Faculty of Economics and Business

Employee Brand Relationship Quality in Pakistan Higher Education: The Role of Digital Enablement as the Moderator

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Employee Brand Relationship Quality in Pakistan Higher Education: The Role of Digital Enablement as the Moderator

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DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Except where due acknowledgements have been made, the work is that of the author alone. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.

Signature

……

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DEDICATION

To my parents,

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With heartfelt appreciation,

ABSTRACT

Developing a strong and consistent brand image that can be effectively communicated to employees is becoming more important in today's competitive higher education context. Making use of digital enablement opportunities to build employee brand relationships is key. An organization can gain numerous benefits, including a prominent position in the market, from technological advancements. A dearth of studies examining the impact of digital enablement on the development of employee-brand relationships has been identified, with a focus on HEIs. This study investigates the complex interaction among various variables, including communication, training, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and how they influence the quality of Employee Brand Relationships (EBRQ) and the moderating role of digital enablement on these relationships. This study focuses on data collected from 541 participants employed in Pakistan's higher education institutions (HEIs), applies Social Exchange Theory and Self-Determination Theory, uses structured questionnaires and Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) within SmartPLS 4.0 software. The analysis validates the reliability, validity, and distinctiveness of constructs. The findings substantiate significant connections between communication, training, leadership, job autonomy, competence, relatedness, and EBRQ. Digital enablement significantly moderates all these relationships except for job autonomy and relatedness.

Keywords: Employee brand relationship quality, digital enablement, internal brand management, intrinsic motivation

Kualiti Hubungan Jenama Pekerja dalam Pendidikan Tinggi Pakistan: Peranan Pemerkasaan Digital sebagai Moderator

ABSTRAK

Membangunkan imej jenama yang kukuh dan konsisten yang dapat dikomunikasikan secara berkesan kepada pekerja menjadi semakin penting dalam konteks persaingan institusi pendidikan tinggi masa kini. Penggunaan pendayagunaan digital (digital enablement) dalam membina hubungan jenama pekerja adalah elemen utama. Kemajuan teknologi menawarkan pelbagai manfaat kepada organisasi, termasuk kedudukan pasaran yang lebih kukuh. Walau bagaimanapun, terdapat kekurangan kajian yang meneliti kesan pendayagunaan digital terhadap pembangunan hubungan jenama pekerja, terutamanya dalam konteks institusi pendidikan tinggi (IPT). Kajian ini menyelidiki interaksi kompleks antara pelbagai pemboleh ubah, termasuk komunikasi, latihan, kepimpinan, autonomi kerja, kompetensi, dan keterhubungan, serta bagaimana faktor-faktor ini mempengaruhi kualiti hubungan jenama pekerja (Employee Brand Relationship Quality, EBRQ). Selain itu, kajian ini turut meneliti peranan moderasi pendayagunaan digital terhadap hubungan tersebut.

*Kajian ini menggunakan data daripada 541 orang responden yang bekerja dalam institusi pendidikan tinggi di Pakistan. Dengan berpandukan Teori Pertukaran Sosial (Social Exchange Theory) dan Teori Penentuan Kendiri (Self-Determination Theory), kajian ini menggunakan soal selidik berstruktur serta model Persamaan Struktur Kuasa Dua Terkecil Separa (PLS-SEM) melalui perisian SmartPLS 4.**0**. Hasil analisis mengesahkan kebolehpercayaan, kesahan, dan keunikan konstruk yang dikaji. Dapatan kajian membuktikan bahawa komunikasi, latihan, kepimpinan, autonomi kerja, kompetensi, dan keterhubungan mempunyai hubungan yang signifikan dengan EBRQ. Selain itu,*

pendayagunaan digital berperanan sebagai moderator yang signifikan dalam kesemua hubungan ini kecuali bagi autonomi kerja dan keterhubungan.

Kata kunci: Kualiti hubungan jenama pekerja, pemerkasaan digital, pengurusan jenama dalaman, motivasi intrinsik

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

EBRQ	Employee Brand Relationship Quality
IBM	Internal Brand Management
COM	Communication
TRA	Training
LEAD	Leadership
JA	Job Autonomy
COMP	Competence
REL	Relatedness
DIG	Digital Enablement
HEC	Higher Education Commission
HEI	Higher Education Institutions

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter covers an introduction to employee relationships with the brand, considering some theories and research work. In addition, the chapter introduces the study, encompassing its background, problem statement, research questions, research-specific objectives, scope, significance, and definition of constructs, as well as an outline of the thesis structure.

1.2 Research Background

In today's competitive landscape, branding has become a strategic imperative for organizations across various sectors. Traditionally, branding has been associated with products and consumer goods, where the primary focus is on differentiating offerings in the marketplace. However, branding in service-oriented industries is fundamentally different, as services are intangible and rely heavily on human interactions and experiences (Aljarah & Bayram, 2021). This distinction is particularly evident in the higher education sector, where universities and colleges must establish a strong institutional brand to attract students, faculty, and stakeholders while fostering engagement within their workforce (Hassan et al., 2021).

Unlike product-based branding, where the unit of analysis is often the consumer and their perceptions of tangible goods, branding in higher education is more complex, encompassing institutional reputation, service quality, and internal alignment of employees with the brand's mission and values (Guenther & Guenther, 2019). In this context, internal branding plays a crucial role by ensuring that employees—including faculty, staff, and

administrators—understand, support, and actively contribute to the institution's brand identity (Liu, 2022).

Employees serve as brand ambassadors, influencing students' educational experiences and shaping the institution's reputation (Wijaya & Annisa, 2020). Effective internal branding fosters a shared understanding of an institution's core values and objectives, reinforcing employee engagement and institutional loyalty (Piehler et al., 2021). This employee-institution connection is encapsulated in the concept of Employee-Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ)—the depth of employees' emotional and professional association with the brand (Punjaisri et al., 2009). Strong EBRQ has been linked to increased employee satisfaction, engagement, and advocacy, ultimately enhancing institutional performance and student satisfaction (Suomi et al., 2021).

Although research has established the significance of Employee-Brand Relationship Quality, empirical studies on this concept within the higher education sector remain scarce, especially in developing countries like Pakistan. Existing studies largely focus on commercial brands and consumer engagement (Quaye et al., 2022), leaving a gap in understanding how EBRQ functions within educational institutions, where employees play a dual role as both service providers and knowledge creators (Clark et al., 2019).

Pakistan's higher education sector comprises both public and private institutions, each facing unique challenges in branding, faculty retention, funding, and digital transformation (Hassan et al., 2021). Private universities struggle with high employee turnover rates, affecting institutional stability, while public institutions often grapple with bureaucratic constraints that hinder effective brand management (Ahsan Nasir, 2019). As competition among universities intensifies, branding is no longer just about external

recognition—it has become essential for employee commitment, internal cohesion, and long-term sustainability (Raja et al., 2022).

Given these challenges, internal branding strategies must be explored to enhance faculty and staff engagement. Research suggests that fostering strong employee-brand relationships leads to improved job satisfaction, institutional loyalty, and a positive student learning environment (Abbass et al., 2022). However, despite its importance, research on internal branding in Pakistani universities remains underdeveloped, necessitating further investigation into the factors influencing Employee-Brand Relationship Quality in HEIs.

In the wake of rapid digital transformation, universities are leveraging technology to enhance communication, collaboration, and engagement (Blahušiaková et al., 2022). Digital enablement, defined as the use of digital tools to support work processes and organizational goals (Lusch et al., 2007), has significantly reshaped higher education institutions, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Usova et al., 2021). Digital platforms facilitate seamless internal communication, improve access to institutional resources, and enhance employee engagement with the university brand (Varadaraj & Al Wadi, 2021). Despite the growing importance of digital enablement in employee engagement, there is a lack of empirical research on its impact as a moderator in internal branding and employee-brand relationships, particularly in the context of higher education. Understanding how digital enablement strengthens or weakens employee-brand relationships is critical for universities aiming to enhance institutional branding through technology-driven strategies (Chakraborty & Biswas, 2020).

This research addresses the existing gaps in branding research by exploring Employee-Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) in the higher education sector of Pakistan.

Unlike branding studies that focus on consumer perceptions or product-based branding, this study investigates internal branding within HEIs, where employees are key stakeholders in delivering the brand promise. By focusing on both public and private universities, this research aims to provide actionable insights for university administrators and policymakers, helping them strengthen employee-brand relationships, enhance institutional branding strategies, and improve overall employee engagement. Given the unique challenges of branding in education, this study will contribute to both academic literature and practical applications in the field of internal branding and higher education management.

1.3 Problem Statement

In the digital age, the role of employees in building and maintaining strong brand relationships has become increasingly critical, particularly in the service sector. Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) represents the depth of emotional attachment, value alignment, and engagement that employees have with their organization's brand (Punjaisri et al., 2009). A high level of EBRQ enhances employee commitment, brand advocacy, and service delivery, leading to positive institutional outcomes (Mostafa & Kasamani, 2021). However, despite its significance, achieving and sustaining strong EBRQ remains a major challenge, particularly in the higher education sector, where faculty, staff, and administrators play a crucial role in shaping institutional reputation and student experience.

In Pakistan's higher education sector, both public and private universities face critical challenges, including high employee turnover, lack of institutional commitment, and weak brand attachment (Abbass et al., 2022; Raja et al., 2022). Private universities, in particular, struggle with faculty retention due to perceived job insecurity and limited professional growth opportunities (Ahsan Nasir, 2019). Public universities, on the other hand, encounter

bureaucratic inefficiencies that hinder effective employee engagement and institutional branding efforts. These challenges weaken employee commitment to the university brand, negatively impacting student satisfaction, institutional reputation, and overall performance. Thus, understanding the factors influencing EBRQ in higher education is crucial for fostering a committed workforce and sustaining a competitive advantage.

One of the key factors influencing EBRQ is internal branding, which aligns employees with institutional values, culture, and mission (Piehler et al., 2021). Effective internal branding fosters brand commitment, enhances job satisfaction, and strengthens employees' emotional connection with their institution (Soleimani et al., 2022). Similarly, intrinsic motivation plays a vital role in shaping employee-brand relationships by fostering a sense of purpose, autonomy, and engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Employees who are intrinsically motivated are more likely to develop positive associations with their organization's brand and exhibit greater brand advocacy (Guzmán et al., 2020).

However, in today's digitalized work environment, traditional internal branding and motivational strategies may not be sufficient to enhance EBRQ. The rise of digital enablement—the use of digital tools and technologies to enhance communication, collaboration, and engagement—has transformed the way organizations interact with employees and shape their brand experiences (Blahušiaková et al., 2022). In the higher education sector, digital enablement has gained prominence due to the increasing reliance on digital learning platforms, remote work models, and online collaboration tools (Usova et al., 2021). When effectively implemented, digital enablement can strengthen internal branding efforts, facilitate real-time engagement, and enhance employees' perception of

their institutional brand (Chakraborty & Biswas, 2020). However, its impact on EBRQ remains underexplored, particularly in the context of Pakistani universities.

Despite the recognized importance of EBRQ in enhancing HEI effectiveness, existing research has largely focused on external branding and student perceptions, neglecting the role of employees in building strong institutional brands (Raja et al., 2022). Moreover, while studies on internal branding and employee engagement exist, they rarely integrate digitalization as a moderating factor influencing employee-brand relationships (Quaye et al., 2022). This gap in the literature highlights the need to examine how internal branding and intrinsic motivation impact EBRQ, and whether digital enablement moderates these relationships in the higher education sector.

Addressing this research gap is crucial for higher education institutions in Pakistan, where digital transformation is reshaping academic operations and employee experiences. By understanding the interplay between internal branding, intrinsic motivation, digital enablement, and EBRQ, universities can develop targeted strategies to enhance employee commitment, reduce turnover, and improve institutional performance. This study, therefore, aims to provide empirical insights into how universities can leverage internal branding and motivation strategies, complemented by digital enablement, to strengthen their employee-brand relationships and sustain a competitive advantage in the evolving educational landscape.

1.4 Research Gaps

Despite the vast literature on internal brand management, intrinsic motivation, digital enablement, and employee brand relationships, numerous gaps remain that require more study. The gaps include theoretical gap, conceptual gap and contextual gap.

1.4.1 Theoretical gap

A significant theoretical gap persists in the absence of a comprehensive theoretical framework that effectively integrates these constructs within the unique context of higher education institutions in Pakistan. This gap suggests a lack of a cohesive theoretical foundation that can provide a holistic understanding of how these factors interact and influence each other within the specific environment of Pakistani higher education (Khan et al., 2019). Without such a framework, it becomes challenging to develop robust theoretical models and advance scholarly understanding in this area. Hence, addressing this gap is crucial for laying the groundwork for future research endeavours.

1.4.2 Conceptual gap

Emphasizing the conceptual gap in existing literature, it's evident that the crucial role of employees as brand ambassadors and pivotal stakeholders in the brand-building process is frequently overlooked (Agrawal & Paulus, 2022; Wang et al., 2023). Despite extensive studies on customer-brand relationships, the influence of employees on brand perceptions and experiences is often underestimated, neglecting the potential impact of their attitudes, behaviors, and interactions on brand equity, customer experiences, and organizational performance. Employee-brand relationships encompass unique dynamics compared to customer-brand relationships, revolving around organizational culture, employee engagement, brand alignment, and internal communication (Iqbal et al., 2023). Understanding these dynamics is crucial for crafting effective internal branding strategies and fostering a positive organizational climate conducive to brand success. However, the conceptual gap extends to the limited understanding of factors such as internal brand management and intrinsic motivation affecting employee brand relationship quality, which remains largely unexplored despite the well-documented factors affecting customer-brand

relationships, (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022; Sujchaphong et al., 2019; L. Zhang et al., 2020). This gap hampers organizations' ability to fully harness their human capital in driving brand success and gaining a competitive advantage.

1.4.3 Contextual gap

Furthermore, a critical gap exists in research that addresses the unique contextual factors influencing internal brand management, intrinsic motivation, digital enablement, and employee brand relationships in Pakistani higher education institutions. Most studies in this area draw upon research conducted in Western contexts or corporate organizations, overlooking the distinct cultural, institutional, and environmental factors that characterize higher education in Pakistan (Bilal et al., 2020; Shaikh et al., 2023). This gap hampers the applicability and generalizability of existing research findings to the Pakistani higher education context and highlights the need for context-specific investigations. Therefore, closing this gap is essential for developing insights and strategies tailored to the specific needs and challenges of higher education institutions in Pakistan (Asad et al., 2021; Hinduja et al., 2023).

1.5 Research Questions

The research questions for this study are as follows:

Q.1: What is the impact of Internal Brand Management activities and Intrinsic Motivation factors in the development of employee brand relationships in Pakistani Higher education institutions?

Q.2: To what extent does Digital Enablement moderate the relationship between Internal Brand Management activities and Intrinsic Motivation factors with employee brand relationship quality in Pakistani Higher education institutions?

1.6 Research Objectives

The general objective of this research is to investigate and understand the factors influencing Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) within the higher education sector in Pakistan, with a focus on internal branding strategies, intrinsic motivation factors, and digital enablement. More specifically, the objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze the relationship between Internal Brand Management activities (including Training, Communication, and Leadership) and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ).

2. To examine the relationship between Intrinsic Motivation factors (specifically Job Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness) and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ).

3. To assess the moderating role of Digital Enablement on the relationship between Internal Brand Management activities (including Communication, Training, and Leadership) and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ).

4. To investigate the moderating role of Digital Enablement on the relationship between Intrinsic Motivation factors (specifically Job Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness) and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ).

1.7 Research Contribution and Originality

This study contributes significantly to the existing body of literature by addressing critical gaps in understanding Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) within the service sector, particularly focusing on higher education institutions (HEIs) in developing countries like Pakistan. While previous research predominantly emphasizes customer-

centric branding strategies, this study shifts the spotlight to the often-overlooked employee perspective, recognizing employees as critical stakeholders in the brand-building process.

The theoretical contribution of this research lies in the integration of Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explore the dynamics of internal brand management, intrinsic motivation, digital enablement, and employee brand relationships in the context of HEIs in Pakistan. SET provides insights into the reciprocal relationships between employees and the organization, emphasizing the role of trust, reciprocity, and mutual benefit in fostering positive employee-brand relationships (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). On the other hand, SDT highlights the significance of intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and competence in driving employee engagement and commitment to the brand (Deci & Ryan, 1985). By synthesizing these two theories, this study offers a comprehensive theoretical framework that helps explain the underlying mechanisms shaping employee perceptions, behaviors, and interactions with the brand. This integration not only enhances scholarly understanding but also provides actionable insights for effectively managing internal branding strategies and improving organizational performance in the higher education sector of Pakistan.

This research also addresses a critical conceptual gap by providing a comprehensive theoretical framework that integrates internal brand management and intrinsic motivation as independent variables and digital enablement as a moderating variable. This framework aims to examine the collective impact of these factors on employee brand relationship quality as the dependent variable within the specific context of Pakistani HEIs. By bridging this gap, this study facilitates the development of robust theoretical models and contributes to advancing scholarly understanding in this domain.

Additionally, the research highlights the often-overlooked role of employees as brand ambassadors and pivotal stakeholders in the brand-building process (Agrawal & Paulus, 2022; Wang et al., 2023). While extensive research exists on customer-brand relationships, the influence of employees on brand perceptions and experiences is often underestimated. By exploring the internal brand management and intrinsic motivation factors affecting employee-brand relationship quality, this study enriches the understanding of how employees influence brand success, thus offering organizations insights into effectively utilizing human capital to drive brand success and enhance competitive advantage.

Moreover, this research addresses the contextual factors that shape internal brand management, intrinsic motivation, digital enablement, and employee-brand relationships in Pakistani higher education institutions. By conducting a context-specific investigation, this study bridges the gap between research conducted in Western or corporate settings and the unique cultural, institutional, and environmental factors in Pakistan's higher education sector (Bilal et al., 2020; Shaikh et al., 2023). As a result, this study enhances the applicability and generalizability of existing research findings, enabling the development of insights and strategies tailored to the needs and challenges of higher education institutions in Pakistan (Asad et al., 2021; Hinduja et al., 2023).

1.8 Scope of the study

The scope of this research encompasses a comprehensive investigation and analysis of Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) within the distinct context of higher education institutions in Pakistan. It aims to understand how internal brand management, intrinsic motivation, and digital enablement collectively influence employee brand relationship quality. The study focuses on employees within selected higher education

institutions in Pakistan, including faculty members, administrative staff, and other relevant personnel involved in the brand-building process, representing a diverse cross-section of the organizational hierarchy.

This research ensures thorough investigation of the research questions and facilitates the attainment of research objectives with precision and rigor. It investigates into various dimensions related to internal brand management, intrinsic motivation, and digital enablement, investigating theories such as social exchange theory and self-determination theory to provide theoretical insights into their interplay and impact on employee brand relationship quality.

This study is conducted within the context of higher education institutions in Pakistan, a developing country facing challenges within its higher education system. By focusing on Pakistan, the research aims to offer insights that extend beyond academia, contributing to broader discussions on organizational management, marketing strategies, and socio-economic development in developing countries. It acknowledges the unique service-oriented aspects of educational services and aims to capture the intricacies of employee-brand relationships within the academic context, distinguishing it from studies in other industries.

The geographical scope encompasses institutions from diverse regions of Pakistan, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter and accounting for regional disparities and cultural nuances inherent within the Pakistani higher education landscape. The research investigates Internal Brand Management (IBM) activities, intrinsic motivation factors, and the role of digital enablement, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, within the higher education sector.

In summary, this study offers a comprehensive examination of the unique context of higher education institutions in Pakistan, emphasizing internal brand management, intrinsic motivation factors, and the influence of digital enablement on Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

1.9 Significance of the study

This research is a novel attempt to explore internal brand management within Pakistani higher education institutions (HEIs). By integrating internal brand management, intrinsic motivation, and digital enablement into a comprehensive theoretical framework, this study breaks new ground in understanding the complexities of employee-brand relationships in this unique context. Through rigorous empirical analysis and theoretical synthesis, the study generates transformational insights that advance both theoretical knowledge and practical applications in internal branding.

1.9.1 Theoretical Contributions

The significance of this study lies in its ability to uncover the nuanced dynamics between internal brand management, intrinsic motivation, and digital enablement, offering new perspectives that reshape how organizations approach brand management in higher education. This study contributes to the existing literature by integrating multiple theoretical perspectives to explain employee-brand relationships in HEIs, an area that has received limited scholarly attention. Additionally, it extends the application of Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by demonstrating their relevance in the context of internal branding within HEIs. By examining digital enablement as a moderating factor, this study adds a novel dimension to branding literature, addressing the impact of technological advancements on employee engagement and institutional branding. The

findings provide a conceptual foundation for future research, setting the stage for continued scholarly exploration in this domain.

1.9.2 Practical Contributions

The findings of this study hold direct relevance to the real-world practices and outcomes of HEIs in Pakistan, providing actionable insights to improve employee engagement, brand perception, and institutional performance. By understanding how internal brand management and intrinsic motivation influence employees' commitment to institutional branding, universities can develop targeted strategies to enhance faculty and staff alignment with organizational values. Furthermore, the study offers valuable recommendations for integrating digital enablement to improve internal communication, brand advocacy, and employee engagement.

Beyond organizational outcomes, this research has broader social and economic implications. Enhancing internal brand management practices in HEIs can improve educational quality and institutional reputation, contributing to societal welfare. Moreover, it can drive economic development by attracting students, faculty, and funding to HEIs in Pakistan, fostering the sector's growth and international competitiveness. By identifying key areas for further investigation and suggesting potential avenues for advancement, this study serves as a catalyst for continued progress in internal branding within HEIs, ensuring its enduring relevance and impact.

1.10 Definitions of the Constructs

All the constructs are defined below:

1.10.1 Internal Brand Management (IBM) activities

Internal brand management (IBM) is a strategic and structured approach through which organizations align employees with the brand's identity, values, and objectives to ensure consistent brand delivery (Morhart et al., 2009; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Effective IBM involves three key components: communication, training, and leadership, each playing a vital role in fostering a strong internal brand culture.

1.10.1.1 Communication

Internal brand communication refers to the strategic dissemination of brand-related information, values, and messaging within an organization to engage and align employees with the brand. It encompasses the formal and informal channels through which organizational values, brand identity, and brand promise are communicated to employees, fostering a shared understanding of the brand's essence and objectives (Punjaisri et al., 2009).

1.10.1.2 Training

Training is defined as a formative process characterized by the communication and instruction provided to employees in alignment with brand knowledge (R. Zhang et al., 2022). This essential element is integral to the domain of internal branding and involves educational and developmental initiatives strategically implemented to foster alignment between employees and the organization's brand values and messaging (Ismail et al., 2022).

1.10.1.3 Leadership

Leadership refers to the role of organizational leaders in shaping and promoting the brand identity, values, and culture within the organization. It encompasses the actions and behaviors of leaders that influence employees' understanding, commitment, and support for the brand. Effective internal brand leadership involves aligning organizational objectives

with the brand's vision, fostering a brand-centric organizational culture, and inspiring employees to embody the brand values in their interactions and decision-making (Morhart et al., 2009).

1.10.2 Intrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation is the internal drive that leads individuals to engage in activities due to personal interest, enjoyment, or fulfillment rather than external rewards (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the workplace, intrinsic motivation is essential for fostering employee engagement, creativity, and long-term commitment. It is primarily driven by three psychological needs: job autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

1.10.2.1 Job autonomy

Job autonomy refers to the level of freedom and independence employees experience in making decisions and carrying out their work within the organization. It is a key enabling factor for employee engagement and innovative behavior(Hur & Adler, 2011; Latifah & Muafi, 2021).

1.10.2.2 Competence

Competence refers to the skills, knowledge, and abilities that employees possess and demonstrate in their roles within the organization. It encompasses the proficiency and capability of employees to effectively perform their job responsibilities and contribute to the organization's objectives (Yoganathan et al., 2021).

1.10.2.3 Relatedness

Relatedness refers to the fundamental psychological need for feeling connected to others and having a sense of belonging (Tang et al., 2023).

1.10.3 Digital Enablement

Digital enablement is the integration and strategic use of digital technologies to enhance communication, collaboration, and operational efficiency within organizations (Wu et al., 2021). It empowers employees by providing access to digital tools, automated processes, and virtual work environments, fostering greater productivity and engagement. Digital enablement in the context of internal branding supports seamless brand communication, knowledge-sharing, and employee-brand interaction, ultimately strengthening Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ).

1.10.4 Employee Brand Relationship Quality

This study revises the definition of Brand Relationship Quality from the customer's perspective established by Fournier (1998) to the employee's perspective. It defines employee brand relationship Quality in higher education institutions as the entire range of interpersonal variables in the relationship that attempt to capture the strength of the connection formed between the employee and the institution brand toward a prediction of relationship stability over time.

1.11 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis is consisting of five chapters, systematically addressing the research questions and objectives outlined in the introduction. The organization is as follows:

1.11.1 Chapter 1 Introduction

The study's background, problem statement, research questions, general and research objectives, scope of the study, significance of the study, essential words and definitions, and overall thesis structure are all presented in Chapter 1. This chapter lays the groundwork for

investigating how employee-brand relationships contribute to maintaining brands' competitive edge.

1.11.2 Chapter 2 Literature Review

Chapter 2 examines the conceptual underpinnings and theoretical underpinnings of the pertinent literature on employee brand relationship quality. It looks at self-determination theory (SDT) and social exchange theory (SET) and their applicability to comprehending the dynamics of interactions between employee brands. The chapter also examines how the concept of employee brand relationships came to be and how important it is to organizational branding.

1.11.3 Chapter 3 Research Methodology

The research methodology used in the study is described in Chapter 3 along with the research design, data gathering strategies, and data analysis approaches. It goes into how the variables were chosen, how the measurements were made, and why the research methodology was chosen.

1.11.4 Chapter 4 Findings and Discussion

The Chapter 4 presents the outcomes of the empirical investigation and discusses the conclusions drawn from data analysis. This chapter offers a thorough examination of the connection between IBM activities, intrinsic motivation factors, and employee brand relationship quality. Additionally, the chapter provides a detailed analysis of the quantitative data and includes a comprehensive discussion of the findings, interpreting their implications in the context of the research objectives.

1.11.5 Chapter 5 Conclusion and Recommendations

The research investigation is comprehensively concluded in Chapter 5, which provides a summary of the key results, contributions, and implications. It addresses the goals of the study and responds to the inquiries raised in Chapter 1 about the study. The chapter also addresses the study's shortcomings and offers suggestions for new lines of inquiry to increase knowledge of the effectiveness of employee brand relationships.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter reviews the literature, discussing the conceptual and theoretical background of the variables, considering the work done by past researchers. It also discusses the supporting theories that govern this research. The chapter presents and extensively discusses the conceptual framework, which leads to the development of the hypotheses.

2.2 Underpinning Theories

This study is grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), as these theories provide a robust foundation for understanding employee brand relationship quality (EBRQ) within the higher education sector in Pakistan. These theoretical perspectives facilitate an in-depth examination of how employees engage with their institution's brand, particularly in the context of internal branding, intrinsic motivation, and digital enablement as a moderating factor.

The rationale for selecting these theories is based on their ability to explain the reciprocal nature of employee-brand relationships and the motivational processes that drive employees' engagement with the brand. While other theories such as Social Identity Theory (SIT), Expectancy Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) offer valuable insights in related domains, their applicability to the core research problem is limited. A detailed justification for their exclusion is presented later in this section.

2.2.1 Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (SET) is a prominent conceptual paradigm in organizational behaviour, emphasizing the reciprocal exchange of resources and its impact on interpersonal relationships and organizational dynamics (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). The theory posits that social interactions involve a balanced exchange where individuals contribute effort and receive rewards in return, leading to mutually beneficial relationships (Chernyak-Hai & Rabenu, 2018). SET has been instrumental in formalizing the study of interpersonal relations, power dynamics, and the exercise of influence (Faraj & Johnson, 2011). Affect theory of social exchange focuses on the emotional and affective processes, broadening the understanding of the emotional effects of exchange in social relationships (Lawler, 2001). This highlights the emotional dimensions of social exchange and its influence on solidarity and feelings within interpersonal interactions.

Research has also explored the relevance of SET in the contemporary workplace, addressing factors that reshape work relationships and proposing alternative models to understand the new era work relationships (Yoshikawa et al., 2018). This critical evaluation emphasizes the need to apply and extend social exchange theory to comprehend the dynamics of modern workplace relationships. SET has been applied to various contexts, including online communities, health care, business ethics, and human sexuality, demonstrating its versatility and applicability across diverse domains (S. Chen & Choi, 2005; H. Liu, 2022a; Sprecher, 1998). The theory continues to provide a theoretical basis for social network research, emphasizing its enduring significance in understanding social relationships and networks (Dijkstra, 2015).

Furthermore, SET has been associated to group cohesion, emphasizing how interdependence leads to instrumental acts and behaviours, as well as symbolic or expressive behaviours within groups (Lawler, 2001). This highlights the multifaceted nature of social exchange and its implications for group dynamics and productivity. To illustrate the significance of employee brand relationship quality in internal branding, this research proposed results based on social exchange theory (SET) presented by Blau, (1964).

Social Exchange Theory (SET) provides a valuable framework for understanding the dynamics of employee-brand relationship quality. The theory emphasizes the reciprocal exchange of resources and its impact on interpersonal relationships, making it particularly relevant in the context of employee-brand interactions. The application of SET in understanding the association between internal branding, affective commitment, employee engagement, and job satisfaction has been explored by research (Kaur et al., 2020). This highlights the role of social exchange processes in shaping employees' attitudes and behaviours towards the brand, emphasizing the importance of a balanced exchange where employees contribute effort and receive recognition and support in return

2.2.1.1 Social Exchange Theory and Employee Brand Relationship

Social Exchange Theory (SET) helps explain employee-brand relationship quality. The approach emphasizes resource reciprocity and interpersonal relationships, making it relevant to employee-brand interactions. Research has examined the relationship between internal branding, affective commitment, employee engagement, and work satisfaction using SET (Kaur et al., 2020). This shows how social exchange processes shape employees' brand views and behaviors, emphasizing the need for a balanced exchange where people give and receive acknowledgment and support. The literature has also examined the mediating role of brand knowledge on employees' brand citizenship behaviour, shedding light on the influence

of social exchange processes on employees' brand-related behaviours (Ngo et al., 2019). This emphasizes the significance of employees' understanding of the brand in fostering positive brand-related behaviours, aligning with the principles of social exchange.

Some studies have also investigated the impact of employer branding on employee brand equity, job satisfaction, and organizational identification, demonstrating the relevance of social exchange processes in shaping employees' perceptions and attitudes towards the brand (Bharadwaj et al., 2021; Kaur et al., 2020). These findings emphasize the reciprocal nature of the employee-employer relationship and the influence of social exchange dynamics on employee-brand relationship quality. Furthermore, the literature has explored the role of social exchange processes in influencing employees' brand citizenship behavior, organizational commitment, and job satisfaction, highlighting the multifaceted impact of social exchange dynamics on employee-brand interactions (Dhiman & Arora, 2022; Hoang, 2021).

2.2.1.2 Social Exchange Theory in Organizational Context

Social Exchange Theory (SET) has provided insight into relationships, employee behaviour, and organizational results in organizational behaviour. Applying SET to organizational contexts has improved understanding of employee-brand interactions, organizational support, and brand-related behaviours. Research on organizational support and employee performance emphasizes the role of social exchange mechanisms in determining employee behaviors and outcomes (Chen et al., 2020). This highlights the reciprocal nature of the exchange between employees and the organization, where organizational support influences employee performance and engagement.

Using social exchange perspectives, studies have investigated what social exchange processes affect environmental organizational citizenship behaviors (Liu & Qi, 2022). This study shows that social interchange dynamics affect employees' behavior in many ways, especially regarding environmental initiatives and organizational identity. The literature also emphasizes brand-specific leadership and employee brand comprehension in turning employees into brand champions through internal branding (Morhart et al., 2009). These studies show how internal branding affects employees' views, behaviors, and brand ambassadorship. The reciprocal link between organizations and employees in brand value transformation has also been studied (Liu, 2022). Employees play a key role in brand equity. This emphasizes the dynamic employee-organization interaction and its impact on brand outcomes.

2.2.1.3 Social Exchange Theory in the Higher Education Institution Context

SET helps higher education institutions comprehend student, instructor, administrator, and institution relationships. SET has been studied to determine higher education student happiness and engagement (Al-Rahmi et al., 2015). This emphasizes the reciprocal student-institution interaction by showing how social exchange mechanisms shape students' academic experiences and views. Social exchange procedures affect higher education educators' knowledge sharing, teamwork, and professional development (Moolenaar, 2012; Rogulj, 2019). This highlights the complex effects of social exchange dynamics on academic community professional connections. Studies have also examined how social exchange processes affect alumni involvement, donation behavior, and volunteerism for higher education (Weerts & Ronca, 2007). This emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between the institution and its alumni and the function of social exchange in fostering support and participation. SET has also been used to study higher education social

media use, communication, and knowledge exchange (Castillo & Haddud, 2017; Chatterjee et al., 2020). This shows how social exchange mechanisms shape academic communication, collaboration, and knowledge sharing.

Social Exchange Theory (SET) is a pivotal framework for understanding social behavior in various contexts, including higher education institutions. Originally developed by Homans (1958), SET posits that social behavior is the result of an exchange process aimed at maximizing benefits and minimizing costs. In higher education institutions, this theory provides a valuable lens for examining the dynamics between faculty, students, and administrative staff, emphasizing the reciprocal nature of interactions and the balance of rewards and costs that influence these relationships.

In the context of higher education, SET can be utilized to analyze the relationship between faculty and students. Faculty members invest time, knowledge, and mentorship into their students, expecting in return respect, engagement, and academic performance. This exchange fosters a conducive learning environment where both parties are motivated by the potential rewards. For instance, when students actively participate in class and perform well, faculty members feel their efforts are worthwhile, which can lead to increased job satisfaction and commitment to the institution (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). SET is also instrumental in understanding the interactions between faculty and the administration. Faculty members provide expertise, teaching, and research outputs, while the administration offers resources, support, and recognition. When faculty perceive that the administration fairly rewards their contributions through promotions, funding, and professional development opportunities, their organizational commitment and job satisfaction are likely

to increase (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1976). Conversely, perceived inequities in this exchange can lead to dissatisfaction and reduced morale.

In the context of higher education administration, SET can be applied to understand the relationship between institutional policies and faculty behavior. Policies that recognize and reward faculty contributions, such as tenure systems and merit-based pay, align with the principles of social exchange by providing tangible rewards for faculty efforts. This alignment can motivate faculty to enhance their teaching and research outputs, benefiting the institution as a whole (Mitchell et al., 2012).

Social Exchange Theory provides a robust framework for analyzing the complex interactions within higher education institutions. Through focusing on the reciprocal nature of relationships and the balance of rewards and costs, SET offers insights into how to foster a supportive and engaging academic environment. Understanding these dynamics can help higher education institutions design policies and practices that enhance the experiences of faculty, students, and administrative staff, ultimately contributing to the institution's success and sustainability.

2.2.2 Self-determination theory (SDT)

The theory of self-determination (SDT) indicates that the need for employees to recognise and embrace the brand worth of the company from the internal environment created by leaders to convince them to recognize the value of the corporate brand (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000). The theory emphasizes the role of intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and competence in driving individuals' actions and well-being.

SDT has been utilized to investigate the concept of motivation in the field of physical education. This study has placed an emphasis on the role that autonomy support and competence play in encouraging students to participate in physical activities and to continue doing so. According to (Ntoumanis, 2005), this highlights the significance of SDT in educational contexts and the impact it has on the motivation of students as well as the effectiveness of their learning.

Furthermore, the theory has been utilized to gain an understanding of the fulfillment of psychological requirements in blended learning contexts. This has been accomplished by highlighting the significance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the process of fostering students' engagement and emotional well-being. The findings of this study underline the significance of establishing learning settings that are encouraging and conducive to the development of students' intrinsic motivation and psychological well-being (Aditia et al., 2021).

2.2.2.1 Self-Determination Theory and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

The Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has served as a crucial paradigm for comprehending motivation, personality, and behaviour in diverse contexts, including the realm of organizations. The idea highlights the significance of internal drive, independence, and proficiency in influencing individuals' behaviours and overall welfare. Ryan & Deci, (2000a) examined the utilization of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in promoting internal motivation, fostering social growth, and enhancing overall well-being. The notion proposes that individuals, when proactive and motivated, exert effort to acquire knowledge, push their limits, acquire new abilities, and responsibly utilize their talents. This viewpoint offers a fundamental comprehension of intrinsic motivation and self-determination, which are crucial in cultivating favourable employee-brand connections.

The research conducted by (Deci & Ryan, 1985) presented a significant viewpoint on the internal drive and self-determination in human behaviour. They highlighted the crucial role of autonomy and intrinsic motivation in influencing individuals' activities and overall well-being. This seminal research has had a significant impact on the implementation of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in organizational contexts, namely in comprehending the motivation and engagement of employees. Hagger & Protogerou, (2018) examined the impact within the framework of self-determination theory, highlighting the theory's emphasis on forecasting favourable results associated with motivation and active participation, such as good emotional and affective consequences. This viewpoint illuminates the emotional components of motivation and well-being within the corporate setting, which are crucial for cultivating favourable employee-brand connections.

2.2.2.2 Self-Determination Theory in Organizational Context

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) has helped explain organizational motivation, personality, and behaviour. The theory emphasizes internal motivation, autonomy, and competence in behaviour and well-being. This study illuminates the challenges of adopting SDT in organisations and the necessity for a comprehensive knowledge of workplace motivation. (Deci & Ryan, 1985) established the role of autonomy and intrinsic drive-in human behaviour and well-being. SDT has been used in organisations to understand employee motivation and engagement since this research. In a comprehensive study of well-being and ill-being in working situations, (Nunes et al., 2023)highlighted SDT's role in comprehending organizational employees' psychological well-being. This study shows that SDT improves workplace results and reduces negative effects. Hagger & Protogerou, (2018a) examined affect in the framework of Self-Determination Theory, highlighting the

natural and organic process of pursuing environmental demand satisfaction. This study examines organizational motivation and well-being from an emotional perspective.

According to (Ryan & Deci, 2000a), agentic and motivated people learn, grow, master new abilities, and use their talents appropriately. Positive employee-brand connections require a basic grasp of intrinsic drive and self-determination. Hui & Tsang, (2012) researched self-determination theories from the perspectives of motivation and skills enhancement, demonstrating SDT's role in positive youth development and psychological well-being. SDT has helped higher education institutions understand faculty motivation, engagement, and well-being. The theory's focus on intrinsic motivation and autonomy has illuminated higher education faculty conduct and well-being.

2.2.2.3 Self-Determination Theory in the Higher Education Institution Context

In the context of higher education institutions, SDT offers valuable insights into the factors that enhance student engagement, faculty motivation, and overall institutional effectiveness. Autonomy, the need to feel in control of one's own behaviors and goals, is a critical component of SDT. In higher education, fostering autonomy can significantly impact students' intrinsic motivation and academic performance. When students have the freedom to choose their courses, participate in decision-making processes, and pursue research topics that interest them, they are more likely to be engaged and motivated. Studies have shown that autonomy-supportive teaching practices, which involve providing meaningful choices and encouraging self-initiative, are associated with higher levels of student motivation and academic success (Niemiec & Ryan, 2009; Reeve, 2009). For instance, Jang, Reeve, and Deci (2010) found that students who perceived their instructors as autonomy-supportive reported greater intrinsic motivation and academic self-efficacy. Competence, the need to feel effective in one's activities and attain desired outcomes, is another essential element of

SDT. In the higher education context, this can be addressed through challenging coursework, constructive feedback, and opportunities for skill development. When students and faculty members feel competent, they are more likely to engage deeply with their academic work and pursue excellence. Research by Vansteenkiste, Simons, Lens, Sheldon, and Deci (2004) demonstrated that students who experienced competence in their academic tasks exhibited higher levels of motivation and better academic performance. Similarly, faculty members who receive support for professional development and research endeavors are more likely to experience job satisfaction and remain committed to their institutions (Deci et al., 2001). Relatedness, the need to feel connected and valued by others, is also crucial in higher education. A sense of belonging and positive relationships with peers, faculty, and staff can enhance motivation and well-being. Tinto (1993) emphasized the importance of social integration in student retention, suggesting that students who feel connected to their academic community are more likely to persist in their studies. Relatedness can be fostered through collaborative learning environments, mentorship programs, and extracurricular activities that promote interaction and community building. Research has shown that students who experience a sense of relatedness in their educational settings report higher levels of intrinsic motivation, engagement, and academic success (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

For faculty members, relatedness is equally important. Positive relationships with colleagues, supportive leadership, and a collaborative work environment can enhance job satisfaction and motivation. In a study by Black and Deci (2000), faculty members who felt supported by their peers and administrators reported higher levels of intrinsic motivation and professional fulfillment. Creating a culture of relatedness within higher education institutions can lead to a more engaged and productive academic community. SDT also

highlights the role of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation in educational settings. Intrinsic motivation, driven by internal satisfaction and interest in the activity itself, is often associated with deeper learning and greater persistence. Extrinsic motivation, on the other hand, involves external rewards or pressures. While both types of motivation can influence behavior, SDT posits that environments that support intrinsic motivation lead to better outcomes. Higher education institutions can promote intrinsic motivation by designing curricula and experiences that are relevant, engaging, and aligned with students' interests and goals (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

SDT emphasizes the importance of autonomy-supportive environments for both students and faculty. For students, this can involve providing opportunities for self-directed learning, encouraging critical thinking, and minimizing controlling behaviors such as excessive monitoring or high-stakes testing. For faculty, autonomy support can include flexible work arrangements, opportunities for academic freedom, and involvement in institutional decision-making processes. Autonomy-supportive environments have been shown to enhance motivation, well-being, and performance in both students and faculty (Baard, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). Hence, Self-Determination Theory offers a robust framework for understanding motivation within higher education institutions. By addressing the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, higher education institutions can create environments that foster intrinsic motivation, engagement, and well-being among students and faculty. Implementing SDT principles can lead to improved academic outcomes, greater job satisfaction, and a more cohesive and supportive academic community.

2.2.3 Justification for Not Using Other Theories

Although several theories could potentially explain employee engagement with organizational brands, their applicability to this study is limited in key aspects. Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) is commonly used to explain employee-brand identification by emphasizing group identity and social categorization processes. While SIT is useful in explaining how employees align themselves with organizational brands based on social identity, it does not adequately account for the role of exchange relationships and intrinsic motivation, which are central to this study. SET provides a more dynamic perspective on how employees evaluate and respond to brand-related exchanges, while SDT explains how employees' psychological needs influence brand engagement, making them more appropriate theoretical choices.

Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964) is another widely used motivational theory that explains how employees’ expectations of rewards influence their behavior. While this theory is useful for understanding performance-based motivation, it does not fully capture the intrinsic and relational aspects of employee-brand relationships. SDT, in contrast, provides a more comprehensive framework for understanding how employees internalize brand values and engage in brand-related behaviors beyond external rewards.

Similarly, the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991) focuses on intentions and perceived behavioral control, which is useful for explaining specific employee actions, but it does not adequately account for long-term brand relationships and intrinsic motivation. SET and SDT, in contrast, provide a more holistic perspective on how employees engage with internal branding efforts in HEIs, making them the most suitable theoretical foundations for this study.

In summary, the integration of Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding employee-brand relationship quality in higher education institutions. SET explains the reciprocal nature of employee-brand relationships, emphasizing mutual exchanges between employees and organizations, while SDT highlights the role of intrinsic motivation in shaping employees' engagement with the brand. The selection of these theories is further justified by their applicability in organizational and higher education contexts, as well as their ability to address the core research objectives. While other theories offer valuable insights in related domains, they do not fully capture the exchange-based and motivational dimensions of employee-brand relationships, reinforcing the suitability of SET and SDT as the theoretical underpinnings of this study.

2.2.4 The Concept of Customer Brand Relationship

For a relationship to truly exist, interdependence between partners must be evident: that is, the partners must collectively affect, define, and redefine the relationship (Hinde1995). Many researchers (for example Blackston, 1993; Fajer and Schouten, 1995) have previously paid attention towards the concept of consumer brand relationship (CBR) and made significant contributions in exploring this concept. In 1998, Fournier wrote a theoretical paper on CBR which defined a consumer brand relationship based on simple human relationships. Fournier (1998) presented the model of brand relationship quality which consists of six dimensions (i.e. love and passion, self-connection, interdependence, commitment, intimacy, and brand participant quality) that intend to measure the strength of the relationship.

The literature reveals that the connection between customers and brands is a complex structure that includes multiple dimensions such as brand attachment, brand trust, brand loyalty, brand experience, and brand image (Park et al., 2010). It highlights the importance of brand attachment in promoting brand profitability and customer lifetime value, emphasizing its crucial role as a catalyst for brand equity. This is supported by (Xie et al., 2017), who establish a connection between brand relationship quality and interpersonal interactions, implying the intrinsic presence of customer-brand relationship quality.

2.2.5 The Emergence of Employee Brand Relationship Concept

The evolving perception of employees' role in shaping brands has led to the emergence of the concept of employee brand relationships. Traditionally, employees' function as brand ambassadors received less attention compared to external customers (Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). However, as firms recognized the critical role employees play in shaping customer perceptions and fulfilling brand promises, the concept of employees' relationship with the brand gained traction (Mishra, Carrigan, & McEachern, 2018). Effective branding requires attention to both external and internal branding efforts (Xiong & King, 2015). Particularly in the service sector, successful branding is often achieved from the inside out. External branding manages customer interactions with the brand (O'Neill & Mattila, 2010), while internal branding ensures that employees are committed to delivering brand value through service experiences (Lee et al., 2019).

In the higher education sector, universities are service brands where employees play a crucial role in delivering brand experiences to students, faculty, and external stakeholders. The concept of Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) is based on the understanding that employees are not just passive recipients of branding efforts but active participants in

shaping and maintaining the brand identity. Employees' brand relationships are defined by their identification with the brand, commitment to brand values, and alignment with organizational goals (Mishra, Carrigan, & McEachern, 2019).

Research provides empirical evidence on the relationships between internal branding and employees' delivery of the brand promise, brand identification, brand commitment, and subsequent brand behavior (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010; King & Grace, 2012; Leijerholt, 2021; Ngo et al., 2019a; Piehler et al., 2021; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011b; Shoaib et al., 2020). The literature highlights that internal branding activities such as communication, training, and leadership significantly influence employees' perception of the brand, shaping their commitment and engagement in branding efforts (Piehler et al., 2016). Similarly, intrinsic motivation factors such as job autonomy, competence, and relatedness play a vital role in fostering employee engagement with the brand (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, in today's digital landscape, digital enablement enhances internal branding by facilitating seamless communication, training, and leadership practices, further strengthening employee-brand relationships (Chou, 2021).

2.3 Employee Brand Relationship Quality in the Higher Education Context

The quality of employee brand relationships in higher education is a pivotal factor influencing an institution's overall brand perception, student satisfaction, and academic excellence. Employee brand relationship quality refers to the strength and positivity of the connections between the institution's employees and its brand, encompassing aspects such as brand commitment, loyalty, and advocacy. Understanding and improving these relationships is crucial for the success of higher education institutions.

Employee brand relationship quality in higher education is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it enhances the student experience. Employees who are deeply committed to the institution's brand are more likely to go above and beyond in their roles, contributing to a positive student experience. This includes faculty members passionate about teaching and staff providing exceptional support services (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). Secondly, it promotes institutional values. Employees who have a strong relationship with the institution's brand are better ambassadors of its values and mission, effectively communicating these values to students, parents, and other stakeholders (Herhausen et al., 2020). Several factors influence the quality of employee brand relationships in higher education. Leadership and management practices play a significant role. Effective leadership that embodies the institution's values and supports its brand can enhance employee engagement and commitment. Transparent communication, recognition, and opportunities for professional growth are essential (Peng et al., 2022). Internal branding efforts are also critical. Institutions must invest in internal branding initiatives that align employees with the brand's mission and values. This includes regular training, brand-related workshops, and consistent communication about the institution's goals and achievements (Punjaisri et al., 2009). Organizational culture is another crucial factor. A positive and inclusive organizational culture that fosters collaboration, respect, and support can strengthen employee attachment to the brand. Employees are more likely to feel proud of their association with the institution (Garas et al., 2018). Job satisfaction and professional development opportunities are also vital. Providing opportunities for professional growth, acknowledging achievements, and ensuring job satisfaction can help employees develop a strong relationship with the brand (Liu et al., 2017).

High-quality employee brand relationships in higher education lead to several positive outcomes. Increased employee engagement is one such outcome. Engaged employees are more productive, innovative, and committed to their roles, enhancing the institution's overall performance (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010). Improved student outcomes are another benefit. Faculty and staff who are deeply connected to the institution's brand are more likely to provide high-quality education and support, leading to better student outcomes, including higher retention and graduation rates (Wei, 2022). Enhanced brand advocacy is a further outcome of high-quality employee brand relationships. Employees with strong brand relationships become advocates for the institution, promoting it to potential students, partners, and the broader community (Altaf & Shahzad, 2018). This advocacy can significantly strengthen the institution's reputation. A positive internal brand environment contributes to a strong external reputation, attracting high-quality students, faculty, and funding opportunities (Murillo & King, 2019).

Higher education institutions can adopt several strategies to enhance employee brand relationship quality. Developing clear brand messaging is essential. Ensuring that all employees understand and align with the institution's brand message through regular communication of the institution's goals, values, and achievements can foster a strong sense of connection (Shoaib et al., 2020). Fostering an inclusive culture is also crucial. Creating an inclusive and supportive culture where all employees feel valued and part of the institution's success can enhance their commitment (Lei, 2023). Investing in professional development is another effective strategy. Providing continuous professional development opportunities helps employees grow and advance in their careers, increasing their commitment to the institution's brand (Thomas, 2020). Encouraging employee feedback can also strengthen brand relationships. Establishing mechanisms for employees to provide

feedback and participate in decision-making processes fosters a sense of ownership and commitment to the institution's brand (Wang et al., 2022).

Hence, employee brand relationship quality in higher education is a critical determinant of an institution's success. By fostering strong, positive connections between employees and the brand, institutions can enhance student experiences, improve recruitment and retention, and strengthen their overall reputation. Investing in leadership practices, internal branding efforts, organizational culture, and professional development are key strategies to achieve high-quality employee brand relationships, ultimately contributing to the institution's long-term success and sustainability.

2.4 Internal Branding

In recent years, internal brand management has garnered increasing attention among researchers, leading to a diverse body of literature and multiple conceptualizations of the term. Researchers have proposed various definitions that, while highlighting different aspects, converge on several common themes.

Firstly, internal branding is frequently depicted as a process or a tool within organizations. Vallaster (2004) and Vallaster and de Chernatony (2005, 2006) characterize internal branding as a dynamic "process," emphasizing how employees cultivate and sustain their connections with the brand. This process involves aligning their daily actions with the brand promise, thereby influencing organizational culture and behavior. Similarly, Burmann et al. (2009), Punjaisri and Wilson (2007), and Punjaisri et al. (2009) view internal branding as a strategic "tool" for communicating the brand message internally. It serves to ensure that employees' behaviors consistently reflect the brand values promised to external stakeholders, fostering coherence between internal and external perceptions of the brand.

Secondly, the overarching goal of internal branding is to synchronize employee behavior with the core identity and values of the brand. This alignment is crucial for maintaining the consistent delivery of brand promises to customers and other external stakeholders (Bergstrom et al., 2002; Mahnert & Torres, 2007; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007). It also aims to engage employees in embodying the brand's essence and values, transforming them into active brand ambassadors within their respective roles (de Chernatony & Segal-Horn, 2001). Ultimately, this alignment contributes to the establishment and enduring strength of brands in the marketplace (Burmann et al., 2009; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2007; Vallaster & de Chernatony, 2005).

Thirdly, internal branding initiatives are designed to enhance employees' brand knowledge, shape their attitudes towards the brand, and influence brand-related behaviors (Aurand, Gorchels, & Bishop, 2005; Bergstrom et al., 2002; Burmann et al., 2009; Mahnert & Torres, 2007; Punjaisri et al., 2009). Central to these efforts is the dissemination of brand knowledge within the organization, ensuring that all employees understand the brand's identity, values, and commitments to customers. This educational aspect is pivotal in maintaining alignment between internal perceptions and external brand messages, reinforcing a cohesive brand image across all touchpoints. The evolving field of internal branding underscores its pivotal role as both a process and a strategic tool for organizations. By aligning employee behaviors with brand identity and values, internal branding not only strengthens organizational culture but also fortifies the brand's integrity and resonance in the marketplace.

The concept of internal brand management activities has been a subject of considerable interest in academic literature, underscoring its pivotal role in shaping

organizational behaviors and employee engagement. Research has provided empirical evidence highlighting the profound impact of internal brand management on various organizational and employee-related outcomes, offering insights into its mechanisms and implications. Internal brand management has been shown to positively influence brand commitment, brand citizenship behavior, and sustainable competitive advantage (Qureshi et al., 2022). This underscores its significance in fostering employee commitment and behaviors that align with the brand's values and promises. Moreover, internal branding activities are crucial in effectively communicating the brand promise to external audiences, thereby shaping external brand perceptions (Clark et al., 2019).

Internal brand management is instrumental in cultivating and maintaining organizational identity and culture (Azizah et al., 2020). By focusing on internal development and alignment with organizational goals, internal branding helps solidify the brand's identity within the organization, reinforcing its values and vision among employees. In the realm of employee perceptions and behaviors, research emphasizes that effective internal brand management strategies enhance positive employee attitudes and behaviors towards the brand (King & Grace, 2012). Aligning internal branding activities with organizational objectives is critical for fostering employee brand commitment and ensuring that internal efforts resonate with external brand promises (Syaebani et al., 2022).

Studies conducted in various organizational contexts, such as shared-service call centers, highlight the pivotal role of employees as brand ambassadors and the impact of internal brand management practices on enhancing brand commitment (Burmann & König, 2011). These findings emphasize the importance of integrating employees into brand-building efforts and aligning internal initiatives with overarching organizational goals.

Despite the conceptual advancements in understanding internal branding, there remains a call for further empirical research to explore the practical implications and outcomes of internal brand management activities (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). This gap underscores the need for more studies to elucidate how specific internal branding strategies impact employee behaviors and organizational performance in different contexts.

The literature explores the interplay between internal branding and sustainability, suggesting potential synergies between internal branding strategies and sustainability performance (Biedenbach & Manzhynski, 2016). This intersection highlights the evolving role of internal branding in supporting broader organizational goals, including those related to sustainability and corporate responsibilities. Internal branding's influence extends beyond organizational boundaries, affecting consumer perceptions and behaviors through its impact on employee attitudes and behaviors (Anisimova, 2016). This linkage underscores the holistic nature of internal branding, where internal efforts directly contribute to shaping external brand experiences.

2.4.1 Communication

Communication is a fundamental pillar of internal branding, shaping employee engagement, brand comprehension, and brand commitment. Effective communication within an organization ensures that employees are well-informed, aligned with brand values, and motivated to deliver on the brand promise. Communication serves as a conduit through which brand-related knowledge, organizational culture, and expectations are transmitted, making it a crucial determinant of employee brand relationships.

Research has extensively examined the relationship between internal communication and employee brand commitment. Punjaisri et al. (2009) and Kimpakorn & Tocquer (2010)

emphasized that communication acts as a mediator, linking internal branding efforts to behavioral outcomes such as brand identification, commitment, and loyalty. They argue that internal communication fosters a shared understanding of brand values and expectations, ultimately influencing employees' attitudes and behaviors. In service-oriented industries, Kimpakorn & Tocquer (2008) found that internal communication strengthens brand loyalty by ensuring that employees are aligned with brand expectations. This alignment is particularly vital in industries such as hospitality, where employees serve as the face of the brand in their interactions with customers (Tocquer & Kimpakorn, 2008).

Erkmen (2018) examined how both internal and external communication contribute to employees' brand commitment, concluding that internal communication enhances brand knowledge and role clarity, while external communication and brand experiences positively influence employees' brand commitment. Furthermore, Liu et al. (2017) emphasized the role of internal communication in maintaining employee focus on brand-related goals, demonstrating that clear and consistent internal communication fosters an environment in which employees actively uphold the brand promise.

The effectiveness of internal communication also extends to employer branding. Špoljarić & Verčić (2021) found that employee engagement and satisfaction with internal communication significantly influence their perception of the employer brand. This underscores the importance of communication in shaping employees' experiences and their willingness to advocate for the brand externally.

Deepa & Baral (2021) explored the impact of integrated communication on employee brand equity, emphasizing that when employees perceive communication as effective, it enhances their understanding of the employee value proposition and strengthens their brand

alignment. Similarly, Paruthi et al. (2018) highlighted the role of communication in reinforcing employees' brand-building responsibilities, particularly in managerial strategies that empower employees to exhibit brand-consistent behaviors (Quaratino & Mazzei, 2018).

Leadership communication is another crucial factor in internal branding. Sujchaphong et al. (2019) examined how transformational leadership, employee brand support, and brand-centric training contribute to fostering a strong internal brand culture in higher education institutions. Their study emphasized that leaders who effectively communicate brand values and provide employees with the necessary support enhance employee brand commitment. Communication is not merely an organizational function but a strategic asset in internal branding. Effective internal and external communication drive brand commitment, brand comprehension, and brand-consistent behaviors among employees. Organizations that invest in robust communication strategies foster stronger employee-brand relationships, ultimately enhancing overall brand performance.

2.4.2 Training

Employee training is a cornerstone of internal branding, serving as a strategic tool for equipping employees with the knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary to align with brand values. Training not only enhances employees' competencies but also reinforces brand commitment by fostering a shared organizational identity.

Gotsi & Wilson (2001) emphasized the significance of brand-centered training in aligning human resource practices with an organization’s brand values. This perspective was later reinforced by Punjaisri & Wilson (2011), who argued that internal branding is incomplete without structured training programs. Burmann & Zeplin (2009) proposed a

holistic IBM (Internal Brand Management) model in which training is a key dimension, alongside communication.

Brand-related training directly impacts employees' ability to deliver on brand promises. King & Grace (2005) noted that training helps employees understand their roles, equipping them with the necessary skills to perform brand-related tasks effectively. Similarly, Miles & Mangold (2004) emphasized that brand training enhances organizational identification, fostering a sense of belonging and commitment among employees. Training also plays a critical role in shaping brand-consistent behaviors. Chong (2007) found that training ensures employees internalize brand values, leading to improved service quality and customer satisfaction. Research by Guan & Frenkel (2019) highlighted how employees' perceptions of training quality influence their performance, further emphasizing the link between training, engagement, and brand commitment.

Internal branding studies have also explored the mediating role of training in influencing employee attitudes. Punjaisri et al. (2009) and Ngo et al. (2019) demonstrated that structured training programs significantly impact brand identification, commitment, and loyalty. Furthermore, Nguyen et al. (2019) found that employee tenure moderates the effectiveness of training programs, indicating that long-term training strategies are essential for maintaining engagement.

Employee engagement and emotional attachment also play crucial roles in translating brand knowledge into performance. Latifah & Muafi (2021) and Liu (2022) found that well-designed training programs enhance employee engagement, leading to stronger brand equity and improved organizational performance. So, training is an indispensable component of internal branding. It strengthens brand knowledge, fosters organizational alignment, and

enhances employee engagement. Organizations that invest in comprehensive training programs create a workforce that is not only skilled but also deeply committed to the brand's values.

2.4.3 Leadership

Leadership is a critical aspect of organizational success, influencing employee motivation, performance, and overall effectiveness (Bass, 1985; Yukl, 2013). The study of leadership encompasses various dimensions, including entrepreneurial leadership, transformational leadership, and shared leadership, each contributing to the understanding of effective leadership practices (Gupta et al., 2004; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Pearce & Conger, 2003). Entrepreneurial leadership emphasizes innovation and risk-taking, fostering an environment that encourages creativity and proactive behavior (Renko et al., 2015). Transformational leadership focuses on inspiring and motivating employees to achieve higher levels of performance by aligning their goals with those of the organization (Bass, 1990; Avolio & Yammarino, 2002). Shared leadership involves distributing leadership responsibilities among team members, promoting collaboration and collective decision-making (Pearce & Sims, 2002; Carson et al., 2007).

Research examines how employees' brand-building activities are influenced by transactional and transformational leadership styles specific to a given brand (Morhart et al., 2009). Wei (2022) found that brand-oriented leadership significantly impacts the relationship between employee-based brand equity and organizational brand-building initiatives. Moreover, servant leadership, through the mediating effect of interpersonal trust, directly enhances employee-based brand equity (Zhang & Guo, 2022). Human Resource Management (HRM) practices positively influence leadership management, which in turn

boosts brand performance (Butbumrung et al., 2022). A strong correlation exists between employee-based brand citizenship behavior (BCB) and various brand leadership styles (Minbashrazgah et al., 2021).

Further, the study by Leijerholt (2021) demonstrates how employee perceptions of their company and brand are negatively impacted by the complex interaction between political leadership and the organization. Positive employee-based brand equity (EBBE) results from the positive influence of executive brand identity on employee brand internalization (Liu et al., 2020). Studies by Asha and Jyothi (2011) and Binu (2018) have investigated the connection between internal branding (IB) and employee outcomes, including brand commitment (Raj, 2021). Piehler et al. (2021) found that employee brand support, internal brand communication initiatives, transformational leadership traits of immediate leaders, and brand-centered training and development activities are all positively correlated.

Boukis and Christodoulides (2018) discovered that internal market orientation is the strongest antecedent of brand identification, while brand leadership has a negligible effect on the brand attachment of internal stakeholders. This indicates substantial potential for leadership to influence employees' brand behavior (Lee et al., 2019). Nguyen et al. (2019) demonstrated that employees process brand-related information, showing a direct impact of internal branding initiatives and brand leadership on employees' brand extra-role behavior. Ansar et al. (2023) examined the relationship between employee work motivation and leadership quality, finding a positive impact of customer experience quality on relationship quality and brand leadership, which in turn moderates the pathway from brand advocacy to customer experience quality (Kumgliang & Khamwon, 2022).

Mariwa et al. (2021) contributed to the body of knowledge by providing insights into how spiritual leadership affects hotel workers' intentions to leave the company. The Brand Leadership Scale (BLS) offers a framework for assessing a product's brand leadership in market dynamics, considering perceived quality, value, innovativeness, and popularity (Chang & Ko, 2013). Xie et al. (2016) analyzed the significance of customers' perceived brand image, supportive leadership, and brand-building behavior in the hotel business. Altaf et al. (2017) found that the relationship between brand confidence and employee brand equity in conventional banking is mediated by the congruence between brand image and individual perceptions. Finally, Sujchaphong et al. (2015) showed that transformational leadership qualities positively impact employees' brand-building activities, and job stability further enhances employee brand commitment (Retamosa et al., 2020).

Together, these findings illustrate the substantial impact of leadership on the quality of the employee-brand relationship, underscoring the complexity of this relationship and the various ways in which leadership affects employee attitudes, actions, and brand-related outcomes.

2.5 Intrinsic Motivation Factors

Intrinsic motivation is a critical factor in driving individuals to engage in activities for the inherent satisfaction and pleasure derived from the activity itself, rather than for external rewards or pressures. Several factors have been identified as facilitators of intrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) found that optimal challenges, encouraging feedback, and freedom from demeaning evaluations facilitate intrinsic motivation. Ng (2018) highlighted autonomy as the strongest predictor of intrinsic motivation. Additionally, Deci and Ryan (1985) emphasized that intrinsic motivation is a core aspect of Self-Determination Theory

(SDT), where individuals are motivated by passion and happiness towards their job (Nurfaizi & Muafi, 2022). Liu and Hou (2017) pointed out that interest and competence are important factors influencing intrinsic motivation, according to SDT. Moreover, intrinsic motivation has been associated with prosocial behavior at work by fulfilling needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Shin et al., 2019). Grant (2008) also emphasized the importance of a social concept of intrinsic motivation, particularly in social, interdependent contexts that affect the welfare of others.

Intrinsic motivation has been associated with creativity, as noted by Meng et al. (2015). Cho and Perry (2011) examined the impact of intrinsic motivation on employee attitudes, identifying factors such as managerial trustworthiness, goal directedness, and expectations of extrinsic rewards as influential. Additionally, intrinsic motivation significantly affects various areas, including learning, performance, and research. Shan (2020) found a strong correlation between intrinsic motivation and learning success, while Ommering et al. (2018) highlighted the role of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors in motivating medical students for research. Aamri et al. (2015) also linked intrinsic motivation to positive work performance.

For employees to internalize the brand, highly effective and intrinsically motivating human resource management policies are necessary to foster an emotional attachment to the organization and its brand (Özçelik, 2015). According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), intrinsic motivation refers to employees performing tasks because they find them enjoyable or satisfying. Organizations must provide opportunities for employees to develop brand awareness to effectively deliver the brand promise. Employees represent the brand in their interactions with customers and other external stakeholders (Wangenheim et al., 2007).

In the service sector, employees play a vital role in delivering the brand promise to consumers. When employees are committed and display a positive attitude in their tasks, it conveys a strong brand image to consumers. However, internal branding efforts, which aim to align employee attitudes and actions with the brand, often encounter challenges such as dissatisfaction, lack of confidence, and resistance (King & Grace, 2008). Researchers like Burmann and Zeplin (2005) and Henkel et al. (2007) have emphasized that holistic brand experiences are achievable only when employees perform their roles correctly and in line with brand standards. While functional employee output is linked to business performance, it alone does not lead to brand success (Henkel et al., 2007). Employees must move beyond functional performance to brand-building behaviors to create a holistic experience and identity, involving consumers in a co-creation process (Burmann & Zeplin, 2005). Employees, especially those in customer-facing roles, humanize the brand and can inspire consumers to form emotional connections with the brand through their actions (Morhart et al., 2009).

Those habits that impair brand perception are referred to as behavioral branding. Intrinsically motivated workers who associate strongly with the brand are linked to higher service efficiency (Harris & De Chernatony, 2001; Henkel et al., 2007; Kaufmann et al., 2012). Overall, intrinsic motivation is influenced by various factors such as autonomy, competence, relatedness, creativity, and prosocial behavior. These factors play a crucial role in driving individuals to engage in activities for the inherent satisfaction and pleasure derived from the activity itself.

2.5.1 Job Autonomy

Autonomy is a 'sense of choice in initiating and regulating one's own actions' (Deci, Connell, and Ryan, 1989). Turner and Lawrence (1965) originally defined job autonomy as "the amount of discretion the worker is expected to exercise in carrying out assigned work activities". Similar definitions have included the level of freedom and independence of employees to perform the tasks and make decisions in the workplace (Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Oldham & Cummings, 1996). Employees with high job autonomy determine on their own what tasks to perform, when, and how the tasks should be carried out (Parker, Axtell, & Turner, 2001). In the motivational behaviour literature, job autonomy has garnered interest among scholars because of the influence job autonomy has on other relationships.

Deci and Ryan (2008) contended that through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, individuals have a psychological need for autonomy. Not surprisingly, researchers have flocked to job autonomy in the workplace as a motivator for employees. Job autonomy is made up of an individual's perception about the amount of control they possess when initiating or performing behaviours (Spreitzer, 1995). The desire for job autonomy serves as a significant employee behavioural motivator (Greenberger & Strasser, 1986; Hackman & Oldham, 1975; Oldham, Hackman, & Pearce, 1976).

Many researchers (e.g. Arshadi 2010; Jeno and Diseth 2014) proved that autonomy increases work as well as learning performance of individuals. Moreover, Khedhaouria, Belbaly, and Benbya (2014) in their research showed that if management failed to provide autonomy to employees, then it will result in low levels of productivity. Hence, job autonomy is essential for employees to performance well in their tasks. Greater autonomy led to greater performance will ultimately result in achievement of goals. Similarly,

autonomy causes increased satisfaction in employees, and they enjoy their work which in turn causes employee commitment (Kim, Chen, and Zhang 2016). Also, research by Deng and Joshi (2016) has shown a positive relationship between autonomy and users' attempts to innovate with IT which as a result support new ways of work.

Deci and Ryan (2008) summarize Self-Determination Theory by stating that the type of motivation is as important as the amount of motivation and pointing out the differentiation between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations. Early on, job autonomy was identified by Hackmanand Oldham (1975) as one of five characteristics motivating employees to better work performance. Hackman and Oldham (1980) suggested that employees in jobs with autonomy have higher motivation. Joo et al. (2010) considered employee self-evaluations and the role of job autonomy and intrinsic motivation on job performance using SDT. In a similar fashion, this research will consider how job autonomy may affect employee brand relationship quality.

2.5.2 Competence

Competence refers to the experience of feeling capable of achieving a desired outcome (Williams et al., 2011). White (1959, 1960) defines competence as the self-appraisal of having efficacy in interacting with one's environment and within relationships. According to Self-Determination Theory (SDT), communication and feedback that enhance feelings of competence can increase intrinsic motivation by fulfilling the psychological need for competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It has been found to significantly affect brand trust, brand affect, and employee satisfaction (Sung & Kim, 2010; Davies et al., 2017). Anitha and Madhavkumar (2012) emphasize that competence is more important in attracting employees, while warmth is more relevant for predicting employee satisfaction (Davies et al., 2017).

Additionally, competence is linked to employee social media competence, online social capital, and employer branding, highlighting its importance in shaping employer-employee relationships (Yoganathan et al., 2021; Li et al., 2022). The impact of competence on brand loyalty is also significant. A competent brand personality positively influences both affective and action loyalty (Lin, 2010). The relationship between brand competence and brand market performance has been examined, with studies indicating that brand competence mediates the relationship between brand digitalization and market performance (Li et al., 2022).

Competence is a key dimension in driving brand relationships, along with warmth, influencing brand-consumer relationships (Fournier & Alvarez, 2012). Competence also impacts employee brand equity, as congruence between brand image and individual self-image moderates the relationship between brand confidence and employee brand equity (Altaf et al., 2017). Brand competence has been shown to positively influence perceived global brand presence, with the coexistence of brand innovation and cultural traditions being essential for maintaining competence in a rapidly changing environment (He & Ge, 2022). Additionally, competence positively affects brand trust, which in turn enhances purchase intention (Xue et al., 2020).

Hence, competence is a multifaceted construct that significantly influences various aspects of brand-consumer and employer-employee relationships. It plays a crucial role in shaping brand trust, affect, loyalty, and market performance, underscoring its importance in both consumer and employee brand dynamics.

2.5.3 Relatedness

Besides autonomy and competence, Deci and Ryan (1995) identified the need for relatedness as an essential component of intrinsic motivation. The need for relatedness refers

to a desire to care for and be connected to others. It encompasses the need for authentic relationships and satisfaction derived from participating and engaging with the social world. This concept was derived from Baumeister and Leary's (1995) need for belongingness and Reis's (1994) work on the importance of deep interpersonal relationships. Relatedness plays a pivotal role in fostering intrinsic motivation and positive employee attitudes towards the brand (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Research by Fitton et al. (2020) highlights the significant positive relationship between relatedness and intrinsic motivation. When employees feel a sense of relatedness, their intrinsic motivation is strengthened, leading to increased engagement with the brand and alignment with its values. Morhart et al. (2009) highlight that relatedness, along with autonomy and competence, mediates the transformation of employees into brand champions by influencing their identification with and commitment to the brand.

Yang et al. (2021) suggest that fostering relatedness significantly impacts how employees form attachments to a brand. Their research shows that the relatedness motive exhibits the strongest mediation effect on the relationship between achievement-related gamification features and brand attachment. In educational settings, relatedness between instructors and students has been found to foster intrinsic motivation (Escandell & Chu, 2021). Przybylski et al. (2010) further elaborate that activities satisfying the needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness can enhance intrinsic motivation, emphasizing the importance of creating environments that support relatedness to promote positive outcomes. Brand CSR programs characterized by a strong sense of relatedness are anticipated to exert a more potent positive influence on consumer happiness and emotional attachment (Gilal et al., 2023). Additionally, Gråstén et al. (2019) indicate a positive link between competence, autonomy, relatedness, and intrinsic motivation in various contexts, including girls'

engagement in physical activities. Wu et al. (2014) observe that perceived relatedness and autonomy play crucial roles in explaining intrinsic motivation, underscoring the significance of fostering relatedness in driving employee motivation and engagement.

In short, the need for relatedness is a critical factor in intrinsic motivation. It influences positive employee attitudes towards the brand, brand attachment, and engagement. By fostering relatedness, organizations can enhance intrinsic motivation and create a more engaged and committed workforce.

2.6 Digital Enablement

Digital enablement stands at the forefront of organizational evolution, playing a transformative role in internal branding processes and shaping organizational dynamics. This paradigm shift is underscored by extensive research highlighting the profound impact of digital channels on enhancing internal communication, refining brand experiences, and fostering clarity among employees. These digital advancements not only influence employees' brand-supporting behaviors but also deepen their commitment and loyalty, thereby amplifying overall brand performance and enriching customer interactions (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Herhausen et al., 2020; Peng et al., 2022; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Altaf & Shahzad, 2018; Garas et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2017; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010; Wei, 2022).

Digital platforms empower employees by providing them with tools to enhance their digital presence and proficiency. This empowerment not only improves their ability to engage customers effectively but also reinforces their role in shaping positive customer perceptions of service quality and organizational commitment (Herhausen et al., 2020). Furthermore, digitalization facilitates comprehensive training programs that equip employees with the knowledge and skills necessary to internalize brand values. As a result,

employees exhibit heightened brand commitment and consistently demonstrate behaviors that align with brand promises, contributing to sustained brand integrity and reputation (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Altaf & Shahzad, 2018; Garas et al., 2018).

The capability of digital platforms to disseminate knowledge within organizations is pivotal. It enables employees to deepen their understanding of brand identity, cultivate emotional attachment to the brand, and enhance their personal brand equity within the organizational context (Liu et al., 2017). This knowledge-sharing aspect not only fosters a cohesive organizational culture but also strengthens employee identification with brand values, driving positive organizational outcomes. Digital enablement facilitates brand citizenship behaviors among employees. Through digital platforms, organizations can effectively communicate brand values, encourage ethical practices, and inspire employees to actively promote and protect the brand's reputation (Murillo & King, 2019; Shoaib et al., 2020). Research indicates that digitalization also supports environmentally responsible behaviors, aligning employees' personal values with corporate sustainability initiatives and enhancing their role as ambassadors of green brand practices (Lei, 2023).

Empirical evidence underscores the pivotal role of digital enablement in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors toward the brand. It serves as a moderating factor that strengthens the effectiveness of internal branding initiatives by enhancing communication, engagement, and alignment with brand values (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Punjaisri et al., 2009). Digital platforms not only facilitate the seamless dissemination of brand-related messages but also empower employees to internalize and enact the brand ethos in their daily interactions, reinforcing customer trust and brand credibility (Quaratino & Mazzei, 2018; Chung & Byrom, 2020). The theoretical justification for Digital Enablement as a moderator

is grounded in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and Social Exchange Theory (SET). Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) posits that employees' intrinsic motivation is driven by autonomy, competence, and relatedness, all of which are enhanced through digital platforms. Digital tools provide employees with greater autonomy by enabling them to interact with brand-related content at their own pace, enhance their competence by offering training and brand knowledge resources, and foster relatedness by strengthening employee-brand connections through digital collaboration platforms. As a result, digital enablement enhances the impact of internal branding on employee motivation, leading to stronger Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). Similarly, Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) suggests that employees reciprocate organizational support with positive brand-related behaviors. Digital platforms enhance this exchange by providing real-time brand communication, reinforcing employees' sense of belonging, facilitating interactive engagement, increasing their willingness to advocate for the brand, and strengthening perceived organizational support, which fosters commitment and loyalty. Thus, Digital Enablement moderates the relationship between internal branding efforts and employee behavioral outcomes by enhancing the perceived value of internal branding initiatives. By acting as a facilitator, digital enablement ensures that branding efforts translate into higher brand commitment, advocacy, and loyalty. It represents a transformative force in internal branding, amplifying the effectiveness of brand-related initiatives by fostering a dynamic, interactive, and engaging environment. Future research should continue exploring innovative digital strategies to optimize internal branding effectiveness and sustain a competitive advantage in evolving market landscapes.

2.6.1 Digital Enablement in Higher Learning Institutions

The world today is feeling overwhelmed by swarms of digital technologies, especially in the artificial intelligence space. Emerging technologies have always followed risk routes before these are finally assimilated in a society. Governments cannot prevent introduction of technologies, whose time has come. Digital technology strategies are discussed in all boardrooms, be it a manufacturing concern or a services sector. Previous research proposes a framework for promoting digitally enabled growth in SMEs, emphasizing the significance of digital strategies as organizations shift towards a digital approach (North et al., 2019; Imran et al., 2021). Research identifies organizational culture as a key enabler for digital transformation in industrial organizations, highlighting its central focus in incumbent organizations' digital transformation efforts (Imran et al., 2021). Additionally, Amit & Xu (2017) emphasize the importance of a holistic approach to enhancing value creation potential in the digital age for entrepreneurs and managers, underscoring the significance of novel resource configurations in a digitally enabled world (Amit & Xu, 2017; Keller et al., 2022). Research contributes to a better understanding of digital transformation in pre-digital organizations, shedding light on the pathways to developing digital capabilities within entrepreneurial initiatives (Keller et al., 2022). Furthermore, Gupta et al. (2020) highlights the enablers of supply chain performance based on digitization technologies, emphasizing the role of digitization in enhancing supply chain management and overall organizational performance. These studies collectively emphasizes the critical role of digital enablement in driving growth, transformation, and performance improvement within organizations, emphasizing the need for strategic frameworks, cultural alignment, resource configurations, and supply chain digitization to realize the full potential of digital transformation.

The literature emphasizes the significance of digital transformation in higher education institutions, highlighting the need for systematic approaches to understand and implement digital initiatives (Benavides et al., 2020; Alenezi, 2021). Previous researcher provides a comprehensive exploration of the challenges faced by higher education institutions in pursuing digital transformation, shedding light on the complexities and potential strategies for successful implementation (Alenezi, 2021). Additionally, past research discusses the assessment of digital transformation in universities, providing insights into the specific considerations and challenges relevant to higher education institutions (Rodríguez-Abitia & Bribiesca-Correa, 2021)

2.7 Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study, illustrated in Figure 2.1, represents the constructs and their interrelationships, providing a structured understanding of how the independent variables influence the dependent variable while considering the moderating role of digital enablement. This framework is developed based on both theoretical and empirical evidence, drawing upon established literature in employee branding and organizational behavior. The study examines the impact of six independent variables—training, communication, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness—on Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ), which serves as the dependent variable. Digital Enablement is incorporated as a moderating factor, reflecting its role in strengthening or altering the relationships between these independent variables and EBRQ. The framework is designed to capture both the organizational and individual dimensions that contribute to the development of employee-brand relationships, ensuring a holistic perspective that aligns with contemporary branding and employee engagement theories.

The foundation of this framework is supported by two well-established theories: Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SET provides a lens through which the exchange-based interactions between employees and organizations can be understood, emphasizing the reciprocal nature of relationships. Employees who perceive their organizations as supportive—offering resources such as leadership, training, and communication—are more likely to exhibit positive workplace behaviors, including commitment to the brand. Prior studies (e.g., Eisenberger et al., 2004; Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005) have demonstrated that employees who feel valued and supported develop stronger brand attachment, advocating for the organization and demonstrating behaviors consistent with its brand values. SET helps explain how organizational factors contribute to EBRQ by fostering a culture of fairness, recognition, and mutual benefit. Employees who experience high-quality interactions with their organizations are more inclined to engage with the brand, reinforcing the importance of organizational-level variables in shaping employee-brand relationships.

In contrast, SDT shifts the focus from external exchanges to internal psychological needs, recognizing the role of intrinsic motivation in shaping employee behaviors. SDT posits that competence, autonomy, and relatedness are fundamental psychological needs that, when fulfilled, enhance motivation, engagement, and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). In the context of this study, competence refers to employees' perceived ability to perform their roles effectively, autonomy reflects their sense of control over work-related decisions, and relatedness signifies their emotional connection to colleagues and the organization. When employees feel competent in their roles, experience autonomy in decision-making, and develop meaningful workplace relationships, they are more likely to engage deeply with the brand. SDT provides a psychological basis for

understanding how individual-level factors influence EBRQ, complementing the organizational perspective offered by SET. The integration of these theories within the conceptual framework ensures a comprehensive examination of both structural and motivational aspects influencing employee-brand relationships.

By combining SET and SDT, the framework acknowledges that employees engage with the brand not only because of organizational incentives and support but also due to their intrinsic motivations and psychological needs. This dual perspective strengthens the theoretical underpinning of the study, addressing concerns regarding the justification of theories and their application within the research context. The framework provides a well-rounded explanation of how both external (e.g., training, leadership, and communication) and internal (e.g., competence, autonomy, and relatedness) factors contribute to the development of strong employee-brand relationships.

Digital enablement serves as a moderator in the framework, shaping workplace interactions through Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). From an SET perspective, digital platforms enhance perceived organizational support by facilitating seamless communication, instant access to brand-related information, and training, reinforcing employees' commitment to the brand. Meanwhile, SDT highlights how digital enablement fulfills psychological needs—competence (through learning resources), autonomy (via flexible communication), and relatedness (by fostering virtual connections)—enhancing intrinsic motivation. Employees with greater digital access are more likely to internalize brand values, engage in branding efforts, and advocate for the organization (Mishra et al., 2018; Rajagopal, 2017). Beyond communication, digital enablement moderates the strength of relationships between internal branding, intrinsic motivation, and

Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). SET suggests it strengthens organizational support mechanisms like leadership and training, while SDT explains how it amplifies autonomy, competence, and workplace relationships, deepening employees' emotional and behavioral commitment to the brand. Ultimately, digital enablement acts as a bridge, ensuring that both organizational support and individual motivation translate into stronger employee-brand relationships.

Digital enablement strengthens the effect of internal branding activities on EBRQ by optimizing communication channels, improving training accessibility, and reinforcing leadership influence. For communication, digital tools such as instant messaging apps, internal social networks, and enterprise collaboration platforms improve the speed and reach of internal brand messaging, ensuring that employees remain consistently engaged with brand-related updates and values. Effective digital communication reduces ambiguity in brand-related expectations and fosters alignment between employees and the organization's brand vision (King et al., 2021). Similarly, digital platforms enhance training by enabling employees to access brand-related knowledge through e-learning modules, webinars, and virtual training sessions at their convenience. The availability of digital learning resources ensures that employees continuously reinforce their understanding of brand expectations, leading to stronger commitment to brand values (Terglav et al., 2020). Moreover, digital enablement plays a crucial role in strengthening leadership's influence on branding efforts by facilitating virtual interactions, real-time feedback mechanisms, and AI-driven performance analytics. Digital leadership tools, such as virtual town halls, online recognition systems, and performance-tracking software, allow leaders to provide continuous reinforcement of brand values, ensuring employees feel supported, motivated, and aligned with the organization's brand strategy (Zhao et al., 2019). These digital mechanisms enhance

employees' perception of leadership effectiveness, thereby increasing their emotional connection to the brand and fostering greater commitment to EBRQ.

In addition to enhancing internal branding efforts, digital enablement also moderates the impact of intrinsic motivation factors on EBRQ by providing tools and platforms that enhance employees' autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In terms of job autonomy, digital platforms allow employees to perform their tasks with greater flexibility and independence while ensuring alignment with brand expectations. Access to cloud-based work systems, self-directed learning platforms, and remote collaboration tools empowers employees to make informed decisions, increasing their sense of ownership and responsibility in brand-related activities (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Digital enablement also strengthens the impact of competence on EBRQ by offering real-time feedback, online learning resources, and AI-driven skill development programs that help employees refine their abilities in delivering the brand promise. Through continuous learning opportunities and skill enhancement tools, employees gain confidence in their roles, reinforcing their commitment to brand values and improving their ability to represent the brand effectively (Sharma & Bajpai, 2022). Furthermore, digital enablement fosters relatedness by creating virtual communities, discussion forums, and internal communication networks that enhance employees' sense of social connection within the organization. Digital interaction platforms allow employees to engage with colleagues, seek guidance from mentors, and participate in brand-related discussions, ultimately strengthening their sense of belonging and alignment with the brand (Mishra et al., 2018). By facilitating stronger interpersonal connections and reinforcing brand-focused interactions, digital enablement ensures that employees develop deeper emotional attachments to the organization's brand, thereby enhancing the overall impact of EBRQ.

By integrating digital enablement as a moderator, this study highlights its crucial role in amplifying the effectiveness of both organizational (internal branding) and psychological (intrinsic motivation) factors in shaping employee-brand relationships. Digital enablement ensures that employees are not only aware of brand values but also actively engaged in maintaining and promoting them within digital and offline environments. Its role extends beyond providing access to information and communication tools, as it actively influences how employees internalize, interact with, and respond to brand initiatives. Employees who experience high levels of digital enablement are more likely to engage deeply with branding efforts, perceive internal branding messages as more credible and impactful, and demonstrate stronger commitment to upholding the brand's identity. In contrast, a lack of digital enablement can weaken the effectiveness of internal branding activities, limit the impact of intrinsic motivation factors, and create inconsistencies in brand representation among employees. Therefore, understanding and leveraging digital enablement as a moderating force can significantly enhance employee engagement, strengthen brand advocacy, and foster a cohesive and dynamic internal branding environment. Through this lens, digital enablement emerges as a pivotal factor that not only supports but also elevates the role of internal branding and intrinsic motivation in shaping employee-brand relationships within higher education institutions.

The conceptual framework integrates SET and SDT to provide a comprehensive perspective on employee-brand relationships, capturing both organizational and individual influences. The framework is structured to address the theoretical and empirical gaps identified in prior research, ensuring a clear justification for the relationships proposed in the study. The inclusion of digital enablement as a moderating factor highlights its growing importance in contemporary work environments, reinforcing the practical implications of

the study. By refining the conceptual framework and ensuring alignment with theoretical foundations, this study contributes to the existing body of knowledge on employee branding and organizational behavior, offering insights that are both academically rigorous and practically relevant.

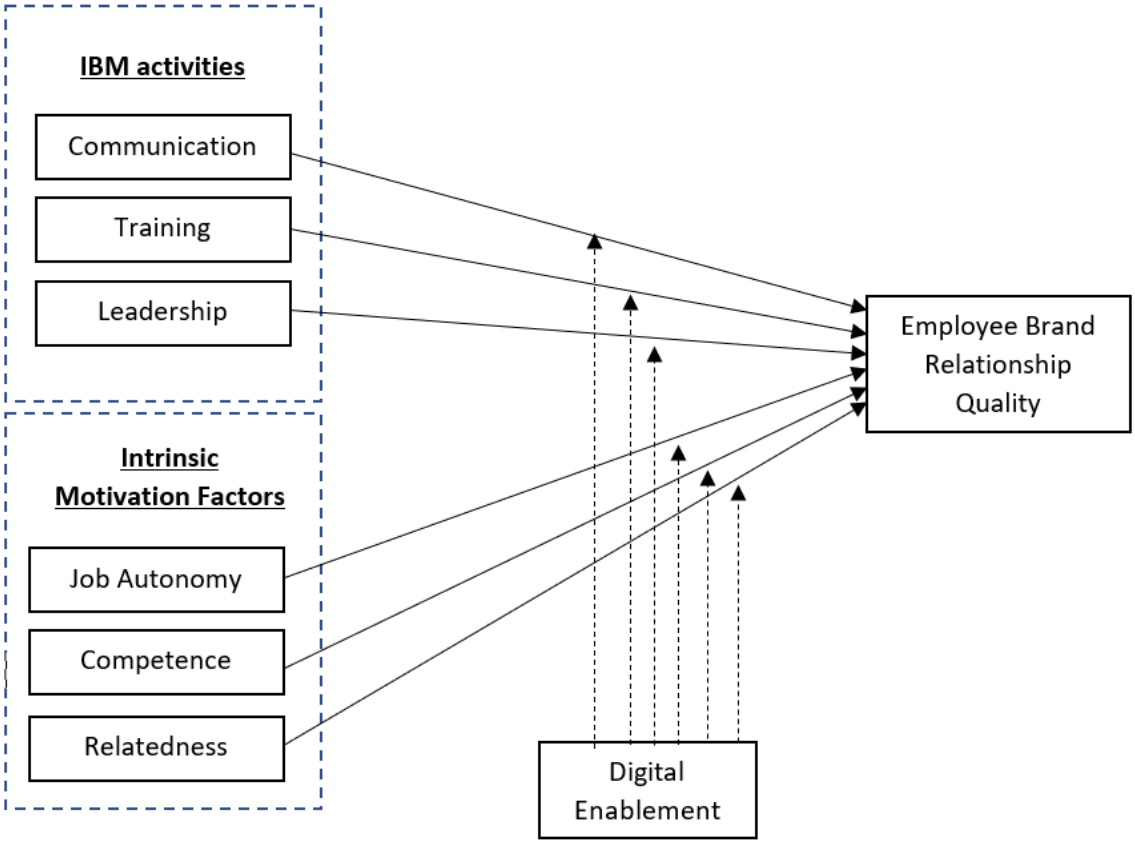

Figure 2-1 Conceptual Framework

2.8 Hypothesis Development

This section explains the hypotheses that represent the relationships between the independent variables (exogenous latent variables) and the dependent variable (endogenous latent variable), along with the moderating variable. The hypotheses are developed based on a comprehensive review of relevant theories and empirical studies.

2.8.1 Communication and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

Communication plays a crucial role in shaping the quality of employee brand relationships. It serves as the primary channel through which an organization conveys its values, mission, and expectations, fostering alignment between employees and the brand. In higher education institutions (HEIs), effective internal communication is essential in ensuring that faculty and staff understand and support the institution's vision, enhancing their commitment and advocacy for the brand (Men & Bowen, 2017).

Clear, consistent, and transparent communication strengthens employees' brand commitment by reducing uncertainty and increasing trust in the organization (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010). Furthermore, a two-way communication approach, where employees can share their feedback and ideas, fosters engagement and reinforces their sense of belonging (Mazzei, 2014). This is particularly important in HEIs, where collaborative environments contribute to institutional development and innovation (Balmer & Liao, 2007).

Theoretical underpinnings such as Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) support this relationship by emphasizing how effective communication fosters trust, reciprocity, and commitment between employees and the institution. Moreover, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) highlights that when employees feel informed and valued through communication, their intrinsic motivation and emotional connection to the brand increase.

In the digital era, communication tools such as intranets, emails, and social media platforms enhance employee engagement by providing timely information and interactive spaces for discussion (Kaur et al., 2020). Digital communication helps bridge geographical and departmental gaps, creating a more connected and informed workforce (Herhausen et

al., 2020). This integration of digital communication aligns with the evolving needs of HEIs, ensuring that faculty and staff remain aligned with institutional objectives and values.

Thus, considering the critical role of communication in fostering employee brand relationship quality in HEIs, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H1 (a) : Communication positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

2.8.2 Training and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

Training is a key factor in shaping the employee-brand relationship, as it equips employees with the knowledge, skills, and behaviors necessary to align with brand values. Effective training programs ensure that employees understand their role in reinforcing and sustaining the brand identity, particularly in knowledge-intensive sectors such as higher education (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Brand-centered training has been found to enhance employee brand support, internal brand communication, and leadership effectiveness, reinforcing employees' ability to embody and advocate for the brand (Sujchaphong et al., 2020). In HEIs, training programs focusing on brand culture, service excellence, and institutional values can significantly impact faculty and staff engagement, fostering a stronger sense of belonging and commitment to the institution (Dhiman et al., 2020).

Social Exchange Theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) provides a foundation for this relationship, suggesting that employees who receive high-quality training perceive the institution's investment in their development, leading to increased loyalty and brand advocacy. Similarly, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) highlights that

training enhances employees' intrinsic motivation by fulfilling their need for competence and professional growth, reinforcing their emotional connection to the brand.

Additionally, empirical research indicates that training contributes to employee retention and long-term brand attachment by improving job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Retamosa et al., 2020). This is particularly relevant in HEIs, where continuous professional development strengthens faculty and staff's ability to contribute meaningfully to the institution's mission.

Given the significant impact of training on shaping employees' relationship with the brand, this study hypothesizes:

H1 (b) : Training positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality

2.8.3 Leadership and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

Leadership is a critical determinant of employee brand relationship quality, as leaders set the vision, culture, and values that shape employees' brand perceptions and engagement. Leadership styles influence how employees interact with and support the brand, particularly in HEIs, where institutional leadership plays a vital role in shaping academic and organizational identity.

Transformational leadership, which inspires and motivates employees towards a shared vision, has been shown to enhance employee brand commitment and loyalty (Bass & Avolio, 1994). In HEIs, transformational leaders can cultivate a strong institutional identity by fostering innovation, collaboration, and alignment with academic values (Astin & Astin, 2000).

Transactional leadership, which emphasizes rewards and accountability, reinforces brand-consistent behaviors through structured guidance and performance-based incentives (Bass, 1985). This approach is relevant in higher education, where performance metrics and institutional success are closely monitored (Northouse, 2018).

Servant leadership, which prioritizes employee development and empowerment, contributes to a supportive work environment where employees feel valued and motivated (Greenleaf, 1977). Servant leadership fosters trust and psychological safety, enhancing employees' emotional connection to the brand and their willingness to advocate for it (van Dierendonck, 2011).

Ethical leadership, which is grounded in integrity, fairness, and transparency, strengthens employees' trust in the institution, increasing their commitment to the brand (Brown & Treviño, 2006). In HEIs, ethical leadership is crucial in maintaining institutional credibility and reputation (Ciulla, 2004).

The relationship between leadership and employee brand relationship quality is well-supported by Social Exchange Theory (SET), which posits that employees reciprocate positive leadership behaviors with higher brand commitment (Blau, 1964). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) further suggests that leadership practices that foster autonomy, competence, and relatedness enhance employees' intrinsic motivation, leading to stronger brand advocacy (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Given the significant role of leadership in shaping employee brand relationships, this study hypothesizes:

H1(c) : Leadership positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

2.8.4 Job Autonomy and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

Job autonomy significantly influences various aspects of employee behavior and attitudes, which, in turn, impact their relationship with the brand. Previous research has demonstrated that job autonomy enhances employee effort and job performance, leading to increased job satisfaction and work engagement (Piccolo et al., 2010; Wu & Zhou, 2022). Moreover, autonomy fosters employees' sense of competence and relatedness, which are critical in their roles as brand representatives and influence their relationship with the brand (Morhart et al., 2009).

Additionally, job autonomy has been linked to self-development, with intrinsic motivation serving as a mediating factor in shaping employee outcomes, further reinforcing its role in the employee-brand relationship (Zhou et al., 2019). Psychological well-being and self-efficacy, which are associated with job autonomy, also play a crucial role in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors towards the brand (Zhao, 2018; Saragih et al., 2019). Furthermore, job autonomy enhances employee engagement through employee voice, which fosters a stronger connection with the brand (Sheoran et al., 2022).

Beyond engagement, job autonomy also contributes to employee creativity and self-determination, leading to innovative brand-related behaviors (Yuan et al., 2022; Guo et al., 2021). This suggests that employees with greater autonomy are more likely to internalize brand values and engage in positive brand-related behaviors.

Given these findings, this study hypothesizes that:

H2(a) : Job Autonomy positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

2.8.5 Competence and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

Competence encompasses the knowledge, skills, and abilities that enable employees to perform their job tasks effectively (Boyatzis, 2024). It is a crucial determinant of employee attitudes and behaviors toward the brand. Employees who perceive themselves as competent in their roles are more likely to engage in brand-supportive behaviors and maintain high levels of commitment to the brand they represent (Morhart et al., 2009).

Research has shown that internal branding initiatives enhance employees' brand commitment and loyalty, ultimately strengthening the employee-brand relationship (Punjaisri et al., 2009). Additionally, employee competencies, particularly in leveraging digital platforms, play a significant role in fostering positive internal and external brand perceptions (Yoganathan et al., 2021). Employees' brand experiences and brand personality perceptions also contribute to brand prestige, which in turn enhances brand relationship quality (Choi et al., 2017).

Furthermore, knowledge dissemination within an organization influences employees' brand-related attitudes and behaviors, reinforcing their role as brand advocates (Liu, 2022). Employee brand commitment has also been identified as a key factor in shaping brand relationship quality, particularly in service-driven industries where employee interactions directly impact brand equity (Iglesias et al., 2019).

Thus, competence is a vital factor in developing a strong employee-brand relationship by influencing perceptions, behavior, and commitment to the brand. Based on these insights, this study proposes the following hypothesis:

H2(b) : Competence positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

2.8.6 Relatedness and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

The quality of the relationship between employees and the brand is integral to organizational success. Employees who perceive autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their roles as brand representatives are more likely to develop strong emotional ties to the brand (Morhart et al., 2009). Relatedness, in particular, plays a crucial role in fostering employees' sense of belonging and their willingness to engage in brand-supportive behaviors.

Research suggests that employees who experience a sense of relatedness in the workplace demonstrate higher levels of brand attachment (Thomson, 2006). Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives that foster a sense of relatedness have been shown to enhance consumer happiness and emotional attachment, which may also extend to employee-brand relationships (Gilal et al., 2023). Moreover, employees' receptiveness to brand-related information affects their brand-related attitudes and behaviors, highlighting the importance of internal knowledge sharing and branding efforts (Liu, 2022).

Studies in the service sector have further confirmed that employees with a strong understanding of the brand exhibit higher levels of brand-supportive behaviors (Altaf & Shahzad, 2018; King & Grace, 2012). Internal branding has been identified as a key enabler of employees' ability to deliver the brand promise, with a significant relationship between the perceived employer brand and positive employee attitudes (Punjaisri et al., 2009; Schlager et al., 2011).

Given the critical role of relatedness in shaping employees' brand engagement and advocacy, this study hypothesizes that:

H2(c) : Relatedness positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

2.8.7 Digital Enablement and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

Internal branding is a critical driver of Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) as it fosters employee commitment, engagement, and alignment with organizational values. Previous research has established that effective internal branding practices—such as communication, training, and leadership—enhance employees' ability to internalize and represent the brand (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). However, the digital transformation of workplaces necessitates an understanding of how digital tools enhance or weaken these relationships (Chan et al., 2021).

Digital Enablement, defined as the degree to which digital tools and platforms facilitate employee-brand interactions, plays a moderating role in this process (Kim et al., 2021). In digitally enabled environments, employees have greater access to brand-related knowledge, real-time communication, and interactive training modules, all of which enhance their engagement and brand commitment (Priskila & Darma, 2020).

From the Social Exchange Theory (SET) perspective, organizations that invest in digital enablement create a reciprocal exchange wherein employees feel more empowered, valued, and engaged (Cropanzano & Mitchell, 2005). This digital support system fosters a stronger employee-brand connection, improving EBRQ. However, low digital enablement may weaken the effects of internal branding efforts, leading to inconsistencies in brand communication and engagement.

2.8.8 Digital Enablement Moderates the Relationship Between Communication and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

Effective brand communication ensures employees understand the brand vision, values, and goals, fostering employee brand commitment and advocacy (Punjaisri et al., 2009). Research highlights that transparent and consistent communication leads to higher levels of trust, engagement, and alignment with brand objectives (King & Grace, 2012).

In digitally enabled environments, internal communication becomes more accessible, dynamic, and interactive. Employees benefit from real-time brand updates, virtual collaboration, and personalized engagement strategies, enhancing their brand relationship quality (Clark et al., 2020). Digital tools such as enterprise social media, AI-driven communication, and virtual town halls further strengthen brand alignment and employee engagement (Nguyen et al., 2021).

However, in organizations with low digital enablement, communication barriers persist, leading to delayed information dissemination, employee disengagement, and weaker brand relationships (Bodkin et al., 2016). Thus, digital enablement amplifies the impact of communication on EBRQ, making it a crucial moderating factor.

H3(a) : Digital enablement moderates the relationship between Communication and Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

2.8.9 Digital Enablement Moderates the Relationship Between Training and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

Brand training is essential for equipping employees with the knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to effectively represent the brand (Sujchaphong et al., 2015). Training strengthens brand knowledge, role clarity, and employee confidence, leading to higher brand commitment and advocacy (Wei, 2022).

With high digital enablement, training becomes more interactive, personalized, and continuous. Employees gain access to e-learning platforms, virtual simulations, and AI-driven training modules, allowing them to internalize brand values more effectively (Facey-Shaw et al., 2020). Digital training platforms also foster peer collaboration and feedback, further strengthening EBRQ (Kim et al., 2021).

Conversely, in organizations with low digital enablement, training is often limited, generic, and inconsistent, reducing its impact on employee engagement and brand relationship quality (Xie et al., 2016). Without digital access, employees may struggle to stay updated on evolving brand expectations, leading to weaker brand alignment.

H3(b) : Digital enablement moderates the relationship between Training and Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

2.8.10 Digital Enablement Moderates the Relationship Between Leadership and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

Leadership plays a central role in internal branding, shaping how employees perceive, internalize, and represent brand values (Morhart et al., 2009). Brand-oriented leaders create a culture of trust, motivation, and engagement, positively impacting EBRQ (Raj, 2021).

In digitally enabled environments, leaders have enhanced tools to connect, engage, and inspire employees. Digital platforms facilitate virtual mentoring, AI-driven leadership training, and transparent communication, strengthening employee-leader relationships and brand commitment (Liu et al., 2020).

However, in low digital enablement settings, leadership influence may be limited by hierarchical barriers and communication gaps, weakening employee brand relationships (Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2010).

H3(c) : Digital enablement moderates the relationship between Leadership and Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

Intrinsic motivation, encompassing job autonomy, competence, and relatedness, plays a vital role in shaping employee attitudes and behaviors within organizations, particularly when it comes to their engagement with the brand they represent (Deci & Ryan, 2000). The key facets of intrinsic motivation—autonomy (the ability to control one's own work), competence (the feeling of mastering a task), and relatedness (the need for connection with others)—have been well-documented as essential drivers of employee engagement and organizational commitment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Specifically, when employees feel empowered, skilled, and connected, they are more likely to develop a strong sense of identification with the organizational brand and engage in behaviors that support the organization's branding efforts (Gamboa & Orozco, 2015).

However, the ongoing digital transformation in modern workplaces has altered the dynamics of how these intrinsic motivators function. With the rise of digital technologies, the role of intrinsic motivation is increasingly influenced by the digital tools and platforms that facilitate work, enhance learning, and foster connections among employees. As organizations adopt digital systems—such as remote collaboration tools, AI-driven learning environments, and virtual platforms for communication—there is a growing need to explore how these digital enablement factors influence employees' experiences of autonomy,

competence, and relatedness, and in turn, affect the quality of their relationships with the organizational brand (EBRQ) (Chan et al., 2021).

The purpose of this section is to examine how Digital Enablement—the degree to which an organization integrates digital tools and platforms—moderates the relationship between intrinsic motivation and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). The concept of digital enablement refers not only to the access to digital technologies but also to how effectively these technologies empower employees to perform tasks, develop new skills, and engage with colleagues and leadership in meaningful ways (Priskila & Darma, 2020). By enhancing intrinsic motivators, digital tools may either amplify or dampen the impact of job autonomy, competence, and relatedness on EBRQ.

2.8.11 Digital Enablement Moderates the Relationship Between Job Autonomy and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

Job autonomy refers to the degree of freedom and discretion employees have in determining how to accomplish their work. This is considered a key driver of intrinsic motivation, as employees who have greater autonomy over their tasks tend to experience higher engagement, job satisfaction, and commitment to the organization (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). Autonomy fosters an environment where employees feel trusted, respected, and empowered to contribute meaningfully to the organization's goals, which increases their sense of ownership over the brand and motivates them to represent the brand in a positive light (Piehler et al., 2016).

In digitally enabled environments, job autonomy is enhanced by digital tools that allow employees to work remotely, set their schedules, and make data-driven decisions with the help of AI-driven technologies. Platforms like cloud-based project management software, remote work tools, and digital collaboration systems further empower employees

to manage their tasks and communicate effectively across different locations and time zones. These technologies not only facilitate work but also support decision-making autonomy and flexibility in how employees contribute to the brand's goals (Chan et al., 2021).

Thus, digital enablement can act as a catalyst, amplifying the positive effects of autonomy on Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). Employees who are empowered through digital technologies are more likely to experience greater ownership over their work, increasing their alignment with organizational values and leading to stronger emotional and behavioral investment in the brand.

However, in organizations with low digital enablement, employees may struggle to experience the same levels of autonomy. Without access to the right digital tools, their work can become fragmented, inefficient, or disconnected from the overall organizational vision. This lack of autonomy can diminish the quality of their relationship with the brand, leading to lower levels of brand engagement and commitment (Bodkin et al., 2016).

H4(a) : Digital enablement moderates the relationship between Job Autonomy and Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

2.8.12 Digital Enablement Moderates the Relationship Between Competence and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

Competence refers to an individual's belief in their ability to achieve desired outcomes and effectively perform their job. When employees feel competent, they are more likely to feel confident in their ability to represent the brand, advocate for its values, and engage with it on a deeper level (Boyatzis, 2024). The relationship between competence and Employee Brand Relationship Quality is crucial because competent employees are more

likely to display brand-relevant behaviors, enhancing both internal and external brand perceptions.

The role of digital enablement is particularly significant in enhancing employee competence. Digital tools such as real-time learning management systems (LMS), AI-powered training modules, and virtual simulations allow employees to build new skills, improve their existing competencies, and keep up with the latest industry trends. For example, digital training platforms can provide personalized feedback, helping employees understand their strengths and areas for improvement. By offering on-demand learning, organizations ensure that employees can continue to develop their capabilities in alignment with organizational needs and brand values (Kim et al., 2021).

Digital enablement allows employees to access training at their convenience, which increases engagement and skill development. Employees who feel competent in their role are more likely to engage with the brand on a deeper level, leading to enhanced Employee Brand Relationship Quality. On the contrary, organizations lacking digital tools may not be able to provide timely, personalized, or accessible training experiences, leading to lower employee confidence and weaker brand relationships (Liu et al., 2020).

H4(b) : Digital enablement moderates the relationship between Competence and Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

2.8.13 Digital Enablement Moderates the Relationship Between Relatedness and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

Relatedness, as defined by Deci & Ryan (2000), is the desire to feel connected to others and to be part of a community. In the context of employee-brand relationships, relatedness is crucial because employees who feel connected to their colleagues, supervisors,

and the larger organizational culture are more likely to develop a strong emotional bond with the brand. This connection helps align personal and organizational values, which enhances overall engagement and brand advocacy.

In digitally enabled workplaces, relatedness is often fostered through digital platforms that facilitate virtual collaboration, social connections, and engagement in brand communities. Digital tools such as social intranets, virtual team-building activities, and enterprise social media provide platforms for employees to share experiences, interact with colleagues, and align their work with organizational goals (Priskila & Darma, 2020). These tools create an online community where employees can strengthen relationships with each other and with the organization, ultimately leading to enhanced EBRQ.

For example, digital tools enable employees to maintain meaningful connections across geographical boundaries, ensuring that employees feel a sense of belonging to the organization, which is crucial for fostering brand alignment and commitment. In contrast, organizations that lack digital enablement may struggle to provide the necessary tools for employees to stay connected and build strong interpersonal relationships, leading to lower levels of relatedness and weaker brand relationships.

H4(c) : Digital enablement moderates the relationship between Relatedness and Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

In line with the research aim, this study investigates the role of internal brand management activities, intrinsic motivation factors, and digital enablement in shaping employee brand relationship quality (EBRQ) within higher education institutions in Pakistan. The hypotheses developed in this study are grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT), providing a theoretical foundation for

understanding the relationships between these key constructs. The following table summarizes the research questions, objectives, and corresponding hypotheses, offering a structured overview of the study's core investigations.

Table 2-2-1 Summary of Research Questions, Objectives and Hypothesis

Research Questions	**Research Objectives**	**Hypothesis**
Q.1: What is the impact of Internal Brand Management activities and Intrinsic Motivation factors in the development of employee brand relationships in Pakistani Higher education institutions?	To investigate the relationship between Internal Brand Management activities (Training, communication, and Leadership) and Employee Brand Relationship Quality.	H1(a): Communication positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality. H1(b): Training positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality. H1(c): Leadership positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality
	To investigate the relationship between Intrinsic Motivation factors (Job autonomy, competence, and relatedness) and Employee Brand Relationship Quality.	H2(a): Job Autonomy positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality. H2(b): Competence positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality. H2(c): Relatedness positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality.
Q.2: To what extent does Digital Enablement moderate the relationship between Internal Brand Management activities and Intrinsic Motivation factors with employee brand relationship quality in Pakistani Higher education institutions?	To investigate the moderating role of Digital Enablement on the relationship between Internal Brand Management activities (Communication, Training, and Leadership) and Employee Brand Relationship Quality.	H3(a): Digital enablement moderates the relationship between Communication and Employee Brand Relationship Quality. H3(b): Digital enablement moderates the relationship between Training and Employee Brand Relationship Quality. H3(c): Digital enablement moderates the relationship between Leadership and Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

Table 2-2-2 continued

	To investigate the moderating role of Digital Enablement on the relationship between Intrinsic Motivation factors (Job autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness) and Employee Brand Relationship Quality.	H4(a): Digital enablement moderates the relationship between Job Autonomy and Employee Brand Relationship Quality. H4(b): Digital enablement moderates the relationship between Competence and Employee Brand Relationship Quality. H4(c): Digital enablement moderates the relationship between Relatedness and Employee Brand Relationship Quality.

2.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter includes the discussion of the underpinning theories and the conceptual framework of the study. All the constructs of the study have been discussed in detail in the light of the social exchange theory, self-determination theory and the previous published literature. The definitions, background, concept of employee brand relationship and other variables have been explained in detail. The relationships of all the variables are discussed and hypotheses have been developed based on past literature, and theoretical and empirical evidence to achieve the objectives of the study.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Chapter Overview

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive overview of the research methodology employed in this study. It describes the procedures for data collection and sample selection. The chapter also discusses the data analysis methods used to investigate the connections between variables and achieve the study's goals. After reading this chapter, readers will have a thorough understanding of the study's methodology, the justification for the methods selected, and the steps followed to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings.

3.2 Research Philosophy

This research adopts a positivist paradigm approach, firmly rooted in the belief that reality is objective and can be accurately measured and quantified (Kardas et al., 2019; Saunders et al., 2018). Positivism, as a research philosophy, underpins the entire study, emphasizing the existence of an objective reality that can be observed and systematically analyzed (Saunders et al., 2018). This paradigm is particularly suited for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), a statistical technique aimed at testing hypotheses concerning relationships between observed and latent variables (Hair et al., 2017). In the specific context of higher education institutions, the study aims to generate objective and generalizable knowledge regarding the relationship between independent variables—such as communication, training, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness—and the dependent variable of employee brand relationship quality.

The selection of the positivist paradigm for this study is based on its suitability for investigating the relationships between internal branding, intrinsic motivation, digital enablement, and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) through a structured and objective approach. However, to further justify this choice, it is important to compare positivism with other research paradigms, such as interpretivism, constructivism, and pragmatism, highlighting why positivism is the most appropriate for this study.

Unlike positivism, which assumes an objective reality that can be measured, interpretivism posits that reality is socially constructed and subjective, relying on qualitative methods such as interviews and observations to understand human behavior (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While interpretivism is useful for exploring individual perceptions and experiences, it lacks the structured generalizability needed for testing predefined hypotheses in large populations. Since this research aims to quantify relationships between variables and derive generalizable conclusions applicable to higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan, an interpretivist approach would not be suitable.

Similarly, constructivism argues that knowledge is created through social interactions and that reality is not fixed but evolves based on experiences and context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Constructivist research typically employs qualitative methodologies to explore how individuals construct meaning in specific environments. Although this perspective is valuable for in-depth explorations of branding within HEIs, it does not support the rigorous statistical testing and hypothesis-driven approach required for this study. The study focuses on objectively measuring the impact of internal branding and intrinsic motivation on EBRQ using validated scales and statistical techniques, which aligns more with the positivist approach.

In contrast, pragmatism advocates for using both qualitative and quantitative methods, emphasizing practical problem-solving rather than committing to a single philosophical stance (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). While pragmatism allows flexibility in research design, it is not necessary for this study since the research objectives are best addressed through a quantitative framework using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM). A mixed-methods approach would only be required if the study sought to explore both statistical relationships and subjective employee experiences, which is not the primary goal.

By choosing positivism, this study ensures objectivity, reliability, and the ability to generalize findings across HEIs in Pakistan. The paradigm facilitates hypothesis testing, systematic data collection, and statistical analysis, all of which are essential for understanding causal relationships. Moreover, positivism eliminates researcher bias by relying on numerical data rather than subjective interpretations, enhancing the validity of the findings. In contrast to interpretivism, constructivism, and pragmatism, positivism provides the most robust framework for this study's structured investigation, allowing for empirical validation of the proposed relationships and contributing to theory-driven knowledge development in internal branding and employee brand relationships.

3.3 Research Design

In this section, the research design for the study is presented, providing a structured overview of the methodology and procedures employed to address the research objectives. According to Zikmund, (2013), the research design acts as a thorough blueprint that specifies the procedures and processes used for data collection and analysis A flowchart is utilized to delineate the sequential steps undertaken throughout the research process, encompassing research methodology, sampling strategy, data collection method and data analysis. Each

stage of the research design is carefully outlined to ensure clarity and coherence, facilitating a systematic approach to the investigation. Through the visualization offered by the flowchart, readers gain insight into the methodological framework guiding the study, enhancing their understanding of the research process and the rationale behind each methodological decision.

The research methodology used in this study was a quantitative. Quantitative research assists in identifying patterns, correlations, and associations among variables, and it attempts to quantify and carefully examine numerical data (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). This design was deemed suitable for investigating the connections between the dependent variable (employee brand relationship quality) and the independent variables (such as communication, training, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness). This study used a quantitative research approach in an effort to provide statistically valid and trustworthy findings that would add to the body of knowledge on employee brand relationship quality.

To ensure the accuracy and validity of the research, a cross-sectional survey methodology was used. A snapshot of the participants' perceptions and experiences in relation to the researched variables was made possible by this design's ability to collect data at a given time (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The survey data were gathered by distributing questionnaire to employees at several higher education institutions. In order to clarify the factors impacting the nature of employee brand relationship, the adoption of a cross-sectional survey design made it easier to examine the relationships between variables.

In this study, the sampling strategy focuses on employees of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan, aiming to obtain a representative sample that reflects the

diversity of this population. HEIs encompass a wide range of educational institutions, including universities, colleges, and research centres, which employ individuals with diverse backgrounds, roles, and responsibilities. Given the heterogeneity within this population, a stratified sampling technique is employed to ensure adequate representation of different subgroups based on key characteristics such as institution type, academic discipline, and job position. This approach involves dividing the population into distinct strata or subgroups based on location. Within each stratum, a random sample of employees is then selected, ensuring proportional representation from each subgroup.

In this study, data collection relies on a survey-based approach, which involves gathering information directly from participants through structured questionnaires. The questionnaire included elements from earlier studies and validated assessment tools. These instruments were altered to include both the pertinent independent variables and the precise aspects of the employee-brand relationship quality. The systematic questionnaire made it possible to standardise data collection, guaranteeing participant replies were uniform and comparable. The objective of this study was to get a full understanding of the variables impacting the nature of employee brand relationships at higher education institutions using a quantitative cross-sectional survey design and a structured questionnaire.

In preparation for the main data collection phase, this study conducted both a pretest and a pilot test of the survey instruments to ensure their validity, reliability, and effectiveness. In the pretest phase, expert opinion was sought to provide critical insights into the initial development of the survey instruments. Experts in the field of organizational psychology and higher education were consulted to evaluate the relevance, clarity, and comprehensiveness of the survey questions. Their expertise helped ensure that the survey

items accurately captured the key constructs of interest and were appropriately tailored to the context of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan.

Following the refinement of the survey instruments based on expert feedback, a pilot test was conducted with a sample of 33 employees selected from diverse HEIs across Pakistan. The pilot test aimed to assess the usability and reliability of the revised survey instruments in a real-world setting. Participants were asked to complete the surveys and provide feedback on the clarity of the questions, the ease of understanding instructions, and any challenges encountered during completion. Additionally, data collected from the pilot test were analyzed to evaluate the internal consistency and reliability of the survey items.

In the study, Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) served as the primary analytical approach for data analysis. SEM allowed for the examination of complex relationships among multiple variables simultaneously, focusing on the interplay between organizational culture, employee satisfaction, and performance within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan. This involved assessing both the measurement and structural aspects of the model, using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to establish the measurement model's reliability and validity. The structural model was then analyzed to investigate relationships between latent variables.

3.4 Research Approach

This study employs a quantitative methodology to explore employee brand relationship quality within higher education institutions. As outlined by Creswell & Creswell (2017), quantitative research allows for the identification of patterns, correlations, and associations between variables through thorough numerical data analysis.

The research methodology involves distributing standardized questionnaires among employees across various higher education institutions. These questionnaires are carefully designed to capture different aspects of employee brand relationship quality and relevant variables, using validated measurement scales. Participants are asked to express their perceptions, attitudes, and experiences using Likert scales. This structured approach facilitates streamlined data collection for subsequent quantitative analysis.

The quantitative research methodology enables rigorous statistical analysis of the collected data. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, and frequencies, are used to summarize sample characteristics and investigated variables. Inferential statistics, such as correlation and regression analyses, are conducted to test study hypotheses and explore relationships between variables. Analysis is supported by software tools like SPSS and Smart PLS to derive meaningful conclusions from the quantitative data.

This study adopts a primary data collection approach, directly accessing information from participants to gain authentic and in-depth insights. As recommended by Saunders et al. (2019), primary data collection provides a more accurate understanding of participants' perceptions and experiences. The use of standardized questionnaires ensures consistency in data collection, facilitating robust statistical and quantitative analyses of the outcomes.

3.5 Data Collection

For data collection, systematic approach is employed in this research.

3.5.1 Data collection Strategy

Research investigations can be divided essentially into two categories: causal and correlational. A causal study is one in which the researcher looks for the cause of one or more issues, according to Sekaran and Bougie (2019). A correlational study is one in which

the researcher aims to pinpoint the important factors connected to a problem. This study adopts a cross-sectional approach to collect data from employees in higher education institutes across Pakistan. The cross-sectional study design involves collecting data at a single point in time from a diverse sample of employees in higher education institutes throughout Pakistan. This approach allows for the examination of relationships and patterns within the data at a specific moment, offering a snapshot of the employee brand relationship quality within the context of Pakistani higher education.

3.5.2 Data collection approach

This study used a cross-sectional survey design. Data from a sample of participants are gathered at a certain time point for a cross-sectional survey (Bryman & Bell, 2015). The cross-sectional survey design used in this study made it possible to examine the relationship between the dependent variable (employee brand relationship quality) and the independent variables (communication, training, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness) in the context of higher education. By gathering information from a wide range of participants at a particular point in time, this technique offered insights into the current perceptions and experiences of employee brand relationship quality.

3.5.3 Population and Sampling

This section contains information about the study's population and sampling methodology. The intended population and the criteria used to choose it are described in this section. Also covered are how to choose sampling methods and how to choose a sample size that will result in a representative sample of the population.

3.5.3.1 Population of the Study

This study's specific goal is to investigate the correlations between factors that affect employee brand relationship quality and its drivers among employees of higher education institutions. All employees, including teachers, support staff, and administrative staff, who carry out a range of tasks and obligations for these institutions make up the population.

3.5.3.2 Sample Size

A well-defined sampling technique is crucial for selecting a representative sample, ensuring that the study's findings can be generalized to the larger population (Sekaran & Bougie, 2019; Zikmund et al., 2022). The sample for this study was carefully selected to reflect the diversity and characteristics of employees in Pakistan's higher education institutions (HEIs), thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of the research findings (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). Determining the appropriate sample size is a fundamental aspect of research design, as it directly influences the study's statistical power, precision, and overall credibility. According to Lakens (2022), selecting an adequate sample size is essential for ensuring generalizability while balancing considerations of cost, effort, and time. However, there is no single definitive method for determining sample size, as it depends on multiple factors, including the nature of variables, measurement scale, model complexity, desired level of precision, statistical power, reliability, and potential issues such as missing data (Bryman & Bell, 2011; Kline, 2023).

Kline (2023) highlights that research across various disciplines commonly employs an average sample size of 200 participants. While small sample sizes are generally discouraged due to their limitations in statistical analysis, Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) is recognized for its ability to handle smaller samples effectively (Hair et al., 2019; Henseler, 2017). However, this does not mean that sample size

constraints are entirely disregarded in PLS-SEM studies, as an insufficient sample may still compromise the reliability and validity of results (Goodhue et al., 2023; Marcoulides & Saunders, 2006). Hair et al. (2019) established guidelines for determining the minimum required sample size for PLS-SEM based on Cohen's (1992) power analysis, considering model complexity and a statistical power threshold of 80%. Their recommendations indicate that for models with multiple constructs, sample sizes should be adjusted based on the number of arrows pointing toward an endogenous variable and the desired significance level. For instance, in this study, the structural model consists of seven arrows pointing toward a construct, requiring a minimum sample size of 228 at a 1% significance level, 166 at a 5% significance level, and 136 at a 10% significance level.

Despite the minimum sample size requirements established for PLS-SEM, this study adopts a larger sample size of 650 respondents to enhance statistical power, ensure robust model estimation, and improve the generalizability of findings. The selection of 650 respondents is justified using Krejcie and Morgan's (1970) sample size determination table, which provides standardized recommendations for selecting a sample from a known population. For a population exceeding 1,000,000 individuals, a sample size of 384 respondents is generally considered sufficient at a 95% confidence level with a 5% margin of error. However, given the complexity of this study, which involves multiple independent variables, a moderating variable (Digital Enablement), and a dependent variable (Employee Brand Relationship Quality), a larger sample was deemed necessary to ensure model stability and more reliable hypothesis testing. Hair et al. (2019) suggest that SEM-based studies typically require at least 200–400 participants, depending on model complexity, and Kline (2023) further emphasizes that a larger sample is particularly important when testing moderating effects to ensure the statistical reliability of interaction terms.

A larger sample size also enhances the study's external validity, ensuring that the findings are representative of HEI employees across various job roles, institutional types, and digital engagement levels. This is particularly important in Pakistan's higher education sector, where employees exhibit significant diversity in terms of institutional affiliation, job responsibilities, and engagement with internal branding practices. Tabachnick and Fidell (2001) highlight that larger samples contribute to stronger measurement reliability, reduce sampling error, and improve the generalizability of results. Moreover, a larger sample minimizes issues related to non-response bias, missing data, and incomplete survey responses, which are common challenges in survey-based research (Dillman et al., 2014). By selecting 600 respondents, this study ensures that the final usable dataset remains robust, even if some responses need to be excluded due to incompleteness or inconsistencies.

Additionally, selecting a larger sample allows for meaningful subgroup analysis, providing deeper insights into potential variations across different demographic and institutional categories. This is particularly valuable in a heterogeneous population such as HEI employees, where differences in intrinsic motivation, digital enablement, and brand relationship quality may vary based on faculty status, administrative roles, and institutional size. The chosen sample size also aligns with previous research on branding, employee engagement, and digital transformation within higher education, where studies typically employ sample sizes ranging from 400 to 800 respondents (Buil et al., 2016; King et al., 2012). By selecting 600 participants, this study ensures comparability with existing literature while maintaining a high degree of statistical rigor.

In addition to methodological justifications, the selection of 600 respondents was guided by practical feasibility and institutional accessibility. Pakistan's higher education

sector provides access to a substantial pool of potential respondents, making it both feasible and practical to obtain a larger sample while maintaining a high response rate. Institutional support and ethical considerations also facilitated smooth data collection, ensuring that responses were gathered efficiently and accurately. Ultimately, the selection of 600 respondents aligns with the methodological best practices of SEM, providing the study with strong statistical power, structural validity, and meaningful interpretability of results. By adopting this approach, the study strengthens its ability to draw reliable conclusions on the interplay between intrinsic motivation, digital enablement, and employee brand relationship quality within the context of Pakistan's higher education sector.

3.5.3.3 Sampling technique

To ensure sample representativeness and capture the sector's variety, the stratified proportionate sampling method was utilised. Stratified sampling includes picking samples from each stratum proportionate to their population representation after separating the population into subgroups or strata based on distinct criteria (Bryman & Bell, 2015). By stratifying the population, the study considered variations in employee characteristics and organisational circumstances that may have an impact on employee brand relationship quality. The sampling frame comprised employees from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across Pakistan. Stratification was based on geographical location, dividing the population into distinct strata corresponding to different regions or provinces within Pakistan. This approach allowed for the proportional representation of employees from various geographical areas, ensuring that each stratum contributed adequately to the overall sample. By employing stratified random sampling, the study aimed to capture the perspectives and experiences of employees from diverse locations within Pakistan's HEIs, thus enhancing the generalizability and robustness of the findings.

The strata are based on the administrative divisions of the country, ensuring comprehensive coverage of employees from various locations. This stratification allows for proportional sampling from each region, ensuring that the sample is representative of the entire population of HEI employees in Pakistan.

Universities serve as major employment centers within their respective regions, hosting a diverse array of staff across various departments and roles. As such, the number of universities provides a reliable proxy for the overall population of employees within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in each region. Moreover, obtaining accurate data on the exact number of employees in HEIs across different regions can be challenging and resource-intensive. Universities typically maintain comprehensive records of their staff, making it more feasible and practical to access information on the number of universities in each geographical location. Additionally, this approach allows for a straightforward and efficient sampling method, streamlining the research design and implementation process within practical constraints.

Table 3-1: Stratum based on geographical location

Stratum	**Geographical Location**	**No. of HEIs**	**Sample**
Strata 1	Punjab	96	250
Strata 2	Sindh	76	200
Strata 3	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	44	120
Strata 4	Balochistan	11	34

Table 3-1 continued

Strata 5	Islamabad Capital Territory	26	96
Strata 6	Gilgit-Baltistan	2	8
Strata 7	Azad Jammu and Kashmir	7	35
Total	**All Regions**	**262**	**650**

3.5.4 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis refers to the level at which data is collected and evaluated for making informed judgments and inferences regarding research variables (Sekaran & Bougie, 2016; Zikmund et al., 2013). In this study, employees in higher education institutions serve as the primary unit of analysis, given the focus on examining variables related to employee brand relationship quality and its determinants. By analyzing the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of individual employees, a nuanced understanding of their interactions with the brand is gained, allowing researchers to identify patterns and correlations at the individual level (Hair et al., 2019). This approach aligns with the research aim of investigating the complex dynamics of employee-brand interactions in the higher education sector. Additionally, organizational factors, such as leadership style and communication tactics, are considered as secondary units of analysis, acknowledging their influence on employee brand relationships (Hair et al., 2019; Sekaran & Bougie, 2016). By examining both individual and organizational units of analysis, this study aims to provide comprehensive insights into the complex links between employee brand relationship quality and its factors within higher education institutions.

3.6 Sample Distribution Across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs)

To ensure a comprehensive representation of Pakistan's higher education sector, data was collected from various higher education institutions (HEIs) across seven regions. The selection of institutions was based on their geographical diversity, academic standing, and accessibility for data collection.

The following table provides the list of participating HEIs along with the number of respondents from each institution:

Table 3-2 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) Involved in Data Collection

Region	**Higher Education Institution (HEI) Name**	**No. of respondents**
Punjab (96 HEIs)	University of the Punjab	24
	Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS)	19
	University of Engineering and Technology (UET), Lahore	19
	Government College University (GCU), Lahore	16
	University of Management and Technology (UMT)	14
	National University of Computer and Emerging Sciences (FAST)	12
	COMSATS University, Lahore	12
	University of Sargodha	11
	The Islamia University of Bahawalpur	11
	Bahauddin Zakariya University, Multan	11
	University of Gujrat	10
	Fatima Jinnah Women University	10
	University of Education, Lahore	10
	Minhaj University, Lahore	10
	Lahore Garrison University	10
	Superior University, Lahore	10
	University of Central Punjab	10
	Other HEIs in Punjab	31
Total - Punjab		250
Sindh (76 HEIs)	University of Karachi	19
	Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi	16
	NED University of Engineering and Technology	16
	Dawood University of Engineering and Technology	13
	Mehran University of Engineering and Technology	14
	Shah Abdul Latif University	13
	University of Sindh, Jamshoro	14

Table 3-2 continued

	Iqra University	13
	Sukkur IBA University	11
	Ziauddin University	10
	Muhammad Ali Jinnah University	10
	Shaheed Benazir Bhutto University, Nawabshah	10
	Indus University	10
	Hamdard University, Karachi	10
	Other HEIs in Sindh	20
Total - Sindh		200
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (44 HEIs)	University of Peshawar	16
	Khyber Medical University	13
	Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Engineering Sciences and Technology (GIKI)	13
	Institute of Management Sciences (IMSciences)	11
	Abdul Wali Khan University	11
	Hazara University	10
	University of Science and Technology, Bannu	10
	University of Malakand	10
	University of Swat	10
	Kohat University of Science and Technology	10
	Other HEIs in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	7
Total - Khyber Pakhtunkhwa		120
Balochistan (11 HEIs)	University of Balochistan	10
	Balochistan University of Information Technology, Engineering and Management Sciences (BUITEMS)	10
	Lasbela University of Agriculture, Water and Marine Sciences	8
	Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University	6
Total - Balochistan		34
Islamabad (26 HEIs)	National University of Sciences and Technology (NUST)	16
	Quaid-i-Azam University	16
	International Islamic University Islamabad (IIUI)	14
	COMSATS University, Islamabad	13
	Bahria University	11
	Air University	10
	National Defence University	8
	Riphah International University	8
Total - Islamabad		96
Gilgit-Baltistan (2 HEIs)	Karakoram International University	5
	University of Baltistan	3
Total - Gilgit-Baltistan		8

Table 3-2 continued

Azad Jammu & Kashmir (7 HEIs)	University of Azad Jammu and Kashmir	11
	Mirpur University of Science and Technology (MUST)	10
	University of Poonch Rawalakot	8
	Women University Bagh	6
Total - AJK		35
Overall Total (262 HEIs)		650

The selection of higher education institutions (HEIs) in this study was carefully designed to capture the diverse academic, research, and administrative structures within Pakistan's higher education sector. This approach ensures that the findings are comprehensive, representative, and generalizable to a wide range of employees working in HEIs across the country. Several key factors justified this distribution. First, regional diversity was considered, as HEIs in Pakistan operate under varied economic, cultural, and technological environments. Including institutions from all provinces and regions ensures geographical balance and strengthens the study's external validity. Second, both public and private institutions were included to provide a broad perspective on employee brand relationships and digital enablement in the sector. Third, institutional reputation and size were taken into account, with HEIs ranging from large, research-intensive universities to smaller, teaching-focused institutions. This variation allows for a more nuanced understanding of employee-brand relationships across different academic settings. Additionally, feasibility and accessibility played a role in the selection process, with priority given to institutions that provided institutional support and facilitated data collection to ensure a higher response rate. By incorporating data from 262 HEIs across seven regions, this study offers a comprehensive and reliable analysis of how employee brand relationship

quality is influenced by intrinsic motivation and digital enablement in Pakistan's higher education sector. This extensive sampling strategy significantly enhances the study's contribution to the literature on branding and employee engagement, particularly in the higher education context.

3.6.1 Data Collection Instrument

The study was conducted to evaluate internal brand management activities, intrinsic motivation factors, employee brand relationship quality, and digital enablement in the context of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan. The questionnaire utilized a five-point Likert scale, adapted from validated research sources, to measure respondents' agreement with each statement. The Likert scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree), providing a structured means to capture subtle variations in attitudes and perceptions. The research instrument utilized in this study is adapted from well-established and validated scales in the literature to ensure the reliability and validity of the measurement items. Each construct is carefully selected and aligned with the theoretical underpinnings of internal branding, intrinsic motivation, digital enablement, and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). The items measuring communication, training, and leadership are adapted from Buil et al. (2016), who developed their scale based on internal branding frameworks emphasizing the role of communication channels, structured training programs, and leadership influence in shaping employee brand commitment. These dimensions align with the broader internal branding literature, which highlights the importance of organizational communication (Punjaisri et al., 2009), training initiatives (Kimpakorn & Dimmitt, 2007), and transformational leadership (Morhart et al., 2009) in fostering brand-oriented employee behaviors.

Similarly, the construct of intrinsic motivation—comprising job autonomy, competence, and relatedness—is adapted from the Work-related Basic Need Satisfaction (W-BNS) scale developed by Van den Broeck et al. (2010), which is rooted in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The inclusion of these items is theoretically justified, as intrinsic motivation has been empirically linked to enhanced employee engagement, commitment, and discretionary brand-supportive behaviors (Yoganathan et al., 2021). Job autonomy is measured through employees' perceived control over their tasks, competence assesses employees' self-efficacy in performing job responsibilities, and relatedness captures their sense of social connection at the workplace. These dimensions are integral to SDT, which posits that fulfilling these psychological needs leads to optimal employee motivation and performance.

The digital enablement construct is adapted from Venkatesh et al. (2003), specifically the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), which explains how technology adoption influences workplace productivity. The inclusion of digital enablement as a moderator aligns with prior research demonstrating that digital tools facilitate seamless communication, enhance knowledge-sharing, and support organizational engagement (Chung & Byrom, 2020). The items measure employees' perceptions of technology usefulness, ease of use, and skill development, which are critical determinants of effective digital adoption within organizations.

Finally, Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ), the dependent variable, is measured using items adapted from Hashim and Yasin (2012), whose scale captures employees’ emotional connection, loyalty, and sense of belonging toward their organization. These items align with the broader branding literature, which emphasizes that strong

employee-brand relationships contribute to higher engagement, advocacy, and long-term organizational commitment (Henkel et al., 2007).

Overall, the research instrument is constructed by integrating measurement items from widely recognized and validated scales in branding, organizational behavior, and digital technology literature. Each item is explicitly linked to theoretical frameworks such as Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Social Exchange Theory (SET), and the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology (UTAUT), ensuring the conceptual robustness of the study. This alignment not only strengthens the justification for the research instrument but also ensures that the constructs are measured reliably and accurately within the higher education institutional context.

The selection of scale items was guided by the relevance of existing research constructs and their applicability to the higher education sector. To ensure content validity, expert validation was conducted with professionals specializing in organizational psychology and higher education branding. A pretest and pilot test were also carried out, refining the instrument based on feedback and statistical analysis (e.g., item reliability, factor loadings).

Table 3-3 Constructs, Measurement Items, and Sources

Construct	**Items**	**Sources**
Communication	"The university communicates the corporate brand values to employees."	Adapted from Buil et al. (2016)
	"The university communicates brand values to my colleagues and me through internal mass communications, for example, newsletters, memos and brochures."	
	"The university communicates brand values to me via informal channels (e.g., meetings, briefings, presentations, etc.)."	
Training	"The university delivers brand values through training activities."	
	"The university's employees attend workshops to learn about the objectives and characteristics of the brand."	
	"The university provides training activities which are related to brand value."	
Leadership	"My supervisor treats staff as individuals, supports and encourages their development."	

Table 3-3 continued

	"My supervisor gives encouragement and recognition to staff."	
	"My supervisor fosters trust, involvement and cooperation among team members."	
	"My supervisor encourages thinking about problems in new ways and questions assumptions."	
	"My supervisor is clear about his/her values and practices what he/she preaches."	
	"My supervisor instils pride and respect in others and inspires me by being highly competent."	
Job Autonomy	"The tasks I have to do at work are in line with what I really want to do."	Adapted from Work-related Basic Need Satisfaction (W-BNS) scale developed by Van den Broeck (2010).
	"In my job, I feel forced to do things I do not want to do (R)."	
	"I feel free to do my job the way I think it could best be done."	
Competence	"I don't really feel competent in my job (R)."	
	"I doubt whether I am able to execute my job properly (R)."	

Table 3-3 continued

	"I am good at the things I do in my job."	
Relatedness	"I don't really feel connected with other people at my job (R)."	
	"I don't really mix with other people at my job (R)."	
	"I often feel alone when I am with my colleagues (R)."	
	"Some people I work with are close friends of mine."	
Digital Enablement	"I find Digital technology system useful in my daily job at university/ Higher Education Institution."	Adapted from Venkatesh et al. (2003).
	"Using Digital technology system increases my chances of achieving tasks that are important to my university/ HEI."	
	"Using Digital technology system helps me accomplish university/ HEI tasks more quickly."	
	"Using Digital technology system increases my productivity at university/ HEI."	

Table 3-3 continued

	"Learning how to use Digital technology system is easy for me."	
	"My interaction with Digital technology system is clear and understandable."	
	"It is easy for me to become skillful at using Digital technology system."	
Employee Brand Relationship Quality	"The relationship that I have with the university deserves my maximum effort to maintain it."	Adapted from Hashim and Yasin (2012).
	"I feel a strong sense of belonging with the university."	
	"I feel happy when I am working at the university."	
	"I never get bored working at the university."	
	"I have warm feelings about the university."	
	"I like the university."	
	"I feel close to the university."	

Table 3-3 continued

	“I defend this university when others criticize it.”	
	“I can identify people who are also employed at this university.”	
	“I feel a deep connection with others who work at this university.”	

3.6.2 Data Collection phase

The data collection phase of this study comprised several sequential steps to ensure the validity and reliability of the collected data.

3.6.2.1 Pretest

Before the main data collection, a pretest was conducted to assess the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the survey instrument. This involved administering the questionnaire to a small sample of participants and soliciting feedback to identify any potential issues or ambiguities (Hair et al., 2019). Based on the feedback received during the pretest, some questions were modified to improve clarity and precision. Additionally, questions that were deemed redundant or irrelevant were deleted to streamline the survey and enhance the overall quality of the data collection instrument.

3.6.2.2 Pilot Test

Following the pretest, a pilot test was conducted to further refine the survey instrument and evaluate its reliability. A subset of the target population participated in the pilot test, providing responses to the questionnaire. The data obtained from the pilot test were analyzed to assess the internal consistency and stability of the survey instrument (Hair et al., 2019). Items that demonstrated low loadings were deleted to ensure the reliability and validity of the final survey instrument.

3.6.2.3 Actual Data Collection

Once the survey instrument was validated through the pretest and pilot test phases, actual data collection commenced. The finalized questionnaire was administered to the selected participants, either electronically or through face-to-face interactions, based on logistical considerations and participant preferences.

The data collection phase adhered to ethical guidelines, including obtaining informed consent from participants and ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

3.7 Data Analysis

The collected data undergoes comprehensive analysis to derive meaningful conclusions regarding the research objectives.

3.7.1 Preliminary Analysis

The preliminary analysis involves initial examination and exploration of the data to ensure its quality and suitability for further analysis. Descriptive statistics such as means, frequencies, and standard deviations are computed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) IBM SPSS Version 29 (Purwanto et al., 2021).

SPSS provides a user-friendly interface for data management and basic statistical analyses, allowing for efficient summarization of dataset characteristics. Additionally, graphical representations such as histograms and box plots may be generated using SPSS to visualize the distribution of variables and identify any outliers or unusual patterns. This phase is crucial for identifying data issues and preparing the dataset for more advanced analyses in the main analysis phase.

3.7.2 Main Analysis

The main analysis thoroughly investigates the dataset to address the research objectives and hypotheses.

3.7.2.1 Statistical analysis technique

As a statistical analysis technique, structural equation modelling (SEM) provides the opportunity to investigate complex models composed of multiple variables such as

dependent, independent, and dummy variables that are analysed simultaneously (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). This occurrence is also referred to as multivariate analysis. Byrne (2016), Kline (2016), and Hair et al. (2021) consider SEM to be the most accepted and extensively used statistical analysis method. Although the primary purpose of structural equation modelling (SEM) is to investigate the interdependence of unobserved latent variables through the use of observed variables (Byrne, 2016; Hair et al., 2021), SEM is also capable of working with other analytical techniques such as factor analysis, regression, covariance, and variance. In addition, the use of SEM for simultaneous hypothesis testing is encouraged (Byrne, 2016). Typically, the variable employed in SEM represents the measurements associated with businesses, people, situations, activities, and events (Hair et al., 2014). It has been widely adopted recently, especially in the context of employee branding (Chopra et al., 2023; Dhir et al., 2020). In the case of primary data, this is measured through observations or surveys, whereas secondary data utilizes databases. The statistical techniques associated with multivariate data analysis are presented in Table 3.8.

3.7.2.2 Software selection

Smart PLS (Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling) 4.0 is utilized for advanced statistical analyses (Ringle et al., 2023). Smart PLS is particularly well-suited for analyzing complex structural models and examining relationships between latent variables, making it ideal for testing theoretical models in social sciences research. SmartPLS is a popular software for structural equation modelling (SEM) that can be used to analyse complex relationships and latent variables in quantitative research studies (Hair et al., 2019). The SEM method permits simultaneous examination of the measurement model (relationships between observed variables and latent constructs) and the structural model (relationships among latent constructs).

It offers robust methods for assessing the validity and reliability of measurement models, as well as for evaluating structural relationships between variables. Smart PLS also provides powerful tools for conducting moderation and mediation analyses, allowing for a comprehensive investigation of the research hypotheses. The use of Smart PLS in the main analysis phase ensures rigorous and sophisticated analysis of the data, leading to more accurate and insightful findings.

Using the SmartPLS software, the measurement model was evaluated using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to analyse the collected quantitative data. By investigating the relationships between observed variables and latent constructs, CFA helps evaluate the validity and reliability of the measurement scales used in the study (Hair et al., 2021). This analysis ensured that the measurement model accurately reflects the underlying theoretical constructs, including training, communication, leadership, and the character of the employee brand relationship.

After validating the measurement model, the structural model was analysed using the SmartPLS software. Analysing the relationships and significance of the hypothesised trajectories between the independent variables (e.g., communication, training and leadership) and the dependent variable (i.e., employee brand relationship quality) was the objective of the structural model analysis. In addition, the analysis assessed the moderating effect of digital enablement on the association between independent variables and dependent variable.

The SmartPLS software includes path coefficients, t-values, R-squared values, and bootstrapping techniques for hypothesis testing to evaluate the model fit and significance of the relationships (Hair et al., 2019). The software permits the evaluation of direct and indirect

effects, as well as the overall model fit, to determine the extent to which the proposed model adequately represents the relationships between the variables.

3.8 Validity and reliability

Ensuring the accuracy and consistency of research instruments is critical for obtaining reliable results. Validity assesses whether the instrument effectively measures the intended concepts, while reliability evaluates the stability and consistency of the instrument's outcomes (Trochim & Donnelly, 2008).

To ensure validity, the study underwent thorough pre-testing and sought expert opinions, while reliability was evaluated through pilot testing (Hair et al., 2019). This careful process allowed for refining the survey instrument, ensuring that the collected data is both meaningful and consistent across participants and contexts.

3.8.1 Validity Measure

Validity in this study was ensured through a rigorous process that included pre-testing and expert opinion from five professionals in the field. Prior to the main data collection, a pre-test was conducted with a small sample of participants. This allowed for the assessment of the clarity, relevance, and appropriateness of the survey questions. Feedback from the pre-test participants was carefully reviewed and incorporated into refining the questionnaire to enhance its validity.

Furthermore, the questionnaire underwent scrutiny by five experts in the field of employee brand relationships and higher education. Their expertise and insights were invaluable in ensuring that the survey instrument effectively measured the intended

constructs. Expert opinions were sought to assess the face validity, content validity, and construct validity of the questionnaire, thereby enhancing its overall validity.

3.8.2 Reliability Measure

The reliability of the survey instrument was rigorously evaluated through a pilot test, a crucial step in ensuring the robustness of the data collection process. A small subset of the target population, consisting of 35 employees, was selected to participate in the pilot test. This subset represented a diverse range of backgrounds and roles within the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan.

During the pilot test, participants were provided with the questionnaire and asked to complete it in its entirety. Subsequently, their responses were analyzed to assess the internal consistency and stability of the instrument. Specifically, measures such as Composite reliability and Cronbach's alpha coefficient were computed to evaluate the reliability of the survey items.

The pilot test served as an invaluable opportunity to identify any inconsistencies, ambiguities, or potential shortcomings in the questionnaire. Participants' feedback and responses were carefully scrutinized to pinpoint areas requiring refinement or clarification. Subsequent revisions were made to the questionnaire based on the insights gleaned from the pilot test, ensuring its clarity, comprehensiveness, and appropriateness for the target population.

3.9 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the research study's methodology is described, including the research design, approach, philosophy, sample selection, data acquisition methods, and data analysis

techniques. The research design employed a quantitative strategy, collecting primary data via online and paper questionnaires. Utilising stratified proportional sampling, a representative sample of the target population was selected. The data were analysed with the SmartPLS software, which enabled the evaluation of the measurement model and the investigation of the relationships between the variables. Ethical considerations were considered, ensuring the participants' rights and confidentiality. This chapter sets the stage for the subsequent chapters, which will present and discuss the study's findings. This research's methodology provides a solid basis for generating reliable and valid results, thereby contributing to the existing corpus of knowledge in the field of employee brand relationship quality.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter investigates the core of the research, offering a detailed analysis and interpretation of the collected data. The primary objective is to reveal empirical insights into the relationships between independent variables (Communication, Training, Leadership, Job Autonomy, Competence, Relatedness) and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ), along with the moderating impact of digital enablement. Initially, the chapter presents an examination of the collected data and describes the demographic characteristics of the respondents in the sample. The use of Partial Least Square (PLS) based Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) for evaluating the measurement and structural models is discussed. The subsequent sections carefully outline the steps taken to analyze the data, test the hypotheses, and derive meaningful conclusions that advance the research objectives. By systematically presenting the results and examining their implications, this chapter is crucial in steering the study towards a comprehensive conclusion.

4.2 Pretest and Pilot Test

To ensure the validity and reliability of the research instrument before full-scale data collection, a pretest and a pilot test were conducted. The pretest focused on assessing face validity through expert evaluation, while the pilot test examined the psychometric properties of the instrument, including construct reliability and validity. Furthermore, after identifying and removing items with low factor loadings, an additional round of expert consultation was conducted to ensure that the deletions were theoretically justified and did not compromise

the conceptual integrity of the study. The results of the pilot test, including factor loadings, are presented in Table 4-1.

4.2.1 Pretest for Face Validity

The pretest was conducted with twelve experts in the fields of organizational psychology, branding, and higher education to assess the clarity, coherence, and theoretical alignment of the questionnaire items. These experts were selected based on their academic and professional expertise in relevant domains, ensuring that their evaluation provided meaningful insights into the appropriateness of the measurement items.

During this phase, the experts reviewed the questionnaire and identified certain items that were redundant, ambiguous, or difficult to interpret. Based on their feedback, some items were deleted, while others were simplified or reworded to enhance clarity and ensure that each item accurately measured its intended construct. The refinements made during the pretest phase contributed to improving the content validity of the instrument by ensuring that the items were easily comprehensible to respondents in the higher education sector.

4.2.2 Pilot Test for Reliability and Validity

Following the pretest, a pilot test was conducted with thirty-three respondents from the target population. The objective of the pilot test was to assess the reliability and validity of the instrument by examining the internal consistency and factor loadings of each measurement item. The results of the pilot test were analyzed to determine whether all items demonstrated acceptable psychometric properties.

The analysis revealed that ten items had low factor loadings, falling below the acceptable threshold of 0.50. These items were subsequently removed to enhance the

reliability and validity of the measurement model. The deleted items included JA2, JA3, and JA4 from the Job Autonomy construct, COMP1 and COMP4 from the Competence construct, REL2 and REL4 from the Relatedness construct, and EBRQ1, EBRQ2, and EBRQ7 from the Employee Brand Relationship Quality construct. The complete results of the pilot test, including factor loadings, are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4-1 Pilot test Cross Loadings

	COMP_	**COM_**	**DIG_**	**EBRQ_**	**JA_**	**LEAD_**	**REL_**	**TRA_**
Com_1		0.757						
Com_2		0.999						
Com_3		0.583						
Comp_1	0.415							
Comp_2	0.85							
Comp_3	0.89							
Comp_4	-0.247							
Comp_5	0.653							
Dig_1			0.877					
Dig_2			0.888					
Dig_3			0.893					
Dig_4			0.761					
Dig_5			0.885					
Dig_6			0.822					
Dig_7			0.634					
Dig_8			0.853					
EBRQ_1				0.248				
EBRQ_10				0.761				
EBRQ_2				0.175				
EBRQ_3				0.645				
EBRQ_4				0.676				
EBRQ_5				0.736				
EBRQ_6				0.656				
EBRQ_7				0.367				
EBRQ_8				0.741				
EBRQ_9				0.602				
JA_1					0.731			
JA_2					0.277			
JA_3					0.401			
JA_4					-0.421			
JA_5					0.736			

Table 4-1 continued

JA_6					0.586			
Lead_1						0.821		
Lead_2						0.913		
Lead_3						0.945		
Lead_4						0.934		
Lead_5						0.915		
Lead_6						0.897		
Lead_7						0.893		
Rel_1							0.939	
Rel_2							-0.018	
Rel_3							0.938	
Rel_4							-0.237	
Rel_5							0.87	
Rel_6							0.566	
Tra_1								0.941
Tra_2								0.929
Tra_3								0.986

Note: COM = Communication, TRA = Training, LEAD = Leadership, JA = Job Autonomy, COMP = Competence, REL = Relatedness, EBRQ = Employee Brand Relationship Quality, DIG = Digital Enablement

4.2.3 Expert Validation and theoretical justification of Item Deletion

The expert validation process was conducted to ensure that the deletion of low-loading items did not compromise the theoretical rigor or construct validity of the research instrument. Three subject-matter experts specializing in organizational psychology, higher education, and branding were consulted to review the revised measurement model. Their evaluations provided valuable theoretical and practical insights to refine the instrument. Detailed profiles of these experts, including their affiliations, academic credentials, and contributions, are provided in Appendix D.

The expert review process involved a structured evaluation in which the revised instrument was presented, along with statistical findings from the factor loadings analysis. The experts were asked to assess the conceptual clarity, theoretical alignment, redundancy,

and comprehensiveness of the retained items while determining whether the removed items had any significant theoretical contributions that warranted reconsideration. Their feedback was collected through structured discussions and written comments, and their collective insights reinforced the decision to proceed with item deletion. The experts unanimously agreed that the removed items were either redundant, conceptually ambiguous, or did not significantly contribute to the construct measurement. They particularly emphasized that the remaining items sufficiently captured the intended theoretical dimensions, ensuring construct validity. Additionally, they highlighted that some deleted items contained overlapping meanings with retained ones, which could have led to measurement redundancy and potential multicollinearity issues.

To ensure transparency and rigor, Appendix C presents a summary of the expert feedback, including their specific comments, justification for each item deletion, and alignment with theoretical foundations. This documentation strengthens the robustness of the measurement model by demonstrating that the retained items effectively represent each construct without sacrificing theoretical integrity.

4.2.4 Implications for the Main Study

The findings from the pretest and pilot test played a critical role in refining the research instrument before its deployment for full-scale data collection. The pretest ensured content validity by incorporating expert recommendations, while the pilot test provided empirical validation, leading to the removal of weak indicators. The additional expert review after item deletion confirmed that the revised instrument remained theoretically sound and methodologically robust.

With these refinements, the final questionnaire was deemed reliable and valid for data collection. The finalized instrument was subsequently administered to the target population across various higher education institutions in Pakistan, as discussed in the subsequent sections.

4.3 Preliminary Data Analysis

Before proceeding with the main data analysis, a preliminary data screening process was conducted to ensure the accuracy, completeness, and reliability of the collected data. This step was essential to detect and address potential issues such as missing responses, response biases, and non-normality, ensuring that the final dataset was suitable for further statistical analysis. The data screening process was carried out using SPSS version 26.0.

A total of 650 questionnaires were distributed to employees across various departments of higher education institutions (HEIs) in Pakistan through both physical distribution and email. Specifically, 400 printed questionnaires were physically distributed, while 250 were sent via email. Of the total distributed, 573 responses were received, with 362 from physical copies and 211 from online submissions, yielding an overall response rate of 88.15%.

To ensure data quality, responses were screened for completeness, response biases (e.g., straight-lining), and inconsistencies. After this process, 32 responses were excluded, resulting in a final dataset of 541 usable responses for analysis. The combination of physical and online distribution ensured broad coverage and accessibility, allowing participation from a diverse pool of employees across different institutions.

4.3.1 Handling Missing Data and Suspicious Response Patterns

The dataset was first examined for missing values. While some responses contained minor missing data, these were not substantial enough to warrant deletion, and given that Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) is robust to missing data, no imputation techniques were required. However, cases with excessive missing responses were excluded to maintain data integrity.

Additionally, the dataset was screened for response biases, particularly straight-lining behavior, where respondents provide identical responses across multiple items, indicating a lack of engagement. Following established guidelines (Kaminska et al., 2010), 19 cases exhibiting clear straight-lining patterns were identified and removed. This step ensured that the final dataset consisted of responses that reflected genuine and meaningful participant engagement.

4.3.2 Data Distribution

Before conducting further analysis, it is essential to assess the distribution of the data.

4.3.2.1 Normality Assessment

The assessment of normal distribution within the data relied on skewness and kurtosis measurements. Following the guidelines proposed by Hair et al. (2021), which suggest that skewness and kurtosis values falling outside the range of -1 to 1 may indicate potential issues, it was found as shown in Table 4-1 that all constructs in this study fell within an acceptable range. Specifically, the skewness and kurtosis values for all constructs ranged between -1 and 1, indicating a satisfactory level of normality within the dataset.

Table 4-2: Skewness and Kurtosis

Variable	(Skewness)	(Kurtosis)
com_1	0.528	0
com_2	0.129	0.097
com_3	0.896	0
tra_1	0.394	0
tra_2	0.1	0
tra_3	0.004	0
lead_1	0.002	0
lead_2	0.018	0
lead_3	0.005	0.008
lead_4	0	0.046
lead_5	0.015	0.201
lead_6	0.094	0.014
lead_7	0	0.106
ja_1	0.003	0.944
ja_5	0.117	0
ja_6	0	0.893
comp_2	0.009	0
comp_3	0.131	0
comp_5	0.003	0.034
rel_1	0.943	0
rel_3	0.791	0
rel_5	0.051	0

Table 4-2 continued

rel_6	0	0.03
dig_1	0	0
dig_2	0	0
dig_3	0	0
dig_5	0	0
dig_7	0	0
ebrq_3	0	0.485
ebrq_4	0	0.029
ebrq_5	0	0.511
ebrq_6	0	0.049
ebrq_8	0	0.643
ebrq_10	0	0.382

Note: com = Communication, tra = Training, lead = Leadership, ja = Job Autonomy, comp = Competence, rel = Relatedness, ebrq = Employee Brand Relationship Quality, dig = Digital Enablement

4.3.2.2 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed to summarize the central tendency and dispersion of the data. Mean and standard deviation were computed for each variable to provide insights into the central tendency and variability within the dataset. As shown n Table 4-2, the mean scores for the variables ranged from 3.128 to 4.257, indicating the average level of agreement or perception among respondents. Additionally, the standard deviation (SD) values ranged from 0.411 to 1.211, representing the dispersion or spread of responses around the mean. Variables such as "ebr 7" and "rel 3" exhibited lower variability with SD values of 0.411 and 0.922, respectively, suggesting a higher level of agreement

among respondents. Conversely, variables like "comp 3" and "lead 1" demonstrated higher variability with SD values of 1.211 and 1.105, respectively, indicating more diverse responses within these constructs. These descriptive statistics demonstrates the distribution and characteristics of the variables, serving as a foundation for further analysis and interpretation.

Table 4-3: Descriptive statistics

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.
com 1	3.327	0.851
com 2	3.25	0.922
com 3	3.407	0.923
tra 1	3.373	0.978
tra 2	3.453	0.947
tra 3	3.558	0.93
lead 1	3.525	1.105
lead 2	3.555	1.052
lead 3	3.501	1.003
lead 4	3.505	1.034
lead 5	3.362	0.95
lead 6	3.462	0.943
lead 7	3.542	0.97
ja 1	3.819	0.728
ja 5	3.235	0.999
ja 6	3.843	0.793

Table 4-3 continued

comp 2	3.196	1.14
comp 3	3.128	1.211
comp 5	3.586	0.91
rel 1	3.224	1.109
rel 3	3.087	1.181
rel 5	3.364	1.107
rel 6	3.516	0.922
dig 1	3.819	0.891
dig 2	3.823	1.001
dig 3	3.871	0.952
dig 4	3.756	0.983
dig 5	3.821	0.987
dig 7	3.811	0.951
ebrq 3	3.64	1.015
ebrq 4	3.725	1.002
ebrq 5	3.793	1.015
ebrq 6	3.734	1.087
ebrq 8	3.656	1.077
ebrq 10	3.667	1.052

Note: com = Communication, tra = Training, lead = Leadership, ja = Job Autonomy, comp = Competence, rel = Relatedness, ebrq = Employee Brand Relationship Quality, dig = Digital Enablement

4.4 Respondents' Demographic Profile

Demographic characteristics are one of the basic elements while doing research in the field of social science as this information is of great concern to marketing managers and

policy makers. As suggested by Stavrou (1999) that demographic characteristics must be mentioned for the sake of facilitating the policy makers so that they can generalize the findings of the research work. In this study, before answering the research related questions, respondents were asked a few questions regarding their demographics. Each respondent filled the first part of the questionnaire by giving details about their gender, age, sector, job designation and length of service with current organization. The received information is displayed in Table 4.2.

Table 4-4: Respondent Profile

Demographic Profile	Category	Respondents (N=541)	Percentage %
Gender	Male	383	70.8%
	Female	158	29.2%
Age	35 or below	109	20.1%
	36-45	234	43..2%
	46-55	155	28.6%
	Above 55	43	7.9%
Sector	Public	344	63.6%
	Private	197	36.4%
Job Designation	Faculty	264	48.79%
	Administrative Staff	178	32.9%
	Support Staff	76	14.04%
	Other	23	4.25%
Length of Service with Current Organization	Less than 1 year	63	11.64%
	1-5 years	216	39.93%
	6-10 years	162	29.9%
	More than 10 years	102	18.9%

Table 4.2 displays demographic information of the participants of this study. The above-mentioned demographics were the most related according to the nature of the studyIt can be seen in the table that female respondents are comparatively less than male respondents i.e. 158 females (29.2%) and 383 males (70.8%). In Pakistan, certain industries, including higher education, have traditionally seen a higher representation of males compared to females due to cultural and societal norms. This gender distribution reflects the broader gender dynamics within the workforce, where males might dominate certain fields or positions within higher education institutions. Factors such as occupational segregation, cultural expectations regarding career choices, and disparities in educational opportunities may contribute to the higher proportion of male respondents in the dataset.

The age distribution (20.1% aged 35 or below, 43.2% aged 36-45, 28.6% aged 46-55, 7.9% above 55) reflects the diverse demographics of employees within higher education institutions in Pakistan. Younger employees (aged 35 or below) might be more prevalent due to recent recruitment drives aimed at attracting fresh talent, while the higher proportion of employees aged 36-55 reflects the established workforce with varying levels of experience and expertise. The smaller percentage of employees above 55 may indicate a trend towards retirement or fewer opportunities for older individuals within the workforce.

As for the sector, majority of respondents were from public sector amounting 344 individuals (63.6%) whereas from private sector there were only 197 respondents (36.4%). The distribution between public and private sectors reflects the dual nature of higher education institutions in Pakistan, with a significant presence of both publicly funded and privately managed institutions. The higher percentage of respondents from the public sector aligns with the predominant role of public universities in the higher education landscape of

Pakistan, which receive government funding and support. Meanwhile, the representation of the private sector reflects the growing presence of privately managed universities and colleges, driven by factors such as demand for quality education and expansion of higher education opportunities.

The distribution of job designations (Faculty: 48.79%, Administrative Staff: 32.9%, Support Staff: 14.04%, Other: 4.25%) reflects the diverse workforce within higher education institutions, comprising faculty members, administrative staff, support staff, and other roles. The higher percentage of faculty members reflects the significant role of teaching and research within these institutions, with faculty members serving as the core academic workforce responsible for delivering educational programs and conducting research. The representation of administrative and support staff emphasizes the importance of non-academic roles in facilitating the smooth functioning of higher education institutions, including administrative operations, student services, and facility management.

The higher percentage of employees with 1-5 years (39.93%) of service suggests a relatively young workforce with recent recruits and early-career professionals. The significant proportion of employees with 6-10 years (29.9%) of service indicates a stable mid-career cohort with established roles and responsibilities. Meanwhile, the lower percentages of employees with less than 1 year (11.64%) or more than 10 years (18.9%) of service may suggest turnover dynamics or limited opportunities for career advancement within the institutions.

~~4.5~~ PLS Based Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) Analysis

In pursuit of comprehensively examining the intricate relationships posited in this study, a Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM) approach was

employed. This methodological choice is justified by its ability to accommodate complex models while simultaneously handling relatively small sample sizes (Hair et al., 2019). PLS-SEM is particularly suited for exploratory research, allowing for the assessment of both measurement and structural models, as well as the incorporation of latent variables, reflective and formative constructs, and complex path relationships (Hair et al., 2017).

In this study, the PLS-SEM methodology aligns with the research objectives by facilitating the analysis of relationships between independent variables (such as training, communication, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness) and the dependent variable (Employee Brand Relationship Quality or EBRQ). The utilization of SmartPLS 4.0 software lends itself to the efficient computation of model parameters, path coefficients, and significance testing (Ringle et al., 2015).

The PLS-SEM approach empowers researchers to validate hypotheses through bootstrapping techniques, offering robustness in analysing indirect effects, total effects, and moderating effects (Hair et al., 2019). This chapter will systematically expound upon the application of PLS-SEM in the present study, detailing the stages of data analysis, measurement model assessment, structural model estimation, and the evaluation of moderation effect.

4.6 Evaluation of Path Model

The core of the analysis in this study revolves around evaluating the proposed path model, elucidating the relationships between the independent variables (training, communication, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness), the moderating variable (digital enablement), and the dependent variable (Employee Brand Relationship

Quality or EBRQ). The evaluation process involves a series of steps aimed at scrutinizing the model's validity, significance, and strength of relationships.

4.6.1 Model Validity and Reliability Assessment

Before delving into the path relationships, the validity and reliability of the measurement model were rigorously examined. This stage is critical for ensuring the accuracy of the measurement instruments used to assess the latent constructs. Indicators' convergent validity, composite reliability, and average variance extracted were assessed in line with established guidelines (Hair et al., 2019). These analyses provide insights into the degree to which items adequately measure their respective constructs and the reliability of these measurements.

4.6.2 Hypothesis Testing and Effect Analysis

The heart of the path model evaluation lies in the assessment of hypothesized relationships between variables. Hypothesis testing involved examining the direct effects between the independent variables and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). Path coefficients, standard errors, and t-values were calculated to assess the significance and direction of the relationships.

Additionally, the moderating effect of digital enablement on the relationship between Internal Brand Management (IBM) Activities/ Intrinsic Motivation Factors and EBRQ was investigated. This analysis scrutinized whether the strength and direction of this relationship vary based on different levels of digital enablement. The moderation effect was tested through interaction terms and bootstrapping procedures, providing insights into the conditions under which the relationship between Internal Brand Management (IBM) Activities/ Intrinsic Motivation Factors and EBRQ is influenced by digital enablement.

4.6.3 Overall Model Fit and Predictive Power

The evaluation of the path model goes beyond individual relationships; it extends to the overall fit and predictive power of the model. Fit indices, such as the goodness-of-fit index (GoF), were employed to assess the overall fit of the model to the data (Hair et al., 2019). Moreover, the model's ability to predict the variance in the dependent variable (Employee Brand Relationship Quality or EBRQ) was evaluated using R^2 values.

The comprehensive evaluation of the path model illuminates the intricate network of relationships proposed in this study. By dissecting each stage of the model's validity, significance, and predictive capability, this analysis contributes to a robust understanding of the study's findings.

Table 4-5: Two-Step Process of PLS Path Model Assessment

Stage	Analysis	Analysis	Constructs
1	Outer Model Basement (Measurement)	i- Item reliability	Reflective
		ii-Internal consistency	Reflective
		iii-Discriminant validity	Reflective
		iv. Validity	Reflective
2	Inner model Assessment (structural)	i- Amount of variance explained (R^2)	Both
		ii- Path coefficient (β)	Both
		iii-Statistical significance of t-values	Both

4.7 Assessment of Measurement Model (Outer Model)

The foundation of any structural equation modelling analysis rests upon the evaluation of the measurement model's validity and reliability. This step involves scrutinizing the indicators' convergent and discriminant validity, as well as assessing their internal consistency reliability.

In this research study, eight reflective constructs were used because each item is a function of the respective construct. Overall, there were 35 items for all the eight constructs: Communication (COM1-COM3), Training (TRA1-TRA3), Leadership (LEAD1-LEAD7), Job Autonomy (JA1, JA5, and JA6), Competence (COMP2, COMP3 and COMP5), Relatedness (REL1, REL3, REL5, REL6), Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ3-EBRQ6, EBRQ8, EBRQ10), Digital Enablement (DIG1-DIG5, DIG7). The figure below shows the measurement model of the current study.

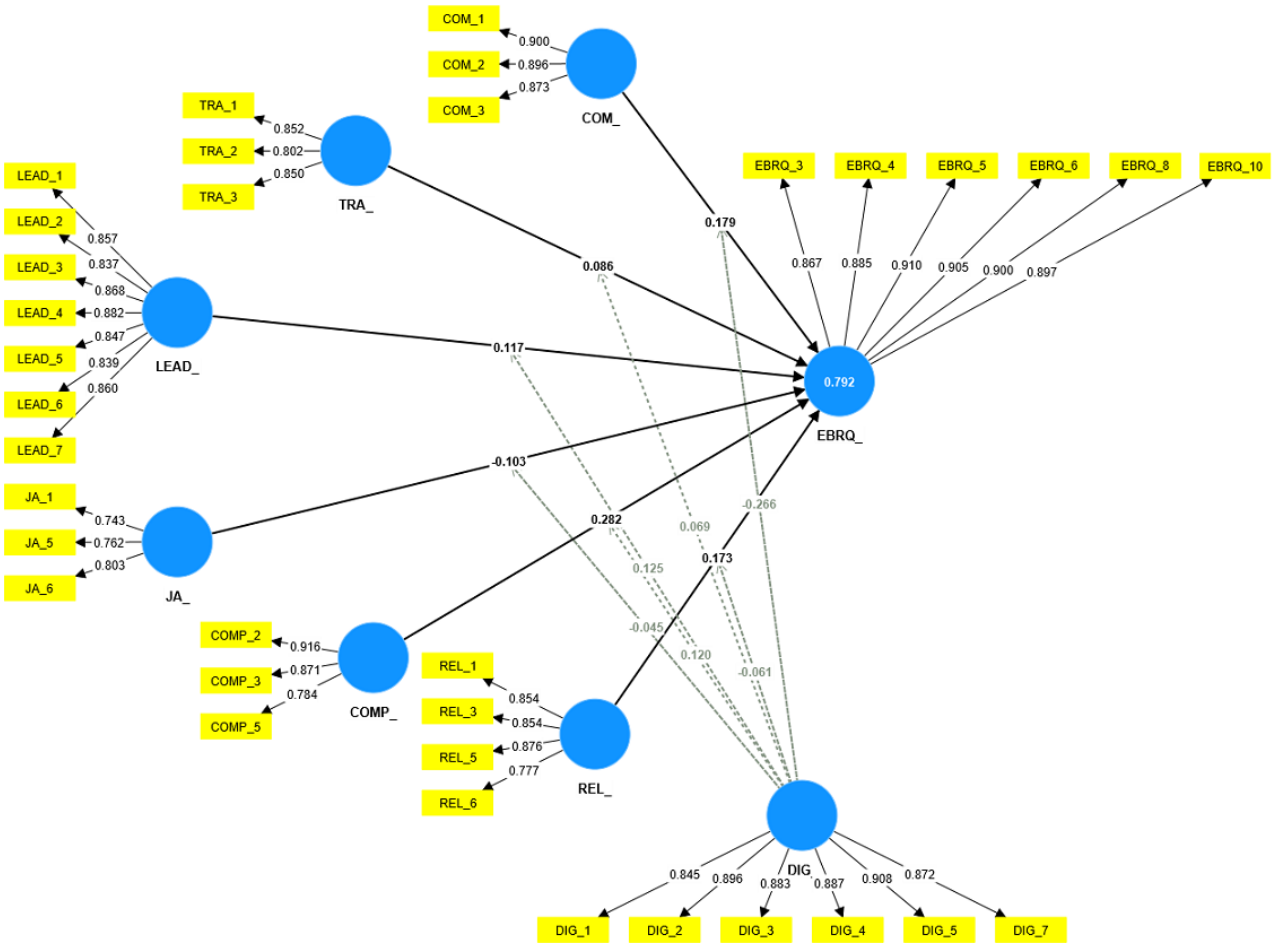

Figure 4-1 Measurement Model

Note: COM represents Communication, TRA represents Training, LEAD represents Leadership, JA represents Job Autonomy, COMP represents Competence, REL represents Relatedness, EBRQ represents Employee Brand Relationship Quality, DIG represents Digital Enablement.

4.7.1 Convergent Validity

Convergent validity gauges the extent to which indicators of a latent construct reflect a common underlying trait. This evaluation was carried out through the examination of factor loadings and average variance extracted (AVE). Factor loadings indicate the strength of the relationship between indicators and their corresponding constructs. Generally, factor loadings above the threshold of 0.5 signify satisfactory convergent validity. In our study, all

indicators demonstrated factor loadings well above this threshold, affirming their convergent validity.

AVE, on the other hand, quantifies the amount of variance captured by the construct's indicators relative to measurement error. Adequate convergent validity is indicated by AVE values exceeding 0.5 (Hair et al., 2019). The AVE values obtained for each latent construct comfortably surpassed this threshold, affirming the convergent validity of the measurement model.

4.7.2 Discriminant Validity

Discriminant validity ensures that indicators of one construct are distinct from those of other constructs. This was assessed by comparing the square root of AVE values with the correlations between constructs (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). As the square root of AVE values for each construct exceeded the correlations with other constructs, discriminant validity was upheld.

4.7.2.1 Internal Consistency Reliability

The reliability of indicators within a construct was evaluated through composite reliability (CR). CR measures the internal consistency of indicators, indicating the extent to which they consistently measure the underlying construct. CR values above 0.7 are deemed acceptable (Hair et al., 2019). Our study's constructs all demonstrated CR values well above this threshold, indicating strong internal consistency reliability.

4.7.3 Indicator Reliability

Within the PLS framework, a key strategy for evaluating individual item reliability is to examine the loadings of items related to reflective constructs. These loading scores can

be obtained from the results of PLS bootstrapping. Scholars suggest that a latent variable should explain a significant portion of an indicator's variance, typically around 50% (Henseler et al., 2009). The literature presents various perspectives on item reliability thresholds. For example, Barclay et al. (2000) recommend considering the exclusion of items with loadings below 0.707, whereas Hulland (1999) advises removing items with factor loadings under 0.50 for structural analysis.

Other researchers propose that a minimum individual loading of 0.40 is acceptable (Igbaria et al., 1997; Hair et al., 1998). Interestingly, a commonly accepted threshold for factor loadings is 0.30 (Sirdeshmukh et al., 2002). Churchill (1979) suggests eliminating reflective indicators from measurement models if their standardized outer loadings are below 0.40 (Henseler et al., 2009). However, due to PLS' emphasis on coherence, caution is recommended when removing indicators. In this context, Henseler et al. (2009) emphasize that indicators should only be removed if their reliability is notably low and their exclusion significantly improves composite reliability.

Table 4-6: Assessment of Items Reliability for Reflective Constructs

Code	Loadings	AVE	Cronbach Alpha	Composite reliability
Com_1	0.900	0.792	0.869	0.919
Com_2	0.896			
Com_3	0.873			
Tra_1	0.852	0.697	0.785	0.874
Tra_2	0.802			
Tra_3	0.850			

Table 4-6 continued

Lead_1	0.857	0.743	0.939	0.950
Lead_2	0.837			
Lead_3	0.868			
Lead_4	0.882			
Lead_5	0.847			
Lead_6	0.839			
Lead_7	0.860			
JA_1	0.743	0.592	0.659	0.813
JA_5	0.762			
JA_6	0.803			
Comp_2	0.916	0.737	0.819	0.893
Comp_3	0.871			
Comp_5	0.784			
Rel_1	0.854	0.707	0.862	0.906
Rel_3	0.854			
Rel_5	0.876			
Rel_6	0.777			
Dig_1	0.845	0.778	0.943	0.955
Dig_2	0.896			
Dig_3	0.883			
Dig_4	0.887			
Dig_5	0.908			
Dig_7	0.872			

Table 4-6 continued

EBRQ_3	0.867	0.799	0.950	0.960
EBRQ_4	0.885			
EBRQ_5	0.910			
EBRQ_6	0.905			
EBRQ_8	0.900			
EBRQ_10	0.897			
EBR_1	0.585	0.516	0.870	0.894
EBR_2	0.609			
EBR_3	0.769			
EBR_4	0.703			
EBR_5	0.702			
EBR_6	0.851			
EBR_7	0.729			
EBR_8	0.763			

Note: Com = Communication, Tra = Training, Lead = Leadership, JA = Job Autonomy, Comp = Competence, Rel = Relatedness, EBRQ = Employee Brand Relationship Quality, Dig = Digital Enablement

Considering the varying recommendations in the existing literature, and with the aim of optimizing the measurement model's capability to meet the criteria for convergent validity, a threshold of 0.5 or higher was established as indicative of item reliability. As a result, following the initial Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis, thirteen items exhibiting loadings below 0.5 were removed from consideration. Specifically, the eliminated items included JA2, JA3, JA4, COMP1, COMP4, REL2, REL4, DIG6, EBRQ1, EBRQ2, EBRQ

9, EBR 9 and EBR10. Additionally, the guideline proposed by Kline (1998) and Rahim et al. (2001) stipulating a minimum of three items for each construct was upheld throughout the process. Notably, even after the removal of certain items, all constructs in the model retained at least three items. Subsequently, the refined measurement model underwent further examination, with all loadings surpassing the established threshold of 0.5, as confirmed by the results presented in Table 4.4.

Table 4-7: Correlation among Constructs and AVE (Forner and Larker)

	COMP	COM	DIG	EBRQ	JA	LEAD	REL	TRA
COMP	0.859							
COM	0.479	0.890						
DIG	0.509	0.617	0.882					
EBRQ	0.708	0.652	0.742	0.894				
JA	0.446	0.418	0.356	0.420	0.770			
LEAD	0.706	0.617	0.609	0.714	0.594	0.856		
REL	0.618	0.454	0.462	0.604	0.561	0.650	0.841	
TRA	0.618	0.614	0.532	0.633	0.490	0.739	0.603	0.835

Note: COM = Communication, TRA = Training, LEAD = Leadership, JA = Job Autonomy, COMP = Competence, REL = Relatedness, EBRQ = Employee Brand Relationship Quality, DIG = Digital Enablement

Correlations below 0.70 between constructs indicate strong discriminant validity (Bruhn et al., 2008). Table 4.5 in this study displays the square root of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) (shown in parentheses along the diagonal) and the correlations between constructs (off-diagonal elements). The results reveal that the square root of AVE exceeds the correlations both within each row and down each column. These findings confirm satisfactory discriminant validity at the construct level. Additionally, AVE values ranged

from 0.718 to 0.890, indicating that the indicators effectively represent their respective latent constructs.

Table 4-8: Correlation among Constructs and AVE (HTMT)

	COMP_	COM_	DIG_	EBRQ_	JA_	LEAD_	REL_	TRA_	DIG_ x COMP_	DIG_ x TRA_	DIG_ x JA_	DIG_ x LEAD_	DIG_ x REL_	DIG_ x COM_
COMP_														
COM_	0.567													
DIG_	0.579	0.679												
EBRQ_	0.802	0.716	0.782											
JA_	0.602	0.547	0.442	0.524										
LEAD_	0.805	0.684	0.648	0.755	0.755									
REL_	0.728	0.516	0.500	0.653	0.739	0.716								
TRA_	0.759	0.744	0.612	0.722	0.654	0.853	0.702							
DIG_ x COMP_	0.202	0.279	0.421	0.244	0.177	0.218	0.284	0.282						
DIG_ x TRA_	0.278	0.270	0.546	0.331	0.095	0.314	0.281	0.308	0.735					
DIG_ x JA_	0.039	0.130	0.217	0.161	0.207	0.111	0.133	0.076	0.453	0.424				
DIG_ x LEAD_	0.228	0.327	0.564	0.333	0.199	0.285	0.325	0.334	0.785	0.831	0.576			
DIG_ x REL_	0.303	0.287	0.412	0.333	0.153	0.335	0.225	0.307	0.748	0.744	0.561	0.766		
DIG_ x COM_	0.272	0.363	0.740	0.559	0.166	0.306	0.260	0.264	0.592	0.660	0.429	0.683	0.598	

Note: COM = Communication, TRA = Training, LEAD = Leadership, JA = Job Autonomy, COMP = Competence, REL = Relatedness, EBRQ = Employee Brand Relationship Quality, DIG = Digital Enablement

Cross Loading: Cross loading refers to a criterion for discriminant validity where an item within a construct demonstrates a higher loading compared to its loading in any other constructs. Each indicator is anticipated to have a loading that surpasses all of its cross-loadings (Chin, 1998; Gotz et al., 2009).

Table 4-9: Cross Loading

	COMP_	**COM_**	**DIG_**	**EBRQ_**	**JA_**	**LEAD_**	**REL_**	**TRA_**	**DIG_ x COMP_**	**DIG_ x TRA_**	**DIG_ x JA_**	**DIG_ x LEAD_**	**DIG_ x REL_**	**DIG_ x COM_**
COMP_2	**0.916**	0.441	0.431	0.635	0.371	0.579	0.582	0.521	-0.187	-0.220	-0.046	-0.167	-0.263	-0.228
COMP_3	**0.871**	0.283	0.373	0.590	0.315	0.451	0.511	0.436	-0.160	-0.221	0.000	-0.164	-0.222	-0.220
COMP_5	**0.784**	0.507	0.506	0.595	0.463	0.787	0.495	0.633	-0.124	-0.206	-0.044	-0.199	-0.220	-0.184
COM_1	0.454	**0.900**	0.608	0.587	0.400	0.562	0.426	0.566	-0.234	-0.254	-0.103	-0.303	-0.224	-0.319
COM_2	0.417	**0.896**	0.579	0.609	0.359	0.538	0.418	0.520	-0.275	-0.275	-0.146	-0.322	-0.298	-0.359
COM_3	0.407	**0.873**	0.454	0.542	0.357	0.548	0.363	0.556	-0.186	-0.144	-0.074	-0.189	-0.192	-0.224
DIG_1	0.438	0.548	**0.845**	0.603	0.311	0.548	0.413	0.434	-0.319	-0.398	-0.139	-0.414	-0.291	-0.523

Table 4-9 continued

DIG_2	0.428	0.552	**0.896**	0.651	0.300	0.538	0.408	0.471	-0.393	-0.468	-0.185	-0.502	-0.383	-0.652
DIG_3	0.427	0.548	**0.883**	0.646	0.334	0.559	0.420	0.458	-0.383	-0.490	-0.205	-0.486	-0.357	-0.650
DIG_4	0.455	0.522	**0.887**	0.655	0.305	0.486	0.409	0.407	-0.377	-0.533	-0.226	-0.522	-0.377	-0.674
DIG_5	0.488	0.581	**0.908**	0.688	0.342	0.577	0.403	0.550	-0.371	-0.487	-0.187	-0.503	-0.372	-0.671
DIG_7	0.454	0.517	**0.872**	0.677	0.294	0.517	0.393	0.491	-0.321	-0.429	-0.175	-0.469	-0.336	-0.634
EBRQ_10	0.600	0.617	0.662	**0.897**	0.391	0.610	0.521	0.516	-0.236	-0.307	-0.165	-0.285	-0.275	-0.508
EBRQ_3	0.669	0.506	0.646	**0.867**	0.419	0.654	0.599	0.599	-0.156	-0.222	-0.114	-0.266	-0.234	-0.436
EBRQ_4	0.645	0.616	0.631	**0.885**	0.411	0.642	0.541	0.565	-0.170	-0.244	-0.082	-0.255	-0.273	-0.434

Table 4-9 continued

EBRQ_5	0.653	0.600	0.683	**0.910**	0.325	0.652	0.520	0.581	-0.241	-0.303	-0.139	-0.301	-0.301	-0.487
EBRQ_6	0.630	0.613	0.711	**0.905**	0.338	0.649	0.535	0.587	-0.219	-0.324	-0.174	-0.306	-0.298	-0.525
EBRQ_8	0.597	0.544	0.643	**0.900**	0.368	0.618	0.518	0.547	-0.256	-0.329	-0.168	-0.328	-0.358	-0.534
JA_1	0.304	0.278	0.198	0.267	**0.743**	0.452	0.317	0.269	0.144	0.015	-0.080	0.083	-0.017	0.036
JA_5	0.395	0.333	0.363	0.350	**0.762**	0.490	0.548	0.472	-0.099	-0.106	-0.077	-0.175	-0.148	-0.204
JA_6	0.324	0.346	0.245	0.341	**0.803**	0.430	0.406	0.367	-0.089	-0.057	-0.232	-0.116	-0.122	-0.070
LEAD_1	0.575	0.576	0.533	0.619	0.541	**0.857**	0.585	0.660	-0.185	-0.284	-0.035	-0.250	-0.248	-0.259
LEAD_2	0.554	0.579	0.491	0.572	0.538	**0.837**	0.534	0.658	-0.173	-0.199	-0.082	-0.187	-0.265	-0.208

Table 4-6 continued

LEAD_3	0.579	0.511	0.531	0.611	0.512	**0.868**	0.598	0.611	-0.256	-0.293	-0.155	-0.265	-0.327	-0.283
LEAD_4	0.643	0.539	0.488	0.625	0.522	**0.882**	0.600	0.655	-0.192	-0.260	-0.123	-0.226	-0.299	-0.263
LEAD_5	0.598	0.471	0.547	0.624	0.453	**0.847**	0.510	0.594	-0.180	-0.299	-0.109	-0.277	-0.286	-0.310
LEAD_6	0.558	0.501	0.536	0.598	0.531	**0.839**	0.543	0.596	-0.174	-0.285	-0.071	-0.249	-0.286	-0.246
LEAD_7	0.716	0.523	0.523	0.624	0.464	**0.860**	0.526	0.658	-0.106	-0.202	-0.070	-0.202	-0.231	-0.206
REL_1	0.474	0.364	0.311	0.417	0.557	0.507	**0.854**	0.458	-0.186	-0.185	-0.086	-0.196	-0.117	-0.133
REL_3	0.521	0.322	0.321	0.456	0.526	0.524	**0.854**	0.468	-0.136	-0.135	-0.040	-0.160	-0.070	-0.150
REL_5	0.543	0.448	0.425	0.542	0.460	0.625	**0.876**	0.586	-0.232	-0.200	-0.107	-0.255	-0.185	-0.207

Table 4-9 continued

REL_6	0.524	0.373	0.457	0.575	0.373	0.513	**0.777**	0.492	-0.333	-0.360	-0.185	-0.404	-0.331	-0.321
TRA_1	0.583	0.501	0.467	0.593	0.478	0.694	0.669	**0.852**	-0.251	-0.247	-0.039	-0.285	-0.262	-0.258
TRA_2	0.419	0.494	0.389	0.434	0.317	0.545	0.347	**0.802**	-0.160	-0.206	-0.003	-0.201	-0.181	-0.117
TRA_3	0.524	0.545	0.468	0.540	0.411	0.597	0.452	**0.850**	-0.216	-0.232	-0.127	-0.256	-0.239	-0.212
DIG_ x COM_	-0.246	-0.341	-0.720	-0.545	-0.116	-0.297	-0.252	-0.243	0.592	0.660	0.429	0.683	0.598	**1.000**
DIG_ x LEAD_	-0.205	-0.308	-0.548	-0.324	-0.106	-0.277	-0.315	-0.301	0.785	0.831	0.576	**1.000**	0.766	0.683
DIG_ x JA_	-0.035	-0.122	-0.212	-0.157	-0.172	-0.108	-0.131	-0.071	0.453	0.424	**1.000**	0.576	0.561	0.429
DIG_ x REL_	-0.275	-0.269	-0.401	-0.324	-0.132	-0.324	-0.223	-0.276	0.748	0.744	0.561	0.766	**1.000**	0.598

Table 4-9 continued

DIG_ x COMP_	-0.184	-0.262	-0.409	-0.238	-0.036	-0.211	-0.274	-0.255	**1.000**	0.735	0.453	0.785	0.748	0.592
DIG_ x TRA_	-0.251	-0.255	-0.530	-0.322	-0.071	-0.304	-0.272	-0.275	0.735	**1.000**	0.424	0.831	0.744	0.660

Note: COM = Communication, TRA = Training, LEAD = Leadership, JA = Job Autonomy, COMP = Competence, REL = Relatedness, EBRQ = Employee Brand Relationship Quality, DIG = Digital Enablement

While the Fornell-Larcker criterion evaluates discriminant validity at the construct level, cross-loadings facilitate this evaluation at the indicator level (Henseler et al., 2009). Table 4.6 presents the results of the loading and cross-loading correlations, demonstrating that all items exhibit higher loadings on their respective constructs compared to other constructs within the model. Consequently, the second criterion for discriminant validity is satisfied. This implies that all reflective constructs in the measurement model are distinct from one another. These findings provide robust empirical support for the reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity of the reflective constructs, paving the way for subsequent analysis.

To evaluate the nature of formative constructs, it is essential to examine the degree of multi-collinearity among formative measures (Diamantopoulos & Winklhofer, 2001), which can be assessed by calculating the variance inflation factor (VIF) or tolerance values (Henseler et al., 2009). In this study, the VIF statistic was employed to determine if there was excessive correlation among reflective indicators. Traditionally, a VIF value above 10 indicates multicollinearity concerns; however, for reflective measures, a VIF value exceeding 3.3 is considered indicative of high multicollinearity (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006). The highest VIF value for the reflective indicators of LEAD in this study was 2.605, which is well below the threshold of 3.3. Therefore, multicollinearity did not compromise the validity of reflective measures at the indicator level in this study (Roberts & Thatcher, 2009).

According to Jarvis et al. (2003), reflective indicators should not be excluded solely based on statistical results. Consequently, the researcher retained both significant and insignificant reflective indicators in the measurement model, as this was justified

conceptually. With the measurement model established as adequate and sufficient for the study, PLS analysis was subsequently conducted to evaluate the structural model in the next phase of this research.

Table 4-10: Multicollinearity

Items	VIF
COMP_2	2.963
COMP_3	2.574
COMP_5	1.465
COM_1	2.423
COM_2	2.290
COM_3	2.158
DIG_1	2.671
DIG_2	3.585
DIG_3	3.250
DIG_4	3.288
DIG_5	4.079
DIG_7	3.170
EBRQ_10	4.176
EBRQ_3	3.150
EBRQ_4	3.563
EBRQ_5	4.686
EBRQ_6	4.572
EBRQ_8	4.081

Table 4-10 continued

JA_1	1.352
JA_5	1.198
JA_6	1.370
LEAD_1	2.907
LEAD_2	2.818
LEAD_3	3.160
LEAD_4	3.294
LEAD_5	2.816
LEAD_6	2.618
LEAD_7	2.960
REL_1	2.861
REL_3	2.871
REL_5	2.357
REL_6	1.501
TRA_1	1.583
TRA_2	1.637
TRA_3	1.711

Note: COM = Communication, TRA = Training, LEAD = Leadership, JA = Job Autonomy, COMP = Competence, REL = Relatedness, EBRQ = Employee Brand Relationship Quality, DIG = Digital Enablement.

4.8 Assessment of Structural Model

The assessment of the structural model is a pivotal phase in confirming the validity and robustness of the proposed relationships between variables. Through the utilization of Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modelling (PLS-SEM), this stage of analysis aims

to validate the connections between the independent and dependent variables that were hypothesized in the study, thus contributing to the empirical foundation of the research and enhancing the understanding of the dynamics at play.

Path coefficients hold a central role in this assessment. These coefficients quantify the strength and direction of the relationships between variables, offering insights into the extent to which changes in the independent variables impact the dependent variable (Hair et al., 2014). The examination of these path coefficients provides valuable information for evaluating the hypotheses formulated in the research.

Statistical significance is a critical facet of the assessment. Through bootstrapping, a resampling technique, the significance of path coefficients is determined (Henseler et al., 2015). This involves generating a distribution of the coefficients and their associated confidence intervals. By comparing these distributions to zero, researchers can ascertain whether the relationships are statistically significant or not. This robust statistical approach ensures that the results are not mere chance occurrences.

In addition to path coefficients, the coefficient of determination (R^2) for the dependent variable is evaluated. R^2 indicates the proportion of variance in the dependent variable that can be explained by the independent variables (Hair et al., 2014). A higher R^2 signifies a stronger predictive power of the model, suggesting that the independent variables have a substantial impact on the dependent variable.

Table 4-11 Structured table summarizing the key structural model results.

Path Relationship	**Path Coefficient (β)**
LEAD → EBRQ	0.117
TRA → EBRQ	0.086
COM → EBRQ	0.179
JA → EBRQ	-0.103
COMP → EBRQ	0.282
REL → EBRQ	0.125
DIG → EBRQ	0.173
DIG → REL	0.061
DIG → COMP	0.120
DIG → JA	0.045

Note: COM = Communication, TRA = Training, LEAD = Leadership, JA = Job Autonomy, COMP = Competence, REL = Relatedness, EBRQ = Employee Brand Relationship Quality, DIG = Digital Enablement

4.8.1 Path Coefficient (β) and T-value

This test was run to assess the link of the construct as hypothesised in this research after the explanatory power of the model was established through the amount of variance explained from R2 value (Mustamil, 2010). Like before Hensler et al., 2009, re-sampling techniques like bootstrapping were used to calculate the confidence intervals of the path coefficients and statistical inference (Tenenhaus et al., 2005). In more detail, the path coefficient and the t-value are assessed to evaluate the statistical analysis. The t value is

displayed in Table 4.3 because it does not automatically appear in the graphic, although the path coefficient value is shown on each path of the graph connecting the constructs in graphic 4.2. The two-tail method for t value statistics was used since all hypotheses (whether positive or negative) had a specific nature. The standardised path co-efficient and associated t-value (equivalent to the t-test) are displayed in Table 4.3. Table 4.3 serves as an example of how one relationship is not significant. In general, this indicated that the connections between the constructs (positive or negative) along these paths were not sufficiently strong to be considered as significant. It should be highlighted that, according to the literature, seven out of the eight hypotheses were supported with an incredibly high level of significance.

Table 4-12: Hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Original Sample	Sample Mean	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	Decision	VIF
H1(a)	COM→ EBRQ	0.179	0.174	0.031	5.702	0.000	Supported	2.116
H1(b)	TRA→ EBRQ	0.086	0.083	0.039	2.192	0.028	Supported	2.692
H1(c)	LEAD→ EBRQ	0.117	0.118	0.048	2.429	0.015	Supported	3.899
H2(a)	JA→ EBRQ	-0.103	-0.101	0.031	3.361	0.001	Supported	1.895
H2(b)	COMP→ EBRQ	0.282	0.283	0.033	8.497	0.000	Supported	2.401
H2(c)	REL→ EBRQ	0.173	0.172	0.033	5.322	0.000	Supported	2.418
H3(a)	DIG moderates COM & EBRQ	-0.266	-0.258	0.037	7.143	0.000	Supported	3.486

Table 4-12 continued

H3(b)	DIG moderates TRA & EBRQ	0.069	0.069	0.035	1.986	0.047	Supported	4.066
H3(c)	DIG moderates LEAD & EBRQ	0.125	0.116	0.053	2.331	0.020	Supported	5.743
H4(a)	DIG moderates JA & EBRQ	-0.045	-0.043	0.027	1.701	0.089	Not Supported	1.851
H4(b)	DIG moderates COMP & EBRQ	0.120	0.119	0.034	3.504	0.000	Supported	3.326
H4(c)	DIG moderates REL & EBRQ	-0.061	-0.060	0.040	1.516	0.130	Not Supported	3.861

Note: COM = Communication, TRA = Training, LEAD = Leadership, JA = Job Autonomy, COMP = Competence, REL = Relatedness, EBRQ = Employee Brand Relationship Quality, DIG = Digital Enablement

4.8.1.1 Direct and Moderating effects

In the current study, the relationships between various IBM activities (Communication, Training, and Leadership) and intrinsic motivation factors (Job Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness) with Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) is investigated. The analysis yielded several noteworthy findings.

Firstly, regarding the direct relationships, results indicate that Communication (COM) significantly influences EBRQ (β=0.179, t=5.702, p=0.000), which supports H1(a).

Similarly, Training (TRA) (β=0.086, t=2.192, p=0.028) and Leadership (LEAD) (β=0.117, t=2.429, p=0.015) also showed significant positive effects on EBRQ, supporting H1(b) and H1(c) respectively.

Furthermore, the intrinsic motivation factors exhibited significant influences on EBRQ. Job Autonomy (JA) (β=-0.103, t=3.361, p=0.001), Competence (COMP) (β=0.282, t=8.497, p=0.000), and Relatedness (REL) (β=0.173, t=5.322, p=0.000) all displayed significant relationships with EBRQ, supporting H2(a), H2(b), and H2(c) respectively.

Additionally, research analysis explored the moderating effect of digitalization (DIG) on the relationships between IBM activities/Intrinsic Motivation Factors and EBRQ. The results revealed significant moderation effects for Communication (COM), Training (TRA), and Leadership (LEAD) with DIG, indicating the importance of digitalization in influencing these relationships.

However, it's worth noting that not all moderation effects were significant. For instance, while DIG moderated the relationship between Job Autonomy (JA) and EBRQ (β=-0.045, t=1.701, p=0.089), this effect was not statistically significant, failing to support H4(a). Similarly, DIG moderation on the relationship between Relatedness (REL) and EBRQ was also not supported (β=-0.061, t=1.516, p=0.130), as per H4(c).

4.9 Effect Size (f2)

Following guidelines provided by Cohen (1988), the impact of communication, training, and leadership on EBRQ was found to be small (i.e. 0.073, 0.013 and 0.017 respectively). Similarly, the impact of Job autonomy and relatedness on EBRQ was also found to be small (i.e. 0.027, 0.060 respectively). Whereas the impact of competence on

EBRQ was found to be medium (i.e. 0.150). Overall, these findings emphasize the complex nature of employee-brand relationships and highlight the varying degrees of influence that different factors exert on EBRQ.

Table 4-13: Effect size (f 2)

Hypothesis	Relationship	f^2	Inference
H1	COM→ EBRQ	0.073	Small
H2	TRA→ EBRQ	0.013	Small
H3	LEAD→ EBRQ	0.017	Small
H4	JA→ EBRQ	0.027	Small
H5	COMP→ EBRQ	0.150	Medium
H6	REL→ EBRQ	0.060	Small

Note: COM = Communication, TRA = Training, LEAD = Leadership, JA = Job Autonomy, COMP = Competence, REL = Relatedness, EBRQ = Employee Brand Relationship Quality, DIG = Digital Enablement

4.10 Coefficient of Determination (R2)

The coefficient of determination (R2) was used to assess the model's predictive accuracy. Figure 4.1 illustrates how the model predicted exogenous variables to account for 45.5% of the variations in EBRQ. Further data interpretation was important because the R2 values were significantly higher than the threshold of 0.10 suggested by Falk and Miller (1992). According to the generalisation made by Hair et al. (2017), the endogenous construct EBRQ (R2 =0.103) both have moderate R2 in this study. It further affirms the model's effectiveness in capturing the variance in these crucial variables.

Table 4-14: Coefficient of Determination (R2)

	R-square	R-square adjusted
EBRQ	0.104	0.103

Note: COM = Communication, TRA = Training, LEAD = Leadership, JA = Job Autonomy, COMP = Competence, REL = Relatedness, EBRQ = Employee Brand Relationship Quality, DIG = Digital Enablement

4.11 Predictive Relevance (Q2)

By making use of the Stone-Geisser Q2 value, the predictive relevance of the model was evaluated (Geisser, 1974; Stone, 1974). In this investigation, it was discovered that the endogenous construct EBRQ had a Q2 value of 0.079. It was confirmed that the model has predictive relevance because the Q2 values were higher than zero (Hair et al., 2017). According to the general rule of thumb, the model was discovered to have significant predictive significance (Chin, 1998; Henseler et al., 2009; Hair et al., 2017).

Table 4-15: Predictive Relevance (Q2)

	Q^2predict	RMSE	MAE
EBRQ	0.079	0.963	0.763

Note: EBRQ = Employee Brand Relationship Quality

This outcome aligns with established guidelines, indicating that the model exhibits considerable predictive power. Such findings validate the efficacy of the model in predicting employee-brand relationship outcomes within the context of higher education institutions in Pakistan.

4.12 Summary of Findings

The study's analysis revealed that each construct's Composite Reliability (CR) ranged from 0.813 to 0.960, demonstrating the internal consistency and reliability of the measurement model. To establish convergent validity, a threshold of 0.50 or higher was

applied for item reliability. Following the initial Partial Least Squares (PLS) analysis, thirteen items with factor loadings below this threshold were removed, ensuring that each construct retained at least three items, in line with established guidelines. The construct-level discriminant validity was successfully established, as evidenced by correlations below 0.70 between constructs and square root of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values ranging from 0.718 to 0.890. Moreover, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) analysis confirmed the absence of multicollinearity, with all VIF values well below the critical threshold of 3.3.

This study examined the relationships between Internal Brand Management (IBM) activities—Communication, Training, and Leadership, intrinsic motivation factors—Job Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness, and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). Additionally, it assessed the moderating role of digital enablement in these relationships. The findings indicate significant direct relationships, with Communication, Training, and Leadership positively influencing EBRQ, thereby supporting hypotheses H1(a), H1(b), and H1(c). Similarly, intrinsic motivation factors—Job Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness—demonstrated significant effects on EBRQ, supporting hypotheses H2(a), H2(b), and H2(c).

The study also explored the moderating effect of digital enablement on these relationships. The findings revealed significant moderation effects for Communication, Training, and Leadership, underscoring the crucial role of digital enablement in strengthening these relationships. However, not all moderation effects were significant, leading to the rejection of H4(a) and H4(c).

Furthermore, the effect size (f^2) values indicate varying degrees of influence, with some relationships exhibiting small effects and others medium effects. The coefficient of

determination (R^2) suggests that the model explains a substantial portion of the variation in EBRQ, with moderate R^2 values observed. Additionally, predictive relevance (Q^2) analysis using Stone-Geisser's Q^2 values confirmed the model's effectiveness in predicting EBRQ, thereby reinforcing the study's robustness and predictive significance.

4.13 Summary of the Chapter

This chapter provided a thorough explanation of the study's data analyses and conclusions. The early phases were dealing with outliers, missing data, and assessing the participant's demographic profile. To get insights, the data was then subjected to PLS SEM analysis using SmartPLS 4.0. The measuring model underwent a thorough analysis, including an evaluation of the constructs' convergent and discriminant validity as well as indicator and internal consistency reliability. The theories were then thoroughly examined, and the structural model's prediction ability of the model was evaluated. The following chapter will continue with discussions and a conclusion.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter offers a comprehensive conclusion for the research study, summarizing its key findings, discussing their implications, highlighting the study's contributions to the existing literature and providing recommendations. Additionally, it acknowledges the limitations encountered during the research process and suggests potential areas for future research to further advance the understanding of employee-brand relationships.

5.2 Research Summary and Key Findings

The objective of this research was to investigate the intricate dynamics of employee-brand relationship quality (EBRQ) in the context of higher education institutions (HEIs). Given the increasing emphasis on branding in organizational success, understanding the factors that influence employee-brand relationships has become essential for institutions aiming to strengthen employee commitment and engagement.

The concept of employee-brand relationships has received significant attention in both academia and industry. Organizations recognize the importance of employees as brand ambassadors and the potential for fostering meaningful connections between employees and the organizational brand (Sotirofski, 2023). Establishing strong relationships with employees is believed to enhance satisfaction, engagement, and commitment to the brand (Suomi et al., 2021). This study examined the effects of six independent variables—communication, training, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness—on Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) in higher education institutions. These variables were selected based on their theoretical significance and their potential to shape employee-brand

interactions (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015). A quantitative approach was employed to empirically assess the relationships between these independent variables and EBRQ. Additionally, the study explored the moderating effect of digital enablement on the relationships between communication (COM), training (TRA), leadership (LEAD), job autonomy (JA), competence (COMP), and relatedness (REL) with EBRQ. In the digital era, higher education institutions have increasingly adopted digital technologies to enhance communication and collaboration among employees (Li, 2018). Digital enablement was expected to provide employees with greater accessibility to institutional resources and improve engagement with the organizational brand (Varadaraj & Al Wadi, 2021), thereby influencing their perceptions of brand-related interactions.

This study successfully achieved all its research objectives. The findings confirmed the significance of the six independent variables in shaping EBRQ within HEIs. Moreover, the moderating role of digital enablement was validated, highlighting its impact on employee-brand interactions. The empirical results provide strong support for the theoretical framework, reinforcing the importance of internal branding practices, employee motivation, and digital enablement in higher education institutions. This research specifically focused on higher education institutions to provide insights and practical implications for institutions seeking to enhance employee engagement and brand management. As higher education institutions face increasing competition and the need for a strong brand identity, understanding the factors that drive EBRQ becomes a strategic necessity (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022).

The following sections of this chapter present the key findings, discuss their implications, highlight the study's contributions, and acknowledge its limitations.

Additionally, recommendations for future research are provided to further explore employee-brand relationships in the evolving landscape of higher education and digitalization.

5.3 Discussion on Finding

The results of this study shed light on the substantial correlations between employee brand relationship quality (EBRQ) and independent variables such communication, training, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness in higher education institutions. The empirical investigation provided insightful information about the variables affecting the nature and strength of the relationship between employees and brands.

5.3.1 Internal Brand Management (IBM) activities and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

The findings of the study support Hypothesis 1(a), indicating that effective communication within the organization has a significant positive impact on Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). The findings of a study by Smith et al. (2019) provide empirical support for this hypothesis, indicating that effective communication within the organization has a significant positive impact on EBRQ. This suggests that when organizations implement clear, transparent, and consistent communication strategies, employees are more likely to develop stronger relationships with the brand. Effective communication ensures that employees are well-informed about the brand's values, goals, and initiatives, fostering a sense of clarity and alignment. Additionally, the impact of internal corporate branding on employees' brand-supporting behavior further emphasizes the significance of effective communication in cultivating a positive EBRQ (Garas et al., 2018). Moreover, it allows for open dialogue and feedback channels, enabling employees to feel valued and engaged in the brand's journey. Managers and leaders should prioritize

communication efforts, leveraging various channels such as meetings, newsletters, intranet platforms, and social media to disseminate information and cultivate a culture of transparency and trust.

Similarly, Hypothesis 1(b) is supported by the study's findings, indicating that comprehensive training programs have a significant positive effect on EBRQ. Training initiatives play a crucial role in equipping employees with the necessary knowledge, skills, and resources to represent the brand effectively. Previous research has demonstrated that the quality of training and development programs significantly impacts the position of employees and their ability to embody the brand values (Natarajan et al., 2017; Mandey et al., 2020). By investing in training and development opportunities, organizations empower employees to deliver high-quality products and services, engage with customers authentically, and embody the brand's values and identity. Moreover, training programs can enhance employees' confidence and competence, leading to greater satisfaction and loyalty towards the brand. Managers should design tailored training programs that address the specific needs and objectives of their workforce, incorporating interactive and experiential learning methods to maximize engagement and retention.

The study's findings also support Hypothesis 1(c), highlighting the significant positive impact of strong leadership on EBRQ. This is in line with the previous research by Zhang & Guo, (2022), which demonstrated that leadership is positively related to employee-based brand equity, emphasizing the influence of leadership styles on the employee brand relationship. Furthermore, brand leadership has been identified as a significant means of impacting employees' brand behavior, underscoring the role of leadership in shaping employee brand-related behaviors (Lee et al., 2019). Additionally, the relationship between

brand leadership styles and employee-based brand-building behaviors has been established, indicating the significant impact of leadership on employee-based brand equity (Minbashrazgah et al., 2021). Effective leadership practices, characterized by vision, empathy, and empowerment, are essential for fostering a supportive and inspiring work environment conducive to building strong employee-brand relationships. Leaders play a pivotal role in articulating the brand's vision and values, modeling desired behaviors, and providing guidance and support to employees. By demonstrating authenticity, integrity, and inclusivity, leaders can cultivate a culture of trust and collaboration, encouraging employees to actively engage with the brand and contribute to its success. Managers should invest in leadership development initiatives to nurture and empower leaders at all levels of the organization, emphasizing the importance of emotional intelligence, communication skills, and servant leadership principles.

5.3.2 Intrinsic Motivation and Employee Brand Relationship Quality

The study's findings support Hypothesis 2(a), indicating that job autonomy has a significant impact on EBRQ. Job autonomy refers to the degree of freedom and independence employees have in making decisions and executing their work tasks. When employees have autonomy over their work processes, schedules, and decision-making, they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership and responsibility towards the brand. The results are supported by previous research that indicate that job autonomy can improve effort and job performance, as well as potentially raise job satisfaction and work engagement (Piccolo et al., 2010; Zhou et al., 2019). Past research also highlighted the impact of job autonomy on employee outcomes and the employee brand relationship (Zhou et al., 2019). Job autonomy is also linked to psychological well-being and self-efficacy, which have a significant role in influencing employee attitudes and behaviors towards the brand (Yang & Zhao, 2018). Thus

autonomy allows them to innovate, experiment, and take initiative, leading to greater job satisfaction and engagement. Managers should empower employees by delegating authority, providing clear objectives and guidelines, and fostering a culture of trust and accountability. By granting employees greater autonomy, organizations can unlock their full potential and drive meaningful contributions to the brand.

Similarly, Hypothesis 2(b) is supported by the study's findings, indicating that competence has a significant positive effect on EBRQ. Competence refers to employees' perceived ability to perform their job roles effectively and achieve desired outcomes. When employees feel competent and confident in their skills and capabilities, they are more likely to deliver high-quality work, engage with customers positively, and represent the brand with professionalism and expertise. Yoganathan et al. (2021) explored how employee competences help coworkers use social media responsibly to build better online networks and improve the employer brand internally and externally. Organizations should invest in employee development initiatives, such as training programs, skill-building workshops, and mentorship opportunities, to enhance employees' competence and confidence. Moreover, managers should provide constructive feedback and recognition to reinforce employees' sense of achievement and mastery, fostering a culture of continuous learning and improvement.

The study's findings also support Hypothesis 2(c), highlighting the significant positive relationship between relatedness and EBRQ. Relatedness refers to employees' sense of connection, belongingness, and camaraderie within the organization. When employees feel valued, supported, and connected to their colleagues and the broader organizational community, they are more likely to develop strong emotional ties with the brand. The study

result is in alignment with prior research findings which showed that brand CSR initiatives characterized by a strong sense of relatedness are anticipated to enhance consumer satisfaction and foster stronger relationships (Gilal et al., 2023). Furthermore, dissemination of knowledge within the organization holds significant importance, as employees' openness to brand-related information profoundly impacts their attitudes and behaviours toward the brand (Liu, 2022). Hence, organizations should foster a culture of inclusivity, collaboration, and teamwork, where employees feel respected, appreciated, and supported in their personal and professional growth. Managers can facilitate opportunities for social interaction, team-building activities, and cross-functional projects to strengthen relationships and cultivate a sense of belongingness. By prioritizing relatedness, organizations can create a supportive and cohesive work environment conducive to building strong employee-brand relationships.

5.3.3 The Moderating Effects of Digital Enablement on the relationships between IBM activities and EBRQ.

The study's findings reveal the moderating effect of digital enablement on the relationships between IBM activities, intrinsic motivation factors, and EBRQ. Digitalization, characterized by the integration of digital technologies and platforms into organizational processes and practices, has transformed the way employees interact with the brand. In the digital age, organizations must adapt their communication strategies, training programs, and leadership practices to leverage digital tools effectively and engage employees across virtual and remote environments. While digitalization enhances accessibility, connectivity, and flexibility, its influence on employee-brand relationships may vary depending on the organization's digital maturity, culture, and infrastructure. Managers should assess the impact of digitalization on employee engagement and brand perception, tailor their strategies

accordingly, and leverage digital platforms to facilitate meaningful interactions and collaboration.

The hypothesis 3(a) proposed that digitalization would moderate the relationship between Communication (COM) and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). The analysis revealed a statistically significant moderation effect, indicating that digitalization influences how communication activities within the organization impact EBRQ. This is in line with the previous research by Dhiman & Arora (2022) which found that perceived internal brand communication refers to employees' beliefs that brand-oriented internal communication systems enhance their brand knowledge in delivering the brand promise effectively. This highlights the importance of digital communication in fostering employees' understanding of the brand and their commitment to delivering brand promises. Furthermore, the study by Leijerholt et al. (2020) suggests that communication is a key determinant of affective responses to internal branding efforts as expressed in employee brand commitment. This highlights the significance of digital communication in influencing employees' emotional and psychological connection to the brand. Digitalization has transformed the way organizations communicate with their employees, offering new channels and methods for disseminating information and fostering engagement. The significant moderation effect suggests that the impact of communication on EBRQ varies depending on the level of digitalization within the organization. In digitally advanced environments, where communication is facilitated through online platforms, social media, and digital collaboration tools, employees may have greater access to brand-related information, fostering stronger brand relationships. Conversely, in organizations with limited digital infrastructure, the effectiveness of communication efforts in shaping EBRQ may be constrained. Hence, organizations should prioritize leveraging digital communication

platforms to enhance employee-brand interactions and strengthen EBRQ. By investing in user-friendly intranet systems, social media channels, and digital feedback mechanisms, organizations can facilitate transparent communication, encourage employee participation, and cultivate a shared sense of purpose and identity around the brand.

The hypothesis 3(b) posited that digitalization would moderate the relationship between Training (TRA) and EBRQ. The analysis revealed a statistically significant moderation effect, indicating that digitalization influences how training initiatives within the organization impact EBRQ. Digitalization has revolutionized training practices within organizations, offering new opportunities for interactive and personalized learning experiences. Digital enablement, which refers to the degree to which digital technologies are integrated into training processes, moderates the relationship between training and employee brand relationship quality. It is in line with the previous literature which suggests that digital training significantly impacts employee performance through various factors such as motivation, job satisfaction, competence, and productivity (Al-Kharabsheh et al., 2023; Astuti & Harnuansa, 2022; Pattihahuan & Mukti, 2022; Mahmood et al., 2018; Akther & Rahman, 2021; Nashar et al., 2018; Beigi & Shirmohammadi, 2011; Zyl, 2017). Moreover, digital training enhances employee digital literacy, knowledge transfer, and career development (Niati et al., 2021; Kodwani & Prashar, 2019; Klassen, 2019). In present research, the significant moderation effect suggests that the effectiveness of training programs in enhancing EBRQ varies depending on the level of digitalization within the organization. In digitally advanced environments, where employees have access to online training modules, virtual classrooms, and interactive simulations, training initiatives may be more engaging, accessible, and tailored to individual needs, thereby contributing to higher EBRQ. Conversely, in organizations with limited digital training resources, the impact of

training on EBRQ may be less pronounced. Hence, organizations should embrace digital learning technologies to optimize the impact of training programs on EBRQ. By investing in e-learning platforms, mobile learning apps, and virtual reality simulations, organizations can provide employees with immersive and flexible training experiences that enhance their skills, knowledge, and confidence, ultimately strengthening their connection to the brand.

The hypothesis H3(c) suggested that digitalization would moderate the relationship between Leadership (LEAD) and EBRQ. The analysis revealed a statistically significant moderation effect, indicating that digitalization influences how leadership practices within the organization impact EBRQ. Similarly, the literature also investigated into the role of digital leadership in shaping employee-based brand equity, brand citizenship behavior, and organizational identification. For example, Powell (2020) explored the effects of transformational leadership on the brand-related attitudes and behaviors of employees and customers, highlighting the influence of digital leadership on both internal and external brand relationships. Additionally, et al. Bharadwaj et al. (2021) found that employer branding and job satisfaction play a significant role in enhancing the positive identity of satisfied employees, thereby influencing employee retention. Furthermore, the study by Chiang et al. (2019) provides insights into the multilevel effects of brand-specific transformational leadership on employees and customers, emphasizing the broader impact of digital leadership on brand-related outcomes across different stakeholder groups. Digitalization has reshaped leadership practices, offering new opportunities for leaders to connect with and inspire their teams across digital channels. The significant moderation effect suggests that the impact of leadership on EBRQ varies depending on the level of digitalization within the organization. In digitally advanced environments, where leaders leverage digital platforms for remote communication, virtual team meetings, and online

collaboration, employees may experience stronger alignment with the brand vision, greater trust in leadership, and enhanced motivation, leading to higher EBRQ. Conversely, in organizations with limited digital leadership capabilities, the effectiveness of leadership practices in shaping EBRQ may be diminished. Hence, organizations should empower leaders to embrace digital tools and platforms to enhance their effectiveness in fostering EBRQ. By providing leadership training on digital communication strategies, virtual team management, and online employee engagement techniques, organizations can equip leaders with the skills and resources needed to inspire and motivate their teams in the digital age.

5.3.4 The Moderating Effects of Digital Enablement on the relationships between Intrinsic Motivation Factors and EBRQ.

The hypothesis H4(a) proposed that digitalization would moderate the relationship between Job Autonomy (JA) and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). However, the analysis did not find a statistically significant moderation effect for this relationship. This is aligning with previous research such as Wei (2022), which did not directly address the moderating role of digitalization in this relationship. Similarly, studies by Kim & Jin (2022) and Saragih et al. (2021) also did not directly examine the moderating effect of digitalization on the relationship between job autonomy and employee brand relationship quality, focusing instead on ideological and economic influences on journalistic autonomy and cynicism, and the impact of job crafting on employees' well-being during remote work, respectively. Job autonomy refers to the degree of freedom and independence employees have in making decisions and executing their tasks. In digitally advanced environments, employees may have greater flexibility and autonomy facilitated by digital tools and remote work arrangements. However, the lack of a significant moderation effect suggests that digitalization may not significantly alter the impact of job autonomy on EBRQ. This could

indicate that the influence of job autonomy on EBRQ remains relatively consistent across different levels of digitalization. Therefore, while digitalization may provide opportunities to enhance job autonomy through remote work arrangements and flexible scheduling, organizations should also focus on fostering a supportive work culture that empowers employees to make meaningful contributions and take ownership of their tasks. By promoting autonomy within defined boundaries and providing clear communication channels, organizations can cultivate a sense of empowerment and accountability among employees, ultimately enhancing EBRQ.

The hypothesis H4(b) suggested that digitalization would moderate the relationship between Competence (COMP) and EBRQ. This is evidenced by previous literature which provides insights into how digitalization can influence brand competence, which is a key aspect of employee competence, and subsequently affect brand relationship quality (Li et al., 2022). The analysis confirmed a statistically significant moderation effect, indicating that digitalization influences how competence among employees impacts EBRQ. In digitally advanced environments, employees may have access to various digital tools and resources that facilitate skill development and knowledge acquisition. The significant moderation effect suggests that the effectiveness of competence in enhancing EBRQ may vary depending on the level of digitalization within the organization. Hence, organizations should focus on fostering a culture of continuous learning and development. By providing opportunities for skill enhancement, feedback, and mentorship, organizations can empower employees to perform their roles effectively and contribute positively to EBRQ. Additionally, investments in digital learning technologies can further enhance the effectiveness of competence-building initiatives.

The hypothesis H4(c) proposed that digitalization would moderate the relationship between Relatedness (REL) and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). However, the analysis did not find a statistically significant moderation effect for this relationship. This study's finding, which indicates that digital enablement does not moderate the relationship between relatedness and employee brand relationship quality, aligns with prior research extensively investigating this relationship. Studies by Kaur et al. (2020) and Wei (2022) highlight the significance of relatedness in fostering affective commitment and organizational brand-building strategies, thereby influencing employee engagement, job satisfaction, and brand equity, yet without delving into the moderating effect of digital enablement. Similarly, Gong & Wang (2021) and Liu (2022) illuminated the effects of psychological brand contract breach and knowledge dissemination on employee-based brand equity and brand citizenship behaviour, without considering the role of digital enablement. Relatedness refers to employees' sense of connection and belongingness within the organization. In digitally advanced environments, digital communication tools and social platforms may facilitate interactions among employees, fostering a sense of camaraderie and community. However, the lack of a significant moderation effect suggests that digitalization may not significantly alter the relationship between relatedness and EBRQ. This implies that employees' sense of belongingness remains influential in shaping their brand relationships regardless of digitalization levels. Hence, while digital platforms can facilitate connections among employees, organizations should also focus on fostering a supportive and inclusive work culture. By promoting teamwork, collaboration, and open communication, organizations can strengthen employees' sense of relatedness and enhance EBRQ.

5.4 Contribution of the Study

This study makes significant contributions to the existing body of literature by addressing critical gaps in understanding Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) within the service sector, particularly in higher education institutions (HEIs) in developing countries such as Pakistan. While previous research has primarily focused on customer-centric branding strategies, this study shifts the emphasis to the employee perspective, which remains an underexplored area in branding literature. By examining the factors influencing EBRQ, this research highlights the essential role of employees as internal stakeholders in shaping institutional brand perceptions and engagement.

The theoretical contribution of this study lies in the integration of Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to explain the dynamics of internal brand management, intrinsic motivation, digital enablement, and employee brand relationships in Pakistan's HEIs (Blau, 1964; Deci & Ryan, 1985). SET provides a foundation for understanding how reciprocal relationships between employees and organizations influence brand commitment, emphasizing trust, reciprocity, and mutual benefit (Emerson, 1976). SDT, on the other hand, offers insights into the role of intrinsic motivation by emphasizing autonomy, competence, and relatedness as key drivers of employee engagement and brand commitment (Deci & Ryan, 1985). The integration of these theories contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how employees form relationships with their institutional brand, thereby offering a robust theoretical framework that explains both psychological and organizational factors influencing EBRQ. This theoretical synthesis not only advances academic discourse but also provides practical insights for internal branding strategies, particularly in the higher education sector of Pakistan.

Beyond its theoretical contributions, this study also addresses a significant conceptual gap in the literature by providing a comprehensive framework that integrates internal brand management, intrinsic motivation, and digital enablement as key antecedents of EBRQ. While previous research has examined these variables in isolation, this study empirically validates their combined effect on employee-brand relationships. Specifically, this study identifies and evaluates the impact of training, communication, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness on EBRQ, providing empirical evidence of their significance. The findings indicate that effective communication, training, and leadership practices positively influence employees' emotional connections with their institution's brand (Johnson et al., 2020). Furthermore, intrinsic motivation factors such as job autonomy, competence, and relatedness play a crucial role in shaping employees' engagement with the brand, reinforcing the necessity of considering psychological drivers when formulating internal brand management strategies (Akosile & Ekemen, 2022).

Additionally, this study makes a unique contribution by examining the moderating role of digital enablement in the relationship between internal brand management, intrinsic motivation, and EBRQ. With the increasing digital transformation in organizations, it is essential to understand how digital tools and platforms enhance or alter employee engagement with the brand. The findings reveal that digital enablement strengthens the impact of internal brand management practices and intrinsic motivation factors on EBRQ, underscoring the importance of leveraging digital technologies to foster deeper brand connections among employees (Li, 2018). This contribution is particularly relevant for HEIs in Pakistan, where digital integration in brand management has been relatively underexplored.

Moreover, this study contributes to the literature by bridging the contextual gap in existing research. Most prior studies on branding and employee engagement have been conducted in Western contexts or corporate settings, leaving a significant gap in understanding how these concepts apply to higher education institutions in developing countries (Hinduja et al., 2023). This research, by focusing on Pakistani HEIs, provides a context-specific analysis that accounts for the unique cultural, institutional, and environmental factors influencing internal brand management and employee engagement. By doing so, it enhances the applicability and generalizability of existing branding theories to non-Western educational contexts, ensuring that the findings can inform branding strategies specifically tailored to HEIs in Pakistan (Murtaza & Hui, 2021).

From a methodological perspective, this study makes a notable contribution by employing Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4.0 for data analysis. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive examination of complex relationships between variables, ensuring robustness in empirical findings. By adopting a quantitative research approach, this study enhances the validity, reliability, and generalizability of its findings, offering a rigorous model for future researchers exploring employee brand relationships in similar contexts.

The practical contributions of this study are particularly relevant for HEIs seeking to strengthen their internal branding strategies. The findings highlight the critical roles of training, communication, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering positive employee-brand relationships. This knowledge enables HEI administrators, brand managers, and policymakers to develop targeted strategies that enhance employee engagement with institutional brands. By leveraging digital enablement,

institutions can create more interactive and personalized brand experiences for employees, fostering stronger brand commitment and advocacy (Ahmed & Hashim, 2022). Furthermore, the study's findings emphasize the importance of recognizing employees as brand ambassadors, an aspect that has traditionally been overlooked in branding research (Baca & Reshidi, 2024).

Finally, this study provides a foundation for future research by identifying critical areas that require further exploration. Given the evolving nature of digital enablement, future studies can investigate emerging technologies such as AI-driven internal branding initiatives and virtual employee engagement platforms. Additionally, comparative studies between different countries and industries can offer a broader perspective on the generalizability of the findings. By addressing both theoretical and practical dimensions of employee-brand relationships, this study paves the way for further scholarly inquiry and practical advancements in internal branding, particularly within the higher education sector.

5.5 Study Implications

The findings of this study hold several implications for both theory and practice in the field of employee-brand relationships in higher education institutions.

5.5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study adds to the body of knowledge by giving empirical data on the elements that affect the effectiveness of employee-brand relationships (EBRQ). In the context of higher education institutions, the study identified training, communication, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness as major predictors of EBRQ.

By revising the definition of brand relationship quality from the customer-centric perspective of Fournier (1998) to the employee's viewpoint, this study contributes to the ongoing conceptual refinement in branding literature. It emphasizes the multidimensionality of brand relationships and acknowledges the role of employees as active participants in brand building and promotion (Kumar, 2020).

The investigation of internal brand management activities, such as leadership, communication, and training, provides valuable insights into the organizational dynamics shaping employee perceptions and behaviours. Understanding these internal processes sheds light on how organizations operate internally and how they shape the culture and identity within higher education institutions, which is the specific context of this study. By examining these dynamics, the study contributes to theoretical discussions on organizational behaviour, culture, and identity formation (Yakimova et al., 2017; Buil et al., 2016).

By highlighting the significance of intrinsic motivation factors, including autonomy, competence, and relatedness, this study enriches theoretical frameworks of employee motivation and engagement. Drawing from self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and the work on psychological needs satisfaction (Gagné & Deci, 2005), it underscores the importance of fostering environments that nurture employee well-being and fulfilment.

The investigation of digital enablement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic contributes to the evolving literature on digital transformation and organizational resilience. Insights into the adoption of digital technologies for remote collaboration, learning, and brand management inform theoretical discussions on the intersection of technology, organizational change, and crisis management (Gupta et al., 2021; Henfridsson et al., 2020).

5.5.2 Practical Implications

Organisations in the higher education industry can use the study's results to create focused employee brand relationship enhancement strategies. Institutions can create a productive workplace that strengthens bonds between employees and the institutional brand by emphasising training, communication, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The findings highlight the importance of investing in leadership development programs that cultivate effective communication, mentorship, and visionary leadership styles. By empowering leaders to inspire trust, foster innovation, and promote a shared organizational vision, institutions can enhance employee morale and commitment (Haseeb et al., 2021).

This research highlights the strategic value of implementing employee engagement strategies that prioritize intrinsic motivation factors. By fostering a culture of autonomy, mastery, and belonging, organizations can foster greater employee satisfaction, creativity, and loyalty, leading to improved organizational outcomes (Bukhatir et al., 2023). The study emphasises the value of leveraging digital enablement in promoting employee-brand relationships. Higher education institutions can investigate cutting-edge digital technologies and platforms to empower employees, promote their active engagement, and develop unique brand experiences. Organisations can improve internal branding campaigns and synchronise staff members with the institutional brand by embracing digital technologies. Institutions are encouraged to embrace digital integration strategies that facilitate seamless collaboration, knowledge sharing, and brand promotion. By investing in digital infrastructure, training, and support mechanisms, organizations can adapt to evolving educational paradigms and enhance their competitive positioning in a digital-first landscape (Graetz, 2020). The study emphasizes the importance of effective change management practices in navigating digital

transformations and organizational transitions. By fostering a culture of agility, adaptability, and continuous learning, institutions can mitigate resistance to change and drive successful implementation of digital initiatives (GOVL & PPM&E, 2022).

Moreover, increasing employee-brand relationship can have significant impacts on employee engagement and organisational effectiveness. Engaged staff members who feel strongly about the brand are more inclined to act positively, support the organisation, and add to its success. This in turn may have a favourable effect on enrolment numbers, student satisfaction, and the reputation of the institution as a whole.

The findings of this study have important significance for higher education institutions looking to improve their interactions with their employee brands and overall organisational effectiveness. Recognising the moderating impact of digital enablement also emphasises the significance of utilising digital tools to strengthen employee-brand interactions.

5.6 Managerial Implications

Based on the theoretical and practical implications outlined in this thesis, stakeholders within higher education institutions, as well as organizational leaders and decision-makers across various industries, are encouraged to consider the following recommendations:

Firstly, the pivotal role of employees as brand ambassadors and active participants in shaping organizational identity and culture should be recognized. Initiatives that prioritize stakeholder engagement, internal branding, and fostering a sense of belonging among employees should be invested in. By aligning organizational goals with the needs and

motivations of stakeholders, stronger brand relationships can be cultivated, and sustainable growth can be driven.

Secondly, leadership plays a crucial role in shaping organizational culture, fostering innovation, and driving employee engagement. Investment in leadership development programs that equip leaders with the skills and competencies needed to inspire trust, communicate effectively, and navigate change is advisable. By nurturing visionary and empathetic leaders, a conducive environment for employee growth, creativity, and organizational success can be created.

Thirdly, opportunities for autonomy, skill development, and mastery can be provided to empower employees. A culture of experimentation, learning, and continuous improvement where employees feel empowered to take ownership of their work and contribute meaningfully to organizational goals can be encouraged. Fostering a sense of autonomy and mastery can enhance employee motivation, creativity, and overall job satisfaction.

Fourthly, organizations can embrace digital integration strategies that facilitate collaboration, innovation, and brand promotion in today's digital age. Investment in digital infrastructure, providing training and support for digital tools and platforms, and fostering a culture of digital literacy and innovation should be considered. Harnessing the power of technology can streamline operations, enhance customer experiences, and keep organizations competitive in a rapidly evolving landscape.

Finally, successful implementation of digital initiatives and organizational transformations requires effective change management practices. Strategies that foster agility, adaptability, and continuous learning among employees can be prioritized. This

includes clear communication of change objectives, stakeholder engagement initiatives, and capacity-building efforts to address resistance and foster a culture of innovation. Embracing change as a constant and empowering employee to embrace new ways of working can drive successful digital transformations and achieve strategic objectives.

5.7 Study Limitations

While this study offers valuable insights into employee-brand relationships in higher education institutions, it is important to acknowledge several limitations that were beyond the researcher's control and may have influenced the study outcomes.

Firstly, the study was conducted during a period marked by the COVID-19 pandemic, which introduced unforeseen challenges and restrictions. The pandemic significantly impacted data collection efforts, as movement restrictions and safety concerns hindered the researcher's ability to conduct face-to-face interviews or gather data through traditional means. This limitation may have affected the depth and scope of the data collected, potentially limiting the study's comprehensiveness.

Secondly, the instability of internet infrastructure in certain regions posed challenges to online data collection methods. In areas with poor internet connectivity or unreliable infrastructure, participants may have faced difficulties accessing or completing the online questionnaire, leading to potential biases or incomplete responses. These limitations in internet accessibility may have affected the representativeness of the sample and introduced uncertainties in the data analysis process.

Thirdly, the study's reliance on self-reported data through questionnaires introduces inherent limitations, such as social desirability bias and response inaccuracies. Despite

efforts to mitigate these biases through anonymity and confidentiality assurances, the subjective nature of self-report measures may have influenced the validity and reliability of the findings.

Lastly, while the study aimed to capture a diverse range of perspectives from participants within higher education institutions, factors such as institutional policies, organizational culture, and individual differences among participants may have influenced their responses. These contextual factors, although relevant to the study objectives, introduce complexities and nuances that may limit the generalizability of the findings to other settings or populations.

In conclusion, while every effort was made to conduct the study rigorously and ethically, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations imposed by external factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic and internet infrastructure instability. By recognizing these constraints, researchers can better interpret the study findings and identify avenues for future research that address these challenges more effectively.

5.8 Future Research Directions

While this study has provided valuable insights into the relationship between independent variables, employee brand relationship quality (EBRQ), and digital enablement within higher education institutions (HEIs), several avenues for future research remain that could further enhance our understanding of these dynamics.

One promising direction for future research is the exploration of longitudinal studies to establish causal relationships between the variables over time. This study's cross-sectional approach has provided an important snapshot of the employee-brand relationship in the

context of HEIs. However, longitudinal research could offer deeper insights into the evolving nature of these relationships. By observing how employee-brand dynamics change over time, researchers could uncover how shifts in organizational context, culture, or external factors influence employee perceptions and engagement with the brand (Farndale et al., 2020). Longitudinal studies would also allow for the investigation of how interventions, such as changes in internal branding strategies, impact employee brand relationship quality (EBRQ) over extended periods.

Additionally, future research could compare employee-brand dynamics across various organizational contexts and industries, providing a broader perspective on the factors that influence EBRQ. While this study focused on the higher education sector in Pakistan, the principles and findings could be applied to other sectors. Conducting such comparisons would not only highlight the contextual factors that shape employee-brand relationships in different industries but also identify best practices for managing brand engagement across diverse settings. For instance, comparing HEIs with corporate organizations, public sector institutions, or non-profits could yield valuable insights into how industry-specific factors, such as the nature of services provided, the competitive landscape, and organizational structure, influence employee-brand connections (Van Der Meer et al., 2021).

Another promising direction for future research is the integration of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies. While this study utilized a quantitative approach to assess relationships between the variables, qualitative research can offer a more nuanced understanding of the underlying processes that influence employee-brand relationships. Techniques such as in-depth interviews, focus groups, and ethnographic research can provide a deeper exploration of how employees perceive and experience their connection

with the brand on a personal and emotional level. These methods would allow for a better understanding of the motivational drivers behind employee brand relationship quality (EBRQ) and could uncover individual differences in how employees engage with organizational brands (Sotirofski, 2023). By combining quantitative data with qualitative insights, future studies could enrich our understanding of the mechanisms that underpin employee brand relationship quality, adding depth to the findings derived from statistical analyses.

Future research could also explore the impact of additional factors on the employee-brand relationship. Organizational culture, internal communication practices, leadership styles, and organizational support mechanisms could all play a significant role in shaping how employees engage with and perceive the brand. Investigating these factors in more detail could reveal new dimensions of employee-brand relationships and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the organizational dynamics that contribute to EBRQ. For instance, exploring how leadership communication and organizational values influence employee commitment to the brand would offer valuable practical implications for internal branding strategies (Li, 2018).

In terms of extending the scope beyond higher education institutions, future research could investigate employee-brand dynamics in other sectors, such as healthcare, retail, technology, and government organizations. In healthcare, for instance, the relationship between employees and the brand could be particularly relevant to patient care quality and employee satisfaction. Similarly, the technology sector, known for its rapid change and innovation, presents a unique opportunity to study how employees' emotional connections with the brand influence organizational agility and innovation. Exploring these areas would

not only broaden the applicability of the existing theoretical framework but also offer insights into how strong employee-brand relationships can enhance organizational success across different industries.

Lastly, future research could focus on the influence of digital transformation and technological advancements on employee-brand relationships. As organizations increasingly adopt digital platforms and tools to enhance internal communication and employee engagement, understanding how these technologies influence employee brand relationship quality becomes critical. Future studies could investigate how digital enablement shapes employees' emotional and psychological connections to the brand, and whether different forms of digital engagement (e.g., social media, mobile apps, virtual training platforms) lead to varying levels of employee engagement and brand connection across different organizational contexts.

In summary, while this study provides a solid foundation for understanding employee-brand relationships in the context of HEIs, future research should explore the evolving dynamics of these relationships over time, across different sectors, and in response to technological and organizational developments. By addressing these areas, future studies can offer a more comprehensive and multifaceted understanding of the factors that influence employee brand relationship quality in diverse organizational settings.

5.9 Conclusion

The importance of communication, training, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness in fostering positive Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) inside higher education institutions is clarified by this study's findings. Results show how important these elements are in encouraging employee engagement, loyalty, and brand resonance. The

discovery of digital enablement as a moderator deepens our understanding of employee-brand relations. This study adds to the body of knowledge by filling a significant research gap on employee-brand relationships in the higher education industry. The study's application highlights the significance of creating focused strategies to strengthen employee-brand connections and make use of digital technology for enhanced engagement. Even though this study offers insightful information, future research is suggested to investigate the dynamic nature of employee-brand relationship, cross-industry comparisons, and use of qualitative methods can be used to gain a deeper knowledge of the underlying mechanisms. Higher education institutions can develop stronger brand bonds with their employees and have more success in an environment that is getting more competitive through continuing research in this area.

This chapter presents a thorough understanding of the relationship between the dependent variable, Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ), and the independent variables, communication, training, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness, in the context of higher education institutions. Also, how digital enablement affected the relationship between communication, training, leadership, job autonomy, competence, relatedness and employee brand relationship quality (EBRQ) is also looked.

This quantitative study's objective was to determine how different independent variables affected Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) in the context of higher education. Understanding the variables that affect the quality of employee-brand connections becomes essential as the higher education sector faces rising competition for talent and reputation. Relationships between employee brands are essential for establishing organisational identity, encouraging employee commitment, and promoting successful

organisational results (Mittal et al., 2022). However, there hasn't been much research into the particular dynamics in higher education institutions, therefore this work is crucial to the subject.

Research findings revealed both supported and unsupported hypotheses. Research examined the intricate relationships between various Internal Brand Management (IBM) activities (Communication, Training, and Leadership), intrinsic motivation factors (Job Autonomy, Competence, and Relatedness), and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). The analysis unveiled several significant findings.

Firstly, concerning direct relationships, the results demonstrated that Communication (COM) significantly influences EBRQ, affirming H1(a). Similarly, Training (TRA) and Leadership (LEAD) also exhibited significant positive effects on EBRQ, providing support for H1(b) and H1(c) respectively. Moreover, the intrinsic motivation factors displayed significant influences on EBRQ. Job Autonomy (JA), Competence (COMP), and Relatedness (REL) all showcased significant relationships with EBRQ, corroborating H2(a), H2(b), and H2(c) respectively.

Furthermore, our analysis delved into the moderating effect of digitalization (DIG) on the relationships between Internal Brand Management (IBM) activities/ Intrinsic Motivation Factors and EBRQ. Research uncovered significant moderation effects for Communication (COM), Training (TRA), and Leadership (LEAD) with DIG, underscoring the pivotal role of digitalization in shaping these relationships. However, it's important to note that not all moderation effects reached statistical significance. For example, while DIG moderated the relationship between Job Autonomy (JA) and EBRQ, this effect did not meet

the threshold for significance, failing to support H4(a). Similarly, DIG moderation on the relationship between Relatedness (REL) and EBRQ was also not supported, as per H4(c).

These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms underlying employee-brand interactions, highlighting the importance of both organizational activities and individual motivational factors in shaping employee perceptions and relationships with the brand. According to these findings, communication, training, leadership, job autonomy, competence, and relatedness have a special role in developing strong employee-brand relationship inside higher education institutions.

This study makes a significant contribution to the existing body of literature by enhancing the understanding of employee-brand relationships within the higher education sector, an area that has received limited attention in previous research. By examining the influence of internal branding and intrinsic motivation on Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ), this study provides valuable insights into the factors that drive positive employee-brand interactions in higher education institutions (HEIs). Additionally, the study contributes to theoretical knowledge by exploring the moderating role of digital enablement in shaping the relationship between intrinsic motivation, internal branding, and EBRQ. Given the increasing digitalization of workplaces, understanding how digital enablement influences these relationships is crucial for fostering employee engagement and brand commitment. Through this investigation, the study offers both theoretical and practical implications for HEIs seeking to strengthen employee-brand relationships in an evolving digital landscape.

This study has limitations, despite its contributions. First of all, the cross-sectional nature of our study makes it difficult for us to determine causality. It would be helpful for

future longitudinal studies to confirm the directionality of associations and look at how they change over time (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Research findings have important applications for higher education institutions. Institutions can establish targeted initiatives to improve employee-brand connections by having a clear understanding of the factors that affect Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). Institutions may generate a pleasant work environment that encourages employee happiness, commitment, and engagement with the institutional brand by investing in training, leadership development, job autonomy, competence building, and developing a sense of relatedness (Mızrak, 2023). The need for institutions to use digital technology to promote employee-brand interactions is further highlighted by the recognition of the role of digital enablement as a moderator in the relationship between IBM activities/ Intrinsic Motivation Factors and EBRQ (Lee & Yang, 2018).

Future research can investigate a variety of directions to advance this field of study. The dynamic nature of employee-brand interactions and how they change over time would be shown by longitudinal studies. The comprehension of the distinctive elements impacting employee-brand connections in diverse situations would be improved by comparative studies across various higher education institutions and businesses. Additionally, qualitative research can offer in-depth perceptions and experiences of leaders and employees in developing and sustaining relationships with their employee brands (Nassaji, 2020).

As a result, this study contributes to understanding and enhancing the quality of relationships between employees and institutional brands within the higher education sector, particularly in Pakistan. By investigating factors such as internal brand management, intrinsic motivation, and digital enablement, this research seeks to provide actionable

insights for improving employee engagement, organizational culture, and ultimately, institutional performance. Furthermore, by focusing on Pakistan, a country facing unique challenges in its higher education system, this study offers context-specific recommendations that can be valuable for similar institutions globally, fostering sustainable brand development and enhancing overall educational quality.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A- Questionnaire

Employee Brand Relationship Quality in Pakistan Higher Education: The Role of Digital Enablement as the Moderator

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in a study investigating perceptions towards the relationship between individuals and their Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

Your participation is voluntary, and your responses will be kept strictly confidential. By completing the survey, you consent to the use of your responses for research purposes only.

Your decision to participate or not will not affect your relationship with any institution. If you have any questions, please contact at urooj22@ymail.com.

Thank you for considering participation.

Sincerely,

Urooj Ahmed

PhD Candidate,

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak

Instruction

Kindly tick (✓) at the appropriate column to indicate the extent of your agreement with each statement regarding the perception towards your relationship with your Higher Education Institution (HEI).

Note: (1) Strongly disagree; (2) Disagree; (3) Neither agree nor disagree; (4) Agree; (5) Strongly agree

Internal Brand Management Activities	SD	D	N	A	SA
1. The university communicates the corporate brand values to employees.	1	2	3	4	5
2. The university communicates brand values to my colleagues and me through internal mass communications, for example, newsletters, memos and brochures.	1	2	3	4	5
3. The university communicates brand values to me via informal channels (e.g., meetings, briefings, presentations, etc.).	1	2	3	4	5
4. The university delivers brand values through training activities.	1	2	3	4	5
5. The university's employees attend workshops to learn about the objectives and characteristics of the brand.	1	2	3	4	5
6. The university provides training activities which are related to brand value.	1	2	3	4	5
7. My supervisor communicates a clear and positive vision of the future.	1	2	3	4	5
8. My supervisor treats staff as individuals, supports and encourages their development.	1	2	3	4	5

9. My supervisor gives encouragement and recognition to staff.	1	2	3	4	5
10. My supervisor fosters trust, involvement and cooperation among team members.	1	2	3	4	5
11. My supervisor encourages thinking about problems in new ways and questions assumptions.	1	2	3	4	5
12. My supervisor is clear about his/her values and practices what he/she preaches.	1	2	3	4	5
13. My supervisor instils pride and respect in others and inspires me by being highly competent.	1	2	3	4	5
Intrinsic Motivation Factors	**SD**	**D**	**N**	**A**	**SA**
14. The tasks I have to do at work are in line with what I really want to do.	1	2	3	4	5
15. At work, I often feel like I have to follow other people's commands (R).	1	2	3	4	5
16. I feel like I can be myself at my job.	1	2	3	4	5
17. If I could choose, I would do things at work differently (R).	1	2	3	4	5
18. In my job, I feel forced to do things I do not want to do (R).	1	2	3	4	5
19. I feel free to do my job the way I think it could best be done.	1	2	3	4	5
20. I really master my tasks at my job	1	2	3	4	5
21. I don't really feel competent in my job (R)	1	2	3	4	5
22. I doubt whether I am able to execute my job properly (R)	1	2	3	4	5
23. I have the feeling that I can even accomplish the most difficult tasks at work	1	2	3	4	5
24. I am good at the things I do in my job.	1	2	3	4	5

25. I don't really feel connected with other people at my job (R).	1	2	3	4	5
26. At work, I feel part of a group.	1	2	3	4	5
27. I don't really mix with other people at my job (R).	1	2	3	4	5
28. At work, I can talk with people about things that really matter to me.	1	2	3	4	5
29. I often feel alone when I am with my colleagues (R).	1	2	3	4	5
30. Some people I work with are close friends of mine.	1	2	3	4	5
Digital Enablement	**SD**	**D**	**N**	**A**	**SA**
31. I find Digital technology system useful in my daily job at university/ Higher Education Institution.	1	2	3	4	5
32. Using Digital technology system increases my chances of achieving tasks that are important to my university/ HEI.	1	2	3	4	5
33. Using Digital technology system helps me accomplish university/ HEI tasks more quickly.	1	2	3	4	5
34. Using Digital technology system increases my productivity at university/ HEI.	1	2	3	4	5
35. Learning how to use Digital technology system is easy for me.	1	2	3	4	5
36. My interaction with Digital technology system is clear and understandable.	1	2	3	4	5
37. I find Digital technology system easy to use.	1	2	3	4	5
Employee Brand Relationship Quality	**SD**	**D**	**N**	**A**	**SA**
38. I am very committed to my relationship with the university.	1	2	3	4	5
39. I intend to maintain this relationship indefinitely.	1	2	3	4	5

40. The relationship that I have with the university deserves my maximum effort to maintain it.	1	2	3	4	5
41. I feel a strong sense of belonging with the university.	1	2	3	4	5
42. I feel happy when I am working at the university.	1	2	3	4	5
43. I never get bored working at the university.	1	2	3	4	5
44. I find myself always thinking about visiting the university every day.	1	2	3	4	5
45. I have warm feelings about the university	1	2	3	4	5
46. I like the university	1	2	3	4	5
47. I feel close to the university	1	2	3	4	5

Respondent Information				
Age	Below 35( )	36-45yrs ( )	46-55yrs ( )	Above 55 ( )
Gender	Male ( )	Female ( )		
Job Designation	Faculty ( )	Administrative Staff ( )	Support Staff ( )	Other ( )
Length of Service with Current Organization	Less than 1 year ( )	1-5 years ( )	6-10 years ( )	More than 10 years ( )
Name of HEIs	_____			

Appendix B: Journal Publications

Ahmed, U., Shakur, M. M. A., Hashim, S., & Ahmed, R. (2024). Digital Transformation and Employee Competence: The Impact of Internal Brand Engagement in Higher Education. International Journal of Academic Research in Economics and Management Sciences, 13(4), 706–717.

Ahmed, U., Shakur, M. M. A., Hashim, S., & Ahmed, R. (2024). The Impact of Training and Digital Enablement on Employee Competence and Brand Relationship Quality in Higher Education Institutions. International Journal of Academic Research in Business and Social Sciences, 14(7), 1562–1571.

Ahmed, U., & Hashim, S. (2022). Sustainable brand management: the role of internal brand management and intrinsic motivation in building employee's brand relationship quality towards organization's brand. *Sustainability*, 14(24), 16660

Appendix C: Conference Papers

Ahmed, U., & Hashim, S. (2019). I*nternal branding in Higher education institutions: A literature review.* Proceedings of the Borneo Business Research Colloquium 2019. Faculty of Economics and Business, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS)

Ahmed, U. A., & Hashim, S. (2021). *The impact of Internal Brand Management and Intrinsic Motivation on Employee Brand Relationship: A Conceptual Paper*. Proceedings of the 7th Asia Pacific Marketing and Management Conference (APMMC 2021): Current Issues in Management & Marketing

Muqtader, Zahra Zaidi and Mahani, Mohammad Abdu Shakur and Urooj, Ahmed (2023) *Waste Management for Sustainable Tourism in the Hotel Industry*. In: Borneo Business Research Conference (BBRC 2023), 23 August 2023, Raia Hotel Convention Centre, Kuching

Ahmed, U., & Abdu Shakur, M. (2024). *Digital transformation and employee competence: The impact of internal brand engagement in higher education*. Paper presented at the Faculty of Economics and Business Studies (FEBS) Conference, Hilton Hotel, Kuching, Malaysia.

Appendix D: Justification for deleted items

S.No.	Q.Code	Question	Justification to Delete	Expert 1 Endorsement	Expert 2 Endorsement	Expert 3 Endorsement
1	JA2	At work, I often feel like I have to follow other people's commands (R).	Redundant with JA5 and JA4, which cover similar aspects of autonomy and feeling forced.	Agreed. Removing this question minimizes redundancy while retaining sufficient coverage of the autonomy construct.	Concur. The overlap with other items makes it unnecessary.	Supported. This deletion ensures focus without losing essential information.
2	JA3	I feel like I can be myself at my job.	Less relevant to the core focus of job autonomy compared to other questions.	Supported. The remaining questions adequately capture the construct of job autonomy without this item.	Accepted, though it slightly narrows the perspective on personal expression at work.	Endorsed. The primary aspects of job autonomy are still well-covered.
3	JA4	If I could choose, I would do things at work differently (R).	Similar in meaning to JA5, which also addresses feelings of being forced in the job context.	Endorsed. Deleting this question reduces redundancy and keeps the focus sharp on the key aspects of job autonomy.	Agreed, but consider the nuance it adds regarding personal choice.	Supported. The deletion is justified to maintain a concise measure.
4	COMP 1	I really master my tasks at my job.	Similar content to COMP5, both addressing task mastery and competence.	Agreed. The deletion is reasonable as COMP5 sufficiently covers the aspect of task mastery.	Accepted. COMP5 captures the essence adequately.	Supported. This streamlines the measure without losing critical information.

5	COMP 4	I have the feeling that I can even accomplish the most difficult tasks at work.	Overlapping content with COMP5 and COMP3 regarding task competence and self-efficacy.	Supported. The remaining questions provide a comprehensive assessment of job competence without this item.	Agreed, though this item adds depth to the competency assessment.	Endorsed. The deletion simplifies the scale while retaining its robustness.
6	REL2	At work, I feel part of a group.	Similar content to REL6, both addressing feelings of belonging and connection at work.	Endorsed. This deletion helps streamline the questionnaire by removing redundancy while maintaining the construct of relatedness.	Accepted. However, REL2 has a broader implication of group inclusion.	Agreed. REL6 sufficiently captures the sense of belonging.
7	REL4	At work, I can talk with people about things that really matter to me.	Less central to the core concept of relatedness compared to other questions which more directly assess feelings of connection and support.	Agreed. Removing this item retains the overall measure's effectiveness in capturing relatedness without losing key insights.	Supported, though this item addresses deeper interpersonal connections.	Endorsed. The deletion maintains the integrity of the relatedness measure.
8	EBRQ 1	I get to learn new things from my job.	Redundant with other items that cover aspects of learning and growth at work.	Agreed. This deletion helps to avoid redundancy in measuring learning opportunities.	Concur. Other items sufficiently cover the concept of learning at work.	Supported. The questionnaire remains comprehensive without this item.

9	EBRQ 2	My job allows me to develop new skills.	Overlaps with other questions focusing on skill development and growth.	Supported. Deleting this item avoids redundancy and maintains focus on key areas.	Accepted. Other items can adequately capture skill development aspects.	Agreed. The remaining items provide a complete picture of skill development.
10	EBRQ 7	I have opportunities to grow professionally in my job.	Similar content to other questions addressing professional growth and opportunities.	Endorsed. This deletion streamlines the measure without losing important information.	Agreed, though this item offers a direct measure of growth opportunities.	Supported. The deletion ensures a concise measure while retaining key elements.

Expert Endorsement Summary for Deleted Questions

Expert 1: Agrees with the justifications, emphasizing that the deletions minimize redundancy and maintain the construct coverage.

Expert 2: Accepts the deletions, acknowledging that while some nuances might be lost, the remaining items are sufficient to cover the intended constructs.

Expert 3: Supports the deletions, agreeing that they help maintain focus and streamline the questionnaire without losing critical information or integrity of the constructs.

Appendix E: Expert Validation Panel

To ensure the validity of the research instrument, three distinguished experts in organizational psychology, higher education, and branding were consulted. Their insights were instrumental in refining the measurement model. The following provides details on their qualifications and expertise:

1. **Dr. Kamran Siddiqui**
    - **Affiliation:** College of Business Administration, Imam Abdulrahman Bin Faisal University, Saudi Arabia
    - **Expertise:** Marketing, Entrepreneurship, Brand Equity, Business Administration
    - **Relevant Publications:** Research on brand identity, digital branding strategies, and consumer behavior in corporate and academic settings
    - **Contribution to Validation:** Evaluated the branding and marketing dimensions of the study, ensuring that constructs align with contemporary brand management and digital branding theories.
2. **Dr. Syed Karamatullah Hussainy**
    - **Affiliation:** Professor & Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, Shaheed Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto University of Law, Pakistan
    - **Expertise:** Business Management, Marketing, Advertising, Higher Education Leadership
    - **Relevant Publications:** Extensive research on higher education policies, institutional branding, and faculty engagement

- **Contribution to Validation:** Reviewed the applicability of the research model within higher education institutions, ensuring its relevance to faculty and administrative staff in Pakistan's HEIs.

3. **Dr. Sana Arz Bhutto**
    - **Affiliation:** Assistant Professor, Iqra University, Pakistan
    - **Expertise:** Human Resource Management, Organizational Psychology, Employee Branding
    - **Relevant Publications:** Research on employee engagement, workplace motivation, and branding in organizations
    - **Contribution to Validation:** Provided insights on the psychological constructs in the measurement model, ensuring alignment with established theories in organizational psychology and human resource management.

The collective feedback from these experts was incorporated into the final research instrument, enhancing its theoretical and empirical robustness.