pride in working for the organization
Sense of Belonging (M)	Employees' positive sense of belonging toward the organizational brand and perceptions related to the fate of the group (Piehler et al., 2016)	1. Cognitive identification 2. Affective attachment 3. Membership evaluation	- Person-organization value fit - Emotional attachment - Feeling of being part of a team - Intention to continue working
Retention Intention (Y)	Employees' intention to remain with the organization stay for a certain period of time (Ghani et al., 2022)	1. Commitment to organizational loyalty 2. Organizational loyalty	- Rejection of alternative job offers - Recommendation of the work Place - Long-term career plans

The second (qualitative) phase aims to explain and contextualize the quantitative findings through an in-depth exploration of the mechanisms underlying organizational value communication. Following Näppä et al. (2023), who employed exploratory in-depth interviews in the hospitality context, this study conducts semi-structured interviews with 12–15 key informants selected based on the results of the quantitative phase. Informant selection criteria include employees with extreme scores (high or low) on the sense of belonging variable, human resource managers, and departmental supervisors. The qualitative data are analyzed using thematic analysis following the approach of Braun and Clarke (2022) to identify patterns and themes related to effective internal branding practices within the hotel context of Semarang Regency.

Integration of quantitative and qualitative findings is achieved through a joint display approach, which systematically compares statistical results with qualitative themes. The validity and reliability of the quantitative phase are assessed using composite reliability ($CR > 0.70$), Average Variance Extracted ($AVE > 0.50$), and discriminant validity based on the Fornell–Larcker criterion. For the qualitative phase, trustworthiness is ensured through member checking, source triangulation, and peer debriefing. The final outcome of the study is a contextualized internal branding model aimed at enhancing millennial employee retention in the hospitality industry of Semarang Regency.

4. Results and Discussion

Respondent Characteristics

This study successfully collected data from 156 millennial employees working in 12 star-rated hotels located in the Bandung and Ungaran areas, Semarang Regency. The response rate reached 78% of the 200 questionnaires distributed, exceeding the minimum threshold recommended by Hair et al. (2022) for PLS-SEM analysis. The demographic characteristics of the respondents indicate a composition that is representative of the millennial hospitality workforce in the research area, as presented in Table 1.

Table 2. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents (n = 156).

Characteristics	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	67	43.0%
	Female	89	57.0%
Age	24–28 years	58	37.2%
	29–34 years	64	41.0%
	35–40 years	34	21.8%
Education	High school/Vocational	42	26.9%
	Diploma	68	43.6%
	Bachelor's degree	46	29.5%
Tenure	1–2 years	48	30.8%
	3–5 years	72	46.1%
	> 5 years	36	23.1%
Department	Front Office	38	24.4%
	Housekeeping	45	28.8%
	Food & Beverage Service	52	33.3%
	Others	21	13.5%

Source: Processed primary data, 2024.

Measurement Model Evaluation

The measurement model was evaluated to ensure the validity and reliability of the research instruments prior to testing the structural model. Following the procedures recommended by Hair et al. (2022), the assessment covered internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity. Table 2 presents the results of the measurement model evaluation, indicating that all constructs met the established criteria.

Table 3. Results of Measurement Model Evaluation.

Construct/Indicator	Loading	CR	AVE	α	Cronbach's
Internal Branding (X)		0.912	0.678		0.889
IB1: Value communication	0.824				
IB2: Message consistency	0.856				
IB3: Leadership support	0.798				
IB4: Performance recognition	0.817				
Sense of Belonging (M)		0.928	0.722		0.903
SB1: Pride in working	0.867				
SB2: Value congruence	0.842				
SB3: Emotional attachment	0.878				
SB4: Feeling part of the team	0.812				
Retention Intention (Y)		0.905	0.704		0.876
RI1: Intention to stay	0.851				
RI2: Rejection of alternative offers	0.823				
RI3: Recommendation of workplace	0.839				
RI4: Long-term career plans	0.842				

Notes: CR = Composite Reliability; AVE = Average Variance Extracted. Criteria: Loading > 0.70, CR > 0.70, AVE > 0.50, Cronbach's α > 0.70.

The results indicate that all outer loadings exceed the threshold of 0.70, confirming adequate indicator validity. Composite Reliability (CR) values range from 0.905 to 0.928, surpassing the minimum criterion of 0.70 recommended by Fornell and Larcker (1981). The AVE values for all constructs are above 0.50, indicating that each construct explains more than 50% of the variance in its indicators. Discriminant validity was verified using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the HTMT ratio, with all HTMT values below 0.85.

Structural Model Results and Hypothesis Testing

After establishing the validity and reliability of the measurement model, the analysis proceeded with the evaluation of the structural model using a bootstrapping procedure with 5,000 subsamples. Table 3 presents the hypothesis testing results, including path coefficients, t-statistics, and statistical significance.

Table 4. Hypothesis Testing Results.

Hyp.	Path	β	t-value	p-value	Decision
H1	Internal Branding \rightarrow Sense of Belonging	0.687	12.453	< 0.001	Supported
H2	Sense of Belonging \rightarrow Retention Intention	0.542	8.876	< 0.001	Supported
H3	Internal Branding \rightarrow Retention Intention	0.289	4.321	< 0.001	Supported

Notes: β = standardized path coefficient; critical t-values = 1.96 ($p < 0.05$), 2.58 ($p < 0.01$), 3.29 ($p < 0.001$).

Table 5. Mediation Effect Analysis.

Mediation Path	Direct Effect	Indirect Effect	VAF	Type of Mediation
IB \rightarrow SB \rightarrow RI	0.289***	0.372***	56.3%	Partial

Notes: VAF = Variance Accounted For; *** $p < 0.001$; Total effect = 0.661; R^2 Sense of Belonging = 0.472; R^2 Retention Intention = 0.583.

The analysis indicates that all research hypotheses are empirically supported. The first hypothesis (H1), positing that internal branding positively influences sense of belonging, is supported with a path coefficient of $\beta = 0.687$ ($t = 12.453$, $p < 0.001$). The second hypothesis (H2) is also confirmed, showing that sense of belonging has a significant positive effect on retention intention ($\beta = 0.542$, $t = 8.876$, $p < 0.001$). The third hypothesis (H3), concerning the direct effect of internal branding on retention intention, is likewise supported ($\beta = 0.289$, $t = 4.321$, $p < 0.001$). Mediation analysis reveals that sense of belonging partially mediates the relationship between internal branding and retention intention, with a VAF of 56.3%, indicating a substantial mediating role.

Findings from the Qualitative Phase

The qualitative phase involved in-depth interviews with 14 key informants, comprising eight millennial employees with extreme scores on the sense of belonging variable (four high scorers and four low scorers), four HR managers, and two departmental supervisors. Thematic analysis identified four main themes that explain the mechanisms through which internal branding fosters a sense of belonging and enhances retention among millennial employees.

Table 6. Summary of Qualitative Findings.

Theme	Sub-themes	Representative Quotations
1. Authentic Value Communication	Information transparency; Two-way dialogue; Message consistency	“Management is always transparent about the hotel’s condition, and we feel involved in every decision...” (P3, FO)
2. Empowering Leadership	Role modeling; Active mentoring; Recognition of contributions	“My supervisor always gives me the opportunity to try new ideas and appreciates the results...” (P7, FB)
3. Meaningful Career Development	Continuous training; Clear career paths; Cross-departmental rotation	“There is a clear development program; I can see my future here...” (P11, HK)
4. Supportive Work Community	Interpersonal bonds; Team activities; Emotional support	“My coworkers are like family; that’s what makes me stay...” (P5, FO)

Notes: P = Participant; FO = Front Office; FB = Food & Beverage; HK = Housekeeping.

Discussion

The findings of this study make a significant contribution to both theoretical and practical understanding of the role of internal branding in enhancing the retention of millennial employees in the hospitality industry. The quantitative results demonstrating a strong effect of internal branding on sense of belonging ($\beta = 0.687$) are consistent with Social Identity Theory as postulated by Tajfel and Turner (1979). When organizations effectively communicate brand values and cultivate a strong collective identity, employees are more likely to develop deeper psychological identification with the organization, which in turn strengthens their sense of belonging.

These findings are in line with the study by Khairy et al. (2023), which confirms a significant relationship between internal branding and employee engagement in five-star hotels in Egypt. Similarly, Gulati et al. (2023) found that brand communication and training, value alignment, and leadership significantly influence employee brand loyalty through brand internalization in the Indian hospitality sector. Yang and Mostafa (2024) also confirm that organizational identification mediates the relationship between high-performance human resource practices and employee commitment, further supporting the critical role of identification in shaping positive work attitudes.

The substantial effect of sense of belonging on retention intention ($\beta = 0.542$) underscores the importance of affective dimensions in millennial employees’ retention decisions. This finding is consistent with Yan and Mansor (2021), who reported that hotel employees with high psychological capital and positive work attitudes tend to remain with their organizations because they experience a strong sense of connectedness and identity. Wang (2024), in his study on social identity in hospitality organizations, also emphasizes that job embeddedness and organizational identification operate across levels to shape employee behavior.

The partial mediating role of sense of belonging, with a VAF of 56.3%, indicates that this psychological mechanism represents a primary—but not the sole—pathway linking internal branding to employee retention. This result supports the conceptual framework proposed by Ahmed et al. (2022), which suggests that internal employer branding influences talent retention through multiple mechanisms, including employee engagement and organizational identification. Alonderienė and Urbelė (2024) similarly found that internal employer branding dimensions such as organizational

values, rewards, and internal communication significantly affect employee engagement and retention in IT companies.

The qualitative findings further enrich the understanding of how internal branding operates within the hotel context in Semarang Regency. The theme of authentic value communication identified in the interviews is consistent with Näppä et al. (2023), who emphasize the role of employees as co-creators of the employer brand. The second theme, empowering leadership, supports the findings of Olorunniwo and Bustamante (2023), which demonstrate that empowering leadership positively influences organizational identification among hotel employees.

The local context of Semarang Regency, characterized by mountain tourism and fluctuating occupancy rates (25.65% in June 2024), adds a unique dimension to the findings. High levels of job uncertainty make internal branding increasingly critical, as employees seek psychological stability through identification with organizational values. These findings align with Han et al. (2025), who show that personalized work arrangements enhance employees' sense of belonging and reduce turnover intention, particularly in hospitality sectors facing persistent retention challenges. Pittman et al. (2024) also confirm the presence of generational differences in turnover intention, which should be taken into account in the development of retention strategies.

From a practical perspective, the results suggest that hotel management in Semarang Regency should develop comprehensive internal branding strategies that emphasize authentic value communication, empowering leadership, meaningful career development, and the cultivation of supportive work communities. As recommended by Wang et al. (2019) in their study on internal branding implementation in hotels, this process should actively involve employee participation to ensure effective value internalization. Latifah and Muafi (2021) likewise emphasize that effective internal branding enhances employee engagement and job satisfaction, which ultimately contribute to improved organizational performance.

5. Comparison

Comparison with recent (state-of-the-art) studies is a crucial aspect for identifying the unique contribution of this research. Table 1 presents a systematic comparison between the present study and prior empirical research on internal branding and employee retention in the hospitality industry published in reputable international journals during the period 2022–2025.

Table 7. Comparison of the Present Study with State-of-the-Art Research.

Author(s) (Year)	Context	Main Variables	Method	Sample
Khairy et al. (2023)	Egypt, Five-star hotels	IB, EE, WF, OCB	Quantitative, PLS-SEM	385 employees
Gulati et al. (2023)	India, Hospitality sector	Communication, Leadership, Brand internalization	Quantitative, SmartPLS 3	200 employees
Azhar et al. (2024)	Pakistan, Hotels	EB, Commitment, Retention, Performance	Quantitative, SmartPLS 4	312 employees
Alonderienė & Urbelė (2024)	Lithuania, IT companies	IEB, EE, Retention	Quantitative, SEM	287 employees
Han et al. (2025)	China, Hotels & Travel	I-deals, OI, Service performance	Quantitative, SEM	252 dyads
This Study (2024)	Indonesia, Semarang Regency	IB, Sense of Belonging, Retention Intention	Mixed-methods sequential	156 + 14 informants

Notes: IB = Internal Branding; EE = Employee Engagement; WF = Workplace Friendship; OCB = Organizational Citizenship Behavior; EB = Employer Branding; IEB = Internal Employer Branding; OI = Organizational Identification; SB = Sense of Belonging; RI = Retention Intention.

The comparative analysis reveals several distinctive strengths of this study. First, most prior research relies exclusively on quantitative approaches, whereas this study adopts a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, enabling a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying internal branding. This approach is consistent with the recommendations of

Huang et al. (2025), who emphasize the increased adoption of mixed-methods designs in hospitality research to generate more robust and practically relevant findings.

Second, this study introduces sense of belonging as a mediating variable that has not been empirically tested in the context of the internal branding–retention relationship within the hospitality industry. While Khairy et al. (2023) employed employee engagement and Azhar et al. (2024) used organizational commitment as mediators, the construct of sense of belonging offers an affective–identificational perspective that is more closely aligned with Social Identity Theory. The VAF value of 56.3% obtained in this study exceeds the explanatory power reported by Alonderienė and Urbelė (2024), who found an R^2 value of 25.6%.

Third, the explicit focus on millennial employees differentiates this study from prior research that generally does not restrict respondents by generational cohort. Given the unique characteristics of millennials, who emphasize meaningful work and a sense of belonging (Huang et al., 2022), the findings of this study provide more targeted implications for retention strategies. Fourth, the context of an emerging tourism destination in Semarang Regency, characterized by fluctuating occupancy dynamics, enriches the literature that has thus far been dominated by studies conducted in metropolitan hotels or international chains in developed countries (e.g., Egypt, India, Pakistan, Lithuania). This contribution responds to the call by Guo et al. (2025) for greater exploration of employer branding across diverse sectors and geographical contexts.

6. Conclusion

This study reveals the mechanisms through which internal branding enhances the retention intention of millennial hotel employees in Semarang Regency by integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches. The main findings confirm that internal branding exerts a strong positive effect on sense of belonging ($\beta = 0.687$), which in turn drives higher retention intention ($\beta = 0.542$). The research model explains 58.3% of the variance in retention intention, with sense of belonging serving as a partial mediator (VAF = 56.3%). These findings support all proposed hypotheses and confirm the relevance of Social Identity Theory in the context of internal branding within the hospitality industry.

The synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings identifies four key pillars underpinning the effectiveness of internal branding: authentic value communication, empowering leadership, meaningful career development, and a supportive work community. These elements synergistically foster a sense of belonging that serves as the psychological foundation for millennial employees' intention to remain with their organizations. Theoretically, this study enriches the internal branding literature by integrating sense of belonging as a mediating construct that has not previously been empirically examined in hospitality contexts. Practically, hotel management is encouraged to design internal branding programs that facilitate the internalization of organizational values through meaningful work experiences.

This study is subject to several limitations, including its geographical focus on Semarang Regency, its concentration on star-rated hotels, and its cross-sectional design, which limits the ability to capture temporal dynamics. Future research is therefore recommended to extend the scope to other tourism destinations in Indonesia, integrate cross-generational perspectives (e.g., millennials versus Generation Z), and employ longitudinal research designs. Further exploration of moderating variables such as organizational culture and leadership style may also enrich understanding of the boundary conditions under which internal branding is most effective.

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