

Enhancing Employee Brand Relationships in Higher Education: The Moderating Role of Job Autonomy in Internal Brand Management

(Meningkatkan Hubungan Jenama Pekerja dalam Pendidikan Tinggi: Peranan Moderasi Autonomi Kerja dalam Pengurusan Jenama Dalam)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates how internal brand management (IBM) practices shape Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and whether job autonomy strengthens these relationships. Drawing upon Social Exchange Theory and Self-Determination Theory, the study tests the effects of communication, training, and leadership on EBRQ, with job autonomy as a moderator. Data were gathered from 372 employees in public and private HEIs in Pakistan and analysed using PLS-SEM. The results demonstrate that training and leadership significantly enhance EBRQ, whereas communication does not exert a significant direct effect. However, job autonomy strengthens the effects of communication, training, and leadership on EBRQ, confirming its role as an important contextual enabler. The findings indicate that IBM is most effective when employees are empowered through capability-building, value-driven leadership, and sufficient discretion to enact institutional brand values authentically. The study contributes to internal branding literature by showing the differentiated effects of IBM mechanisms and by positioning job autonomy as a boundary condition in employee-brand relationship formation. Practically, HEIs should move beyond communication-focused branding and adopt autonomy-supportive, development-oriented strategies to strengthen internal brand alignment and support SDG 4 and SDG 8.

Keywords: Internal brand management; employee brand relationship quality; job autonomy; higher education institutions; PLS-SEM.

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini meneliti bagaimana amalan pengurusan jenama dalaman (Internal Brand Management, IBM) mempengaruhi Kualiti Hubungan Jenama Pekerja (Employee Brand Relationship Quality, EBRQ) dalam Institusi Pengajian Tinggi (IPT), serta sama ada autonomi kerja mengukuhkan hubungan tersebut. Berpandukan Teori Pertukaran Sosial dan Teori Penentuan Kendiri, kajian ini menguji kesan komunikasi, latihan dan kepimpinan terhadap EBRQ, dengan autonomi kerja sebagai pemboleh ubah pemoderasi. Data dikumpulkan daripada 372 pekerja IPT awam dan swasta di Pakistan dan dianalisis menggunakan PLS-SEM. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa latihan dan kepimpinan memberi kesan positif yang signifikan terhadap EBRQ, manakala komunikasi tidak menunjukkan kesan langsung yang signifikan. Walau bagaimanapun, autonomi kerja mengukuhkan hubungan antara komunikasi, latihan dan kepimpinan dengan EBRQ, sekali gus menegaskan peranannya sebagai pemangkin kontekstual yang penting. Dapatan ini menunjukkan bahawa IBM lebih berkesan apabila pekerja disokong melalui pembangunan keupayaan, kepimpinan berasaskan nilai, dan kebebasan yang mencukupi untuk menghayati serta melaksanakan nilai jenama institusi secara autentik. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada literatur pengurusan jenama dalaman dengan menunjukkan kesan berbeza mekanisme IBM dan menempatkan autonomi kerja sebagai syarat sempadan dalam pembentukan hubungan pekerja jenama. Secara praktikal, IPT perlu mengamalkan strategi yang menyokong autonomi dan pembangunan bagi memperkukuh penajajaran jenama dalaman serta menyokong SDG 4 dan SDG 8.

Kata kunci: Pengurusan jenama dalaman; kualiti hubungan jenama pekerja; autonomi kerja; institusi pengajian tinggi; PLS-SEM.

INTRODUCTION

Internal Brand Management (IBM) has emerged as a strategic imperative for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) seeking to cultivate stronger employee engagement, organisational commitment, and alignment with institutional values. As competition intensifies in global higher education markets, institutions increasingly depend on their internal workforce to deliver distinctive, brand-consistent experiences that differentiate them from competing institutions (Gibbs 2018; Rutter et al. 2016). IBM encompasses structured internal practices, particularly communication, training, and leadership that enable employees to internalize institutional values and translate brand promises into consistent behaviours across daily academic

and administrative interactions (Keller 2023; Punjaisri & Wilson 2011). When effectively implemented, IBM positions employees as authentic brand ambassadors who enhance service quality, institutional credibility, and long-term sustainability (Boakye et al. 2022; Sujchaphong et al. 2020).

Although early branding research in higher education emphasized external-facing activities such as student recruitment, rankings, and public image, recent scholarship increasingly recognizes that internal processes significantly shape how employees interpret, enact, and sustain institutional brand values (Aaker 1996; Bruhn & Schäfer 2012; Judson et al. 2006). Effective internal brand management relies on practices specifically aimed at communicating, training, and leading employees to internalize and reflect the institution's brand values, promise, and identity, thereby distinguishing it from general management practices (Aaker 1996; Keller & Aaker 1998). These mechanisms (communication, training, and leadership) are not just general management practices but are designed to ensure employees align their behaviours with institutional brand values and identity.

Effective internal brand management is built upon three essential mechanisms. First, brand-oriented communication clarifies expectations and fosters shared understanding of the brand. Second, training equips employees with competencies and behavioural standards that directly reflect the brand promise and brand identity (Punjaisri & Wilson 2011). Third, transformational leadership inspires employees to internalize institutional values and champion the brand through their professional conduct (Carless et al. 2000; Mishra et al. 2014; Kim et al. 2018). Together, these mechanisms elevate Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ), conceptualized in this study as a global evaluative construct reflecting employees' trust, commitment, and emotional attachment to the institutional brand (Hashim et al. 2012). Higher EBRQ has been consistently linked to stronger engagement, improved service delivery, and increased employee advocacy (Wu et al. 2020; Boakye et al. 2022).

The importance of IBM is further explained through Social Exchange Theory (SET), which posits that employees respond positively when they perceive organisational support, clear communication, developmental training, and empowering leadership (Eisenberger et al. 1997). Such organisational investments signal fairness and reciprocity, motivating employees to reciprocate with loyalty, commitment, and brand-supportive behaviours. In this sense, communication, training, and leadership serve as exchange resources that foster high-quality employee–brand relationships, reinforcing trust, psychological security, and mutual obligation, all core components of SET-driven exchanges.

Parallel to IBM literature, organisational research identifies job autonomy as a key driver of employee motivation, authenticity, and performance (Ryan & Deci 2022). Job autonomy, defined as employees' discretion over work methods, pacing, and decision-making (Hackman & Oldham 1976), enables individuals to meaningfully interpret communication, apply brand-related training, and enact leadership direction in ways that resonate with their expertise and professional identity. Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), autonomy fulfils a fundamental psychological need that enhances intrinsic motivation, authenticity, value internalization, and brand-aligned behaviour (Ryan & Deci 2022; Van den Broeck et al. 2010). Within HEIs, autonomy is particularly salient because academic and administrative roles inherently involve self-directed decision-making in teaching, research, management, and student services. In the Pakistani higher education context, job autonomy is particularly relevant, as evidence from universities in Pakistan suggests that greater job autonomy is associated with stronger work engagement among faculty (Akram et al. 2013). Empirical evidence also demonstrates that higher autonomy strengthens innovation, identity expression, and emotional attachment to the institution (Huu 2023; Kim et al. 2018).

Despite the growing body of research on internal brand management and employee-related outcomes, several important theoretical and empirical gaps remain insufficiently addressed. First, prior studies have predominantly examined IBM mechanisms, such as communication, training, and leadership, as independent predictors of Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ), often assuming relatively uniform effects across contexts (Ahmed & Hashim 2022; Ahmed et al. 2026). However, recent higher education research suggests that these IBM dimensions may not contribute equally to EBRQ, as training and leadership may exert stronger effects than communication in shaping employee brand relationships (Ahmed et al. 2026). This highlights the need for a more differentiated understanding of which internal branding practices are most impactful within knowledge-intensive environments such as higher education.

Second, although EBRQ has been recognized as a critical outcome of internal branding, existing research has largely focused on its direct antecedents, with limited attention given to the boundary conditions that shape the strength and effectiveness of these relationships (Ahmed & Hashim 2022; Afshardoost et al. 2023). In particular, the role of job autonomy as a contextual enabler remains underexplored, despite strong theoretical grounding in Self-Determination Theory suggesting that autonomy is essential for the internalization of organisational values and the development of authentic, intrinsically motivated behaviours (Ryan & Deci 2020). Recent work in higher education has also highlighted the relevance of intrinsic motivation and autonomy-related mechanisms in strengthening brand relationship quality, yet further empirical investigation is needed to clarify how autonomy conditions the effectiveness of internal branding practices (Ahmed et al. 2025).

Third, the higher education sector presents a unique organisational context characterized by decentralized structures, professional autonomy, and strong disciplinary identities, yet much of the existing internal branding literature is derived from corporate or service-sector settings (Punjaisri & Wilson 2011; Piehler et al. 2022). As a result, there remains a lack of sector-specific empirical evidence explaining how internal branding practices operate within HEIs, where employees may interpret and enact brand values differently compared to more hierarchical organisational environments. This gap is

particularly important because recent studies in higher education marketing and branding emphasize that relationship quality and brand-related outcomes in HEIs are shaped by context-specific relational and engagement mechanisms (Song et al. 2023; Ahmed et al. 2026).

Addressing these gaps, the present study advances the literature by simultaneously examining the differentiated effects of communication, training, and leadership on EBRQ, while introducing job autonomy as a theoretically grounded moderating mechanism that strengthens the translation of internal brand management practices into meaningful employee–brand relationships. By integrating insights from Social Exchange Theory and Self-Determination Theory, this study provides a more contextually sensitive and theoretically enriched understanding of how HEIs can foster empowered, intrinsically motivated, and brand-aligned employees capable of sustaining long-term internal branding success.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section reviews relevant literature on internal brand management in higher education, focusing on its key mechanisms and outcomes

UNDERPINNING THEORIES

This study is supported by established theoretical perspectives, particularly Social Exchange Theory, to explain employee attitudes and brand-related behaviours.

INTERNAL BRAND MANAGEMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Internal Brand Management (IBM) has evolved into a strategic imperative for higher education institutions (HEIs) seeking to create cohesive organisational identities and sustain competitive advantage in increasingly globalized education markets. IBM refers to a coordinated set of internal processes designed to cultivate employees' understanding, commitment, and enactment of organisational brand values (Keller & Aaker 1998; Keller & Richey 2006). When effectively implemented, IBM enhances employees' attitudes, intrinsic motivation, and brand-supportive behaviours, which subsequently contribute to improved institutional performance, stronger student satisfaction, and enhanced brand reputation (Morgan and Hunt 1994; Wu et al. 2020).

IBM IN HEIS: SHIFTING FROM EXTERNAL TO INTERNAL BRANDING

Although branding practices in higher education have historically emphasized external activities such as student recruitment, rankings, and institutional image-building (Aaker 1996), recent scholarship underscores the importance of internal mechanisms as critical drivers of sustainable brand value. Without strong internal alignment, even well-designed external branding strategies risk inconsistency and credibility gaps (Judson et al. 2009). Several HEIs still lack structured systems to ensure that academic and administrative employees understand and embody institutional values, leading to fragmented brand experiences and weaker organisational identity (Ahmed & Hashim 2022; Judson et al. 2021).

Recent studies (2018–2024) emphasize that employees play a central role in delivering “lived brand experiences,” especially as universities increasingly adopt service-oriented and student-centric models (Kim et al. 2018; Boakye et al. 2022). Consequently, IBM has been reconceptualized as an integrated approach that cultivates trust, emotional attachment, role clarity, and brand commitment among employees, dimensions reflected in the Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) construct (Hashim et al. 2012). More recent research also supports this view, showing that internal brand management activities, including communication, training, and leadership, contribute to stronger employee–brand relationships by enhancing intrinsic motivation, emotional engagement, and alignment with organisational values (Ahmed & Hashim 2022; Ahmed et al. 2026). These studies reinforce that IBM mechanisms help employees internalize brand values, ultimately strengthening key relational outcomes such as trust, commitment, and advocacy toward the brand.

EMPLOYEE BRAND RELATIONSHIP QUALITY (EBRQ)

Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) refers to the strength of the emotional, cognitive, and behavioural connection between employees and the brand they represent. This concept, adapted from broader relationship quality and internal branding literature, refers to employees' brand-specific relationships, reflected in trust, emotional attachment, and commitment (Fournier 1998; Burmann & Zeplin 2005). Recent studies indicate that strong employee–brand relationships are important drivers of brand-supportive behaviours, including positive word-of-mouth, brand citizenship behaviour, and service performance, with implications for brand reputation and organisational outcomes (Mittal et al. 2022; Chhibber et al. 2025; Tong & Kang 2025). Prior research in service and higher education contexts has also demonstrated that brand relationship quality plays a central role in shaping relational outcomes, including brand loyalty, engagement, and behavioural intentions, thereby reinforcing its importance as a key mechanism in brand-based relationships (Hashim & Yasin 2012; 2017)

To avoid conceptual redundancy, EBRQ is treated in this study as a global evaluative construct reflecting employees' overall perception of their relationship with the organisational brand, rather than as separate independent dimensions. This

approach aligns with prior research that conceptualizes relationship quality as a holistic construct when the objective is to capture the strength of relational bonds in an integrated manner.

Internal Brand Management (IBM) mechanisms, particularly communication, training, and leadership, play a critical role in strengthening these relational dimensions. Brand communication enhances employees' understanding of brand values and expectations, thereby fostering trust and role clarity. Brand-related training equips employees with the knowledge and skills needed to enact the brand promise, which strengthens confidence and commitment. Leadership, especially when it is supportive and value-driven, encourages employees to identify with the brand and develop stronger emotional attachment. In this way, IBM mechanisms help employees internalize organisational brand values and translate them into stronger employee–brand relationships. Recent evidence also suggests that internal brand communication and leadership are important drivers of brand understanding and employee brand commitment (Afshardoost et al. 2023; Kim et al. 2018).

Moreover, studies highlight that brand-specific training plays an essential role in improving EBRQ by equipping employees with the knowledge and skills necessary to deliver brand-aligned services, thus reinforcing their emotional and cognitive attachment to the brand (Sujchaphong et al. 2020; Boakye et al. 2022). This connection is crucial for driving brand advocacy and long-term engagement.

CORE COMPONENTS OF INTERNAL BRAND MANAGEMENT

Afshardoost, Eshaghi, and Bowden (2023) found that internal brand communication and leadership are among the core IBM mechanisms that significantly predict brand understanding and employee brand commitment. Internal brand communication involves the systematic dissemination of brand values, institutional goals, and behavioural expectations through formal and informal channels. Effective communication ensures message clarity, reduces uncertainty, builds trust, and enhances employee role clarity (Ind & Coates 2013; Mishra et al. 2014). Recent studies highlight that communication quality significantly influences employees' brand knowledge, brand identification, and subsequent brand-consistent behaviours, specifically focusing on brand values, promise, and identity (King & Grace 2018; Piehler 2020). In HEIs, communication is crucial due to the diversity of academic roles, decentralized structures, and autonomy-driven work cultures, making consistent message delivery essential for aligning employees with institutional identity and values (Rutter et al. 2016).

Training serves as a mechanism for equipping employees with the skills, knowledge, and brand understanding necessary to deliver brand-aligned performance. Brand-oriented training enhances employees' role competence, service quality, and ability to translate institutional values into practice, ensuring that training is aligned with the brand's core identity and promise (Sujchaphong et al. 2020). Empirical evidence (2019–2024) demonstrates that effective training improves brand commitment, fosters passion and trust, and encourages proactive advocacy behaviours (Boakye et al. 2022; Khan & Fatma 2019). In HEIs, training is especially valuable in promoting consistent behaviour among academic and administrative staff who interact directly with students, stakeholders, and external partners, thereby strengthening the consistency of brand delivery across institutional touchpoints.

Leadership plays a pivotal role in shaping employees' perceptions of the brand and fostering an environment conducive to brand-supportive behaviours. Transformational and empowering leadership styles are particularly effective in shaping brand-aligned behaviours, as they enhance trust, motivation, and identification with institutional values, helping employees internalize and reflect the brand's promise and identity (Carless et al. 2000; Kim et al. 2018). Recent scholarship underscores that leaders who model institutional values produce stronger employee engagement, emotional attachment, and willingness to act as brand ambassadors (Baumgarth & Schmidt 2018; Islam et al. 2022). Within HEIs, where leaders influence academic culture and strategic direction, leadership becomes a critical determinant of the success of IBM initiatives (Vallaster & de Chernatony 2006).

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Effective internal communication plays a critical role in shaping employees' understanding of organisational goals, values, and expectations, which in turn fosters stronger connection and alignment with the institutional brand. Research shows that when organisations communicate transparently and consistently, employees perceive greater support, clarity, and engagement, which enhances their commitment and identification with the brand (Men & Stacks 2013; Welch 2011; Mishra et al. 2014). Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, positive communication exchanges create a cycle of trust and reciprocity, motivating employees to develop higher quality relationships with the brand (Blau 1964; Eisenberger et al. 1997).

In the context of internal branding, communication serves as a foundational mechanism through which employees develop brand knowledge, role clarity, and shared meaning regarding organisational values (Burmam & Zeplin 2005; King & Grace 2010). By enhancing employees' understanding of brand expectations, communication facilitates the internalization of brand values, which is essential for fostering stronger employee–brand relationships.

However, emerging evidence suggests that communication alone may not be sufficient to drive deeper relational outcomes unless supported by enabling conditions such as autonomy and leadership, particularly in complex and decentralized environments such as HEIs.

H₁ Communication positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ).

Training enhances employees' skills, knowledge, and competence to perform their roles in ways that reflect and reinforce organisational values. Prior studies have found that well-designed training programs increase employees' confidence, job satisfaction, and alignment with the organisational mission, which contributes to stronger engagement with internal brand initiatives (Salas et al. 2012; Saks & Haccoun 2016).

From the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, training satisfies employees' need for competence, which enhances intrinsic motivation and facilitates the internalization of organisational values (Ryan & Deci 2022). As employees become more capable and confident in enacting brand values, they are more likely to develop stronger emotional attachment, trust, and commitment toward the institutional brand.

H₂ Training positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ).

Leadership behaviours influence employees' perceptions of the work environment and the importance of organisational values, including the brand. Transformational and supportive leaders inspire, motivate, and model brand-aligned behaviours, which strengthens employees' emotional attachment and loyalty to the organisation (Bass & Riggio 2006; Burmann & Zeplin 2005).

Drawing on Social Exchange Theory, supportive and value-driven leadership fosters reciprocal relationships, whereby employees respond to leader support with increased commitment, loyalty, and identification with the organisational brand.

H₃ Leadership positively influences Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ).

JOB AUTONOMY AS A BOUNDARY CONDITION

Job autonomy is conceptualized as the degree of discretion employees possess in deciding how to perform their tasks, structure their schedules, and make work-related decisions (Hackman & Oldham 1976), and it is increasingly recognized as a critical contextual factor shaping employees' responses to organisational practices. In this study, job autonomy specifically refers to employees' perceived freedom in task execution, decision-making, and work methods, consistent with its conceptualization as a core dimension of work design rather than a broader psychological need construct.

Drawing upon Self-Determination Theory (SDT), autonomy is positioned as a fundamental psychological need that enhances intrinsic motivation, authentic engagement, and the internalization of organisational and brand-related values (Ryan & Deci 2022). Employees who perceive higher levels of autonomy are more likely to integrate brand values into their personal belief systems and display genuine brand-consistent behaviours. Furthermore, empirical studies increasingly show that autonomy magnifies the positive influence of leadership, communication, and training on employee attitudes and performance outcomes (Kim et al. 2018; Nguyen et al. 2022). Recent evidence also highlights the importance of job autonomy and leadership in shaping employee outcomes (Abdul Hamid et al. 2023). In line with this, autonomy is conceptualized as a boundary condition that strengthens the effectiveness of IBM mechanisms.

H₄ Job Autonomy moderates the relationship between Communication and EBRQ.

H₅ Job Autonomy moderates the relationship between Training and EBRQ.

H₆ Job Autonomy moderates the relationship between Leadership and EBRQ.

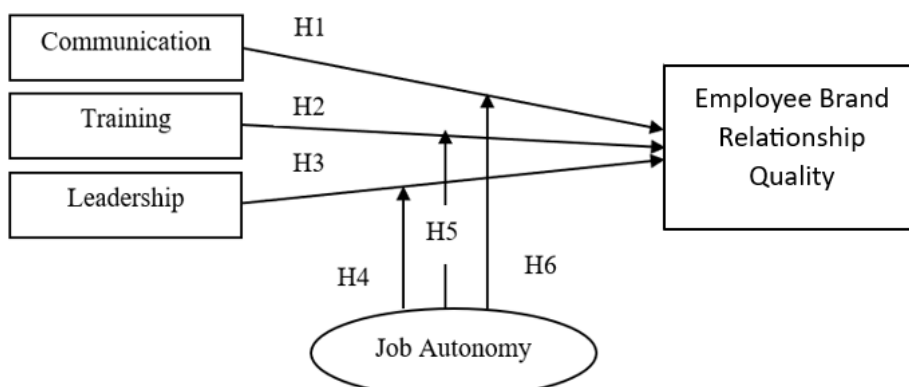


FIGURE 1. Conceptual framework

Figure 1 illustrates the proposed relationships, where communication, training, and leadership act as direct predictors of EBRQ, while job autonomy moderates these relationships.

METHODOLOGY

DESIGN AND RESPONDENTS

To empirically investigate the hypothesized relationships, this study adopted a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design targeting employees working in public and private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across Pakistan. A multi-stage stratified cluster sampling strategy was employed to ensure comprehensive representation of the higher education workforce. In the first stage, the population was stratified based on major geographic regions (Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and the Federal Territory). In the second stage, clusters were formed within each region based on the density and number of universities, ensuring proportional representation of HEIs. In the final stage, employees from diverse departments, including academic faculties, administrative units, and managerial sections, were randomly selected within each cluster to minimize sampling bias and enhance external validity.

Data were gathered using a self-administered questionnaire measured on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree), capturing respondents' perceptions of internal brand management (IBM) practices, job autonomy, and Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). A total of 372 valid responses were obtained, which exceeds the minimum sample size requirements for PLS-SEM and moderation analysis, thereby ensuring adequate statistical power. All constructs were operationalized using established and validated scales. In several cases, measurement items were adapted from more than one prior study to ensure adequate conceptual coverage of the construct and contextual relevance to higher education institutions.

Communication was assessed through three items adapted from Judson et al. (2006), O'Callaghan (2009), and Santos-Vijande et al. (2013), focusing on brand-aligned internal communication. Training was measured using three items adapted from Aurand et al. (2005), Punjaisri and Wilson (2011), and Chang (2012), reflecting brand-oriented training that supports employees' internalization and enactment of brand values. Leadership was evaluated through seven items based on Carless et al. (2000) transformational leadership framework, emphasizing leadership behaviours that support brand commitment and brand-aligned conduct. For transparency, the full measurement instrument, including all items and their respective sources, is provided in the appendix.

Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) was measured as an overall reflective construct using ten items adapted from Hashim et al. (2012). While the items draw conceptually on trust, passion, and commitment, they were treated in this study as indicators of a single overarching employee-brand relationship quality construct to capture employees' overall emotional and relational attachment to the institutional brand. Although EBRQ is conceptually associated with multidimensional components such as trust, commitment, and passion, the present study operationalizes it as a unidimensional reflective construct to capture employees' overall evaluative perception of their relationship with the institutional brand. This specification is appropriate given the study's objective of assessing the strength of the employee-brand relationship as a holistic psychological state rather than disentangling its individual dimensions. Although EBRQ may conceptually comprise multiple relational facets such as trust, commitment, and emotional attachment, the present study focuses on employees' overall relational evaluation of the institutional brand rather than the unique effects of individual dimensions. Given the strong conceptual overlap and empirical convergence among these dimensions, modelling EBRQ as a global unidimensional construct offers greater parsimony and aligns with the study's theoretical objective of examining overall employee-brand relationship quality within higher education institutions. This approach is also consistent with prior relationship quality research that conceptualizes relational strength as an integrated and holistic psychological state (Fournier 1998; Burmann & Zeplin 2005; Ahmed & Hashim 2022). Moreover, treating EBRQ as a multidimensional construct may create conceptual redundancy and multicollinearity concerns, as dimensions such as trust, satisfaction, and commitment frequently exhibit high intercorrelations and are often difficult to distinguish empirically within organizational contexts. In higher education institutions, employees tend to experience the institutional brand collectively rather than through isolated relational mechanisms, making a holistic evaluation more theoretically meaningful. Furthermore, separating EBRQ into multiple dimensions could shift the analytical emphasis toward dimension-specific effects and potentially obscure the broader relational climate that the study seeks to capture. Since the primary purpose of this research is to examine how internal brand management and digital enablement shape employees' overall psychological connection with the institutional brand, a global operationalization is considered more appropriate and theoretically coherent. Accordingly, modelling EBRQ as a unidimensional construct provides a parsimonious and theoretically defensible approach within the context of higher education institutions, where employees' relational experiences with the institutional brand are likely to be integrated rather than compartmentalized.

Job autonomy was measured using six items adapted from the autonomy dimension of the Work-Related Basic Need Satisfaction (W-BNS) scale developed by Van den Broeck et al. (2010). Consistent with the study's conceptual focus, only the autonomy-related items were retained, reflecting employees' perceived discretion in decision-making, scheduling, and task execution. The competence and relatedness dimensions of the original scale were excluded to maintain conceptual clarity and alignment with the study's theoretical framework. These items were further adapted to capture how job autonomy facilitates employees' ability to enact brand-consistent behaviours within the context of internal brand management.

Data analysis was conducted using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM), which facilitated the simultaneous evaluation of the measurement model assessing reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity,

and the structural model, which tested the direct relationships and the moderating influence of job autonomy. PLS-SEM was selected due to its suitability for prediction-oriented research, its robustness in handling complex models with interaction effects, and its ability to accommodate non-normal data distributions, which are common in behavioural research.

Furthermore, PLS-SEM is particularly appropriate for this study given its focus on examining moderating relationships and maximizing explained variance (R^2) in Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ), rather than theory confirmation alone.

The application of PLS-SEM was particularly appropriate given the study's exploratory nature, the inclusion of multiple latent constructs with numerous indicators, and the focus on examining complex moderating mechanisms within the higher education context. PLS-SEM allowed for a robust evaluation of how internal brand management (IBM) practices, specifically those aligned with brand values, interact with job autonomy to shape EBRQ.

TABLE 1. Respondent profile

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	Below 35	88	23.66%
	36-45	147	39.50%
	46-55	106	28.50%
	Above 55	31	8.33%
Gender	Male	261	70.16%
	Female	111	29.84%
Sector	Public	214	57.53%
	Private	158	42.47%

The information presented in Table 1 is a summary of the age, gender, and industry distribution of respondents. It provides frequency distribution and percentages for each category. The table reveals that the majority of respondents were male (70.16%), age 36-45 years old and employed in the public sector. The table provides a quick and easy way to assess the representativeness of the sample and contextualize the study participants.

ANALYSIS OF THE MEASUREMENT MODEL

The initial phase of the analysis focused on evaluating the measurement model to ensure that the constructs were reliable, valid, and appropriately represented the underlying theoretical dimensions. The measurement model was assessed in SmartPLS by examining indicator loadings, internal consistency reliability, convergent validity, and discriminant validity for the five core constructs: Communication, Training, Leadership, Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ), and Job Autonomy.

As shown in Table 2, the indicator loadings were satisfactory and ranged from 0.653 to 0.944. According to established guidelines, indicator loadings should exceed 0.70, although values above 0.50 are considered acceptable in exploratory research (Hair et al. 2019). During the initial assessment, LEAD7 and EBRQ1 were excluded due to insufficient outer loadings. After removing these items, all remaining indicators exceeded the recommended minimum threshold of 0.50, with most loadings above 0.70, indicating that the retained items adequately represented their respective constructs.

Internal consistency reliability was established through both Cronbach's alpha and composite reliability. As recommended by Hair et al. (2019), values above 0.70 indicate satisfactory reliability. In this study, Cronbach's alpha values ranged from 0.798 to 0.948, while composite reliability values ranged from 0.881 to 0.959, exceeding the recommended threshold, thereby reinforcing strong internal consistency reliability across all constructs.

Convergent validity was assessed using the Average Variance Extracted (AVE). A minimum AVE value of 0.50 indicates that a construct explains more than half of the variance of its indicators (Fornell & Larcker 1981; Hair et al. 2019). All constructs in this study exceeded this threshold, with AVE values ranging from 0.620 to 0.872, thereby reinforcing adequate convergent validity.

Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ) was operationalized as a unidimensional reflective construct representing employees' overall evaluation of their relationship with the institutional brand. Although the measurement items conceptually capture elements of trust, commitment, and emotional attachment, they were treated as indicators of a single latent construct to reflect a holistic perception of employee-brand relationship strength. This operationalization is consistent with prior research that conceptualizes relationship quality as a global construct when the objective is to capture an overall relational evaluation rather than distinct sub-dimensions (Fournier 1998; Burmann & Zeplin 2005; Ahmed & Hashim 2022).

The empirical results further support this specification. All retained EBRQ indicators demonstrated acceptable loadings and contributed to satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity, indicating that the items collectively represent a unified underlying construct. Moreover, the relatively high inter-item correlations and AVE value suggest that the dimensions of trust, commitment, and passion are strongly intertwined in this context, thereby justifying their aggregation into a single reflective construct. This is particularly relevant in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), where employees' professional identities and organisational roles often overlap, leading to an integrated experience of brand relationships rather than clearly separable psychological dimensions.

The measurement model demonstrated satisfactory indicator reliability, internal consistency reliability, and convergent validity, thereby providing a sound basis for testing the structural model and moderation effects. Overall, these results provide robust empirical support for the adequacy of the measurement model and confirm that the constructs are both reliable

and valid for subsequent structural analysis. The EBRQ construct was operationalized as a unidimensional reflective construct; this study therefore provides a parsimonious yet robust approach to capturing overall employee–brand relationship quality. Similarly, Job Autonomy was operationalized to reflect employees’ discretion over task execution, timing, and work methods, which is particularly relevant in understanding how employees translate internal brand management practices into brand-consistent behaviour.

TABLE 2. Measurement model summary

Construct	Items	Loadings	CR	AVE
Communication (COM)	3	0.809–0.888	0.881	0.712
Training (TRA)	3	0.922–0.944	0.953	0.872
Leadership (LEAD)	6	0.844–0.922	0.959	0.795
Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ)	9	0.653–0.916	0.936	0.620
Job Autonomy (JA)	6	0.810–0.913	0.948	0.752

The measurement model demonstrated strong internal consistency, convergent validity, and discriminant validity, thereby providing confidence in the subsequent structural analysis. During the initial assessment, LEAD7 and EBRQ1 were removed due to low outer loadings. The remaining indicators were retained because they met the acceptable threshold and preserved the conceptual coverage of the constructs. Although some retained EBRQ items showed comparatively lower loadings than others, they remained above the minimum acceptable level and were theoretically relevant to capture employee brand relationship quality.

As advised by Hair et al. (2019), items should not be removed solely on statistical grounds when they represent important aspects of a theoretically grounded construct. Similarly, MacKenzie, Podsakoff, and Podsakoff (2011) caution that eliminating items with weaker loadings may compromise content validity and distort the conceptual domain. Retaining these items ensures that the construct remains conceptually comprehensive while maintaining adequate psychometric properties.

TABLE 3. HTMT

	COM	EBRQ	JA	LEAD	TRA
COM					
EBRQ	0.194				
JA	0.262	0.285			
LEAD	0.286	0.392	0.395		
TRA	0.268	0.457	0.365	0.368	

Discriminant validity was further assessed using the heterotrait–monotrait ratio (HTMT). The results showed that all HTMT values were below the recommended threshold of 0.90, thereby reinforcing satisfactory discriminant validity among the constructs. Notably, the highest HTMT value was 0.457, which is substantially lower than the recommended cutoff, indicating that Communication, Training, Leadership, Job Autonomy, and EBRQ are empirically distinct constructs. This finding provides strong evidence that the constructs capture conceptually distinct phenomena, thereby supporting the robustness of the measurement model. These results further support the distinctiveness of EBRQ as a global construct relative to other latent variables in the model.

Because the data were collected from a single source using a self-administered questionnaire, common method bias was assessed using the full collinearity approach in SmartPLS. The construct-level VIF values ranged from 1.115 to 1.285, all of which were below the recommended threshold of 3.3. This indicates that common method bias was unlikely to be a serious concern in the present study. In addition, procedural remedies such as assuring respondent anonymity and minimizing item ambiguity were implemented during data collection to further reduce the likelihood of common method bias

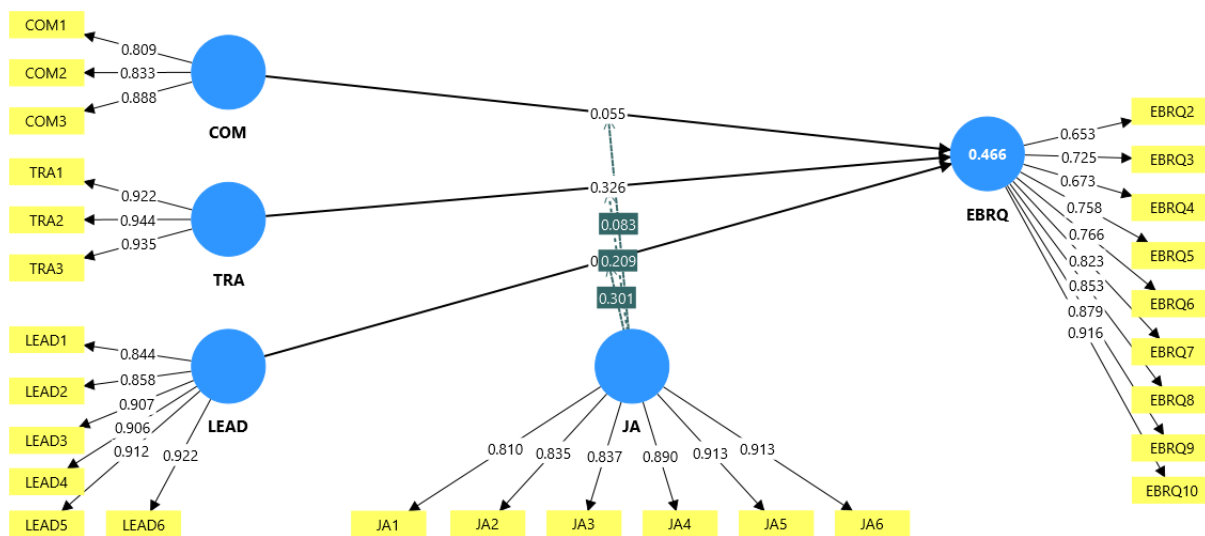


FIGURE 2. Structural model

STRUCTURAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS TESTING

The structural model was evaluated using PLS-SEM to examine the direct effects of Communication, Training, Leadership, and Job Autonomy on EBRQ, as well as the moderating role of Job Autonomy. The results indicated that Training had a significant positive effect on EBRQ ($\beta = 0.326$, $t = 7.316$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting H₂. Similarly, Leadership exerted a significant positive effect on EBRQ ($\beta = 0.284$, $t = 6.397$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H₃. In contrast, Communication did not have a significant direct effect on EBRQ ($\beta = 0.055$, $t = 1.400$, $p = 0.162$), and therefore H₁ was not supported. These findings suggest that communication alone may not be sufficient to directly influence employee–brand relationships without the presence of enabling conditions such as autonomy or supportive leadership.

With regard to the moderating effects, Job Autonomy significantly strengthened the relationship between Communication and EBRQ ($\beta = 0.083$, $t = 2.293$, $p = 0.022$), thus supporting H₄. Likewise, Job Autonomy positively moderates the relationship between Training and EBRQ ($\beta = 0.209$, $t = 5.599$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H₅. The moderating effect of Job Autonomy on the Leadership–EBRQ relationship was also significant and strongest among the interaction terms ($\beta = 0.301$, $t = 7.476$, $p < 0.001$), thereby supporting H₆. These results highlight the critical role of autonomy as a contextual enhancer that amplifies the effectiveness of internal brand management practices.

Overall, these findings highlight Training and Leadership as the strongest direct predictors of EBRQ, while Job Autonomy functions as a powerful amplifier that enhances the effectiveness of all internal brand management components. Consistent with Self-Determination Theory, employees who experience autonomy demonstrate higher intrinsic motivation, enabling them to translate institutional expectations into trust, commitment, and passion for the institutional brand.

TABLE 4. Structural model results and hypothesis testing

Hypothesis	Relationship	Standard Beta (β)	SE	t-value	p-value	Decision	VIF
H1	COM \rightarrow EBRQ	0.055	0.039	1.400	0.162	Not Supported	1.115
H2	TRA \rightarrow EBRQ	0.326	0.045	7.316	<0.001	Supported	1.233
H3	LEAD \rightarrow EBRQ	0.284	0.044	6.397	<0.001	Supported	1.285
H4	JA moderates COM \rightarrow EBRQ	0.083	0.036	2.293	0.022	Supported	1.172
H5	JA moderates TRA \rightarrow EBRQ	0.209	0.037	5.599	<0.001	Supported	1.181
H6	JA moderates LEAD \rightarrow EBRQ	0.301	0.040	7.476	<0.001	Supported	1.213

Note. COM = Communication; TRA = Training; LEAD = Leadership; JA = Job Autonomy; EBRQ = Employee Brand Relationship Quality; SE = Standard Error; VIF = Variance Inflation Factor.

MODEL QUALITY AND PREDICTIVE ASSESSMENT

The structural model further showed that the R² value for EBRQ was 0.466 and the adjusted R² was 0.455, indicating that Communication, Training, Leadership, Job Autonomy, and the interaction terms jointly explained approximately 46.6% of the variance in employee brand relationship quality. This level of explanatory power is considered moderate and acceptable in behavioural research contexts.

The effect size analysis indicated that Training had the strongest direct effect on EBRQ ($f^2 = 0.161$), followed by Leadership ($f^2 = 0.117$), whereas Communication had a negligible effect ($f^2 = 0.005$). The direct effect of Job Autonomy on EBRQ was also negligible ($f^2 = 0.013$). Regarding the interaction effects, the Job Autonomy \times Leadership interaction exhibited the strongest impact on EBRQ ($f^2 = 0.163$), followed by the Job Autonomy \times Training interaction ($f^2 = 0.068$), while the Job Autonomy \times Communication interaction remained negligible ($f^2 = 0.012$).

Predictive performance was evaluated using PLSpredict. The Q²predict values for the EBRQ indicators ranged from 0.142 to 0.387, confirming predictive relevance. In addition, the PLS-SEM model consistently outperformed the linear benchmark by generating lower RMSE and MAE values for all EBRQ indicators.

These findings indicate that the model demonstrates not only explanatory adequacy but also satisfactory out-of-sample predictive capability, further strengthening the robustness of the results.

DISCUSSION

This study makes a substantive contribution to the growing body of internal branding scholarship within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) by empirically demonstrating how Internal Brand Management (IBM) practices interact with job autonomy to shape Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). More specifically, the findings extend existing literature by moving beyond direct-effect models and highlighting the contingent nature of internal branding effectiveness within knowledge-intensive institutional contexts (Bettencourt & Brown 2020; King & So 2022).

First, the results highlight training and leadership as the most influential drivers of EBRQ. This aligns with recent studies suggesting that developmental and empowerment-oriented IBM practices significantly influence employees' brand identification, emotional attachment, and brand-supportive behaviour (Sujchaphong et al. 2020; Boakye et al. 2022; Punjaisri & Wilson 2021). Training equips employees with both cognitive clarity and behavioural confidence to embody brand promises, while leadership promotes a relational climate characterized by trust, authenticity, and psychological safety, which are critical conditions for fostering high-quality social exchange relationships (Islam et al. 2021; Saleem et al. 2023). From a Social Exchange Theory perspective, these practices can be interpreted as organisational investments that employees reciprocate through stronger commitment and brand-aligned behaviours. In HEIs, where autonomy and professional identity

are highly salient, leader–follower relationships play an essential role in shaping institutional commitment and brand alignment.

Second, the insignificant direct effect of communication on EBRQ provides an important theoretical refinement by challenging the long-standing assumption that communication is the cornerstone of IBM. While communication is foundational for transmitting institutional goals and expectations, HEIs are complex environments in which employees interpret messages through their disciplinary identities, academic norms, and personal values (Liu & Fang 2022). These findings suggest that communication may function as a necessary but insufficient condition for developing strong employee–brand relationships. Thus, communication alone may not trigger meaningful relational outcomes unless complemented by empowering structures, dialogic leadership, or employee involvement mechanisms (Men & Yue 2019). Recent research similarly notes that communication must be interactive, participatory, and contextualized to influence employee attitudes effectively in universities (Vera et al. 2023). Accordingly, the present findings contribute to the literature by repositioning communication as a supportive mechanism rather than a primary driver of EBRQ. This is consistent with recent findings that emphasize the role of internal brand management in fostering sustainable employee–brand relationships, particularly when supported by intrinsic motivation and enabling organisational systems (Ahmed & Hashim 2022).

Third, this study offers strong evidence that job autonomy serves as a pivotal contextual enhancer that strengthens the impact of IBM practices on EBRQ. Consistent with Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci 2020) and recent organisational branding research (Kim et al. 2018; Huu 2023; Chen & Lee 2021), autonomy appears to activate employees' intrinsic motivation, enabling them to adapt institutional guidelines and training content in ways that are meaningful, authentic, and aligned with their professional judgment. In line with SDT, autonomy facilitates the internalization of external organisational values, transforming them into self-endorsed beliefs and behaviours. In higher education, where academic discretion, pedagogical freedom, and self-regulation are integral, autonomy fosters the cognitive and emotional space required for employees to internalize brand values deeply. Importantly, the significant moderating effects observed in this study empirically validate the role of autonomy as a boundary condition, thereby addressing a key gap in prior internal branding research.

Finally, the results provide practical and strategic implications for HEIs. By integrating job autonomy into IBM strategies, institutions can enhance employees' capacity to translate branding initiatives into relational and behavioural outcomes. These findings suggest that internal branding efforts are most effective when embedded within autonomy-supportive organisational environments rather than implemented as standalone managerial practices. Autonomy-supportive cultures not only increase EBRQ but also promote creativity, service quality, and institutional loyalty, which are crucial for competitiveness in an evolving educational landscape (Pereira et al. 2022; Ahmed et al. 2024). Therefore, HEIs should move beyond traditional top-down branding approaches and adopt more participatory, empowerment-oriented strategies that enable employees to co-create and authentically enact institutional brand values.

CONCLUSION

This study advances the understanding of internal brand management (IBM) within higher education by demonstrating that communication, training, and leadership exert differentiated and non-uniform effects on Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ). The findings reveal that training and leadership function as primary drivers of employees' trust, commitment, and passion toward the institutional brand, underscoring the importance of capability development and relational leadership in the internal branding process. Conversely, communication alone does not significantly influence EBRQ, thereby challenging its traditionally assumed central role in internal branding frameworks and highlighting that information dissemination must be embedded within supportive structural and psychological conditions. This suggests that effective communication must be integrated with other brand-aligned practices, such as training and leadership, to drive meaningful brand engagement and alignment. This finding is consistent with prior research emphasizing the central role of brand relationship quality in mediating the effects of organisational and relational factors on key brand outcomes, particularly within service-based and higher education contexts (Hashim & Yasin 2012; 2017).

Importantly, the study identifies job autonomy as a critical enabling mechanism that strengthens the effectiveness of IBM practices. Autonomy not only enhances employees' ability to interpret and personalize brand information but also promotes the intrinsic motivation required for genuine brand internalization. From a Self-Determination Theory perspective, autonomy facilitates the transformation of externally communicated brand values into internally endorsed beliefs and behaviours. This emphasizes that internal branding does not operate effectively in rigid or highly controlled environments; rather, it thrives when employees have discretion, self-regulation, and opportunities for authentic engagement with the brand. In HEIs, where academic roles and administrative functions inherently involve high levels of autonomy, employees are better positioned to internalize and reflect brand values in their professional conduct.

Overall, the study contributes to contemporary internal branding and organisational behaviour literature by positioning autonomy as a contextual catalyst for translating managerial practices into meaningful employee–brand relationships. By integrating insights from Social Exchange Theory and Self-Determination Theory, the study provides a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of how internal branding operates within knowledge-intensive environments such as higher education. For HEIs, these insights underscore the necessity of fostering autonomy-supportive cultures to achieve sustainable internal brand alignment and stronger institutional identity. Future research should continue to explore additional boundary

conditions and mediating mechanisms to further unpack the complexity of employee–brand relationship formation in diverse organisational contexts.

IMPLICATIONS

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study makes several important theoretical contributions to the internal branding and organisational behaviour literature. First, it refines IBM theory by demonstrating that not all IBM components exert equal influence on EBRQ. While traditional IBM models consider communication, training, and leadership as parallel predictors, the current findings suggest that, in knowledge-intensive institutions, training and leadership emerge as the dominant drivers, while communication plays a more limited role in shaping employee–brand relationships. This reconceptualizes the relative importance of IBM mechanisms and calls for more context-sensitive and sector-specific theorization, particularly within HEIs.

Second, the integration of job autonomy as a moderating variable advances the internal branding discourse by highlighting the importance of contextual and psychological enablers. This responds to recent scholarly calls to examine boundary conditions that influence how employees internalize brand values (King & Grace 2020; Piehler et al. 2022). Job autonomy provides the flexibility needed for employees to engage authentically with brand values, and its role as a moderator offers a more nuanced understanding of when and how IBM practices are most effective.

Third, the study contributes to Self-Determination Theory by offering empirical evidence that autonomy enhances employees' capacity to internalize brand cues and translate them into intrinsic motivation and brand engagement. It also extends Social Exchange Theory, demonstrating that employees reciprocate developmental and relational IBM practices more strongly when institutions demonstrate trust through autonomy. Together, these findings provide an integrated theoretical perspective that links motivational and relational mechanisms to internal branding outcomes.

Finally, by conceptualizing EBRQ as a unidimensional global construct capturing overall employee–brand relationship quality, the study provides a parsimonious yet theoretically grounded approach for assessing internal branding effectiveness. This contributes to the literature by demonstrating that, in complex institutional contexts such as HEIs, employees may experience brand relationships as an integrated psychological state rather than as clearly separable dimensions.

MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study provide several important managerial insights for leaders and policymakers within Higher Education Institutions seeking to strengthen internal brand alignment and cultivate meaningful employee–brand relationships. A central implication concerns the need for HEIs to design and deliver developmental, value-driven training programmes that go beyond technical upskilling. Training should meaningfully integrate institutional values, brand meaning, and behavioural expectations, enabling employees to translate abstract branding concepts into daily practices. Experiential learning, reflective activities, and collaborative training formats can further deepen internalization and enhance employees' sense of connection to the institutional identity.

Equally important is the development of leadership practices that are transformational, participatory, and aligned with internal branding expectations. Leaders must actively model institutional values, communicate with clarity and authenticity, and create opportunities for employees to participate in decision-making. Investing in leadership development, particularly in areas such as relational transparency, communication competence, and brand advocacy, can foster an empowering climate where employees feel trusted, respected, and emotionally engaged with the institutional mission.

The results also underscore the importance of rethinking communication strategies within HEIs. Communication must move away from traditional, top-down, one-way dissemination and instead adopt dialogic, participatory approaches that promote shared meaning-making. By using interactive channels such as workshops, open forums, peer dialogue, and digital feedback platforms, institutions can foster greater employee understanding, reduce ambiguity, and enable staff members to actively co-construct and interpret brand messages.

In addition, the strong moderating role of job autonomy highlights the strategic value of cultivating autonomy-supportive work environments. Providing employees, both academic and administrative, with greater discretion in task execution, teaching methods, and problem-solving processes not only enhances intrinsic motivation and creativity but also strengthens employees' ability to authentically enact brand values. Such autonomy-supportive environments foster psychological ownership and deeper engagement with the institutional brand.

Finally, the study suggests that internal brand management must be embedded within broader institutional culture and HR systems rather than treated as a stand-alone initiative. Recruitment, onboarding, performance management, and recognition practices should consistently reflect and reinforce institutional values, emphasizing competency development, leadership support, and employee autonomy. When IBM practices are integrated into formal policies and everyday workplace routines, employees are more likely to perceive brand alignment as an authentic and enduring institutional priority. In line with recent studies, HEIs should also consider leveraging digital enablement to strengthen internal brand management processes and support employee engagement and brand relationship development (Ahmed et al. 2026; Ahmed et al. 2025) Collectively, these strategies enable HEIs to develop cohesive, empowered, and brand-aligned workforces

capable of sustaining long-term institutional identity and competitive advantage in an increasingly dynamic higher education landscape.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Despite offering meaningful theoretical and practical insights, this study is subject to several limitations, which provide valuable avenues for future research. First, the use of a cross-sectional survey design limits the ability to establish causality among the constructs. Although PLS-SEM is robust for predictive modelling, the temporal sequence of effects, particularly how communication, training, and leadership translate into strengthened employee–brand relationships over time, cannot be conclusively verified. Accordingly, future studies should adopt longitudinal or experimental research designs to better capture causal mechanisms and examine the dynamic evolution of employee brand-building behaviours (Ployhart & Vandenberg 2010).

Second, the sample was drawn from a single sector-specific context (higher education within Pakistan), which restricts the generalizability of the findings. Internal brand management (IBM) dynamics may differ across industries with varying levels of customer interaction, regulatory environments, and autonomy structures. Future research should extend this model across diverse industries and institutional contexts to assess its robustness and boundary conditions. Cross-cultural comparisons would be particularly valuable, as employee perceptions of autonomy, leadership, and brand expectations vary across collectivistic and individualistic cultures (Hofstede 2011).

Third, while Job Autonomy was modelled as a moderator, other boundary conditions may further explain variability in employee–brand relationship outcomes. For example, psychological empowerment, organisational climate, and digital communication systems may interact with IBM practices to strengthen or weaken their effectiveness. Future studies are encouraged to develop more comprehensive models by incorporating multiple moderators and mediators to capture the complexity of internal branding processes. For instance, serial mediation mechanisms (e.g., self-efficacy, role clarity, or psychological ownership) and additional moderators (e.g., workload, perceived organisational support) may provide deeper insights into the mechanisms underlying EBRQ formation (Spreitzer 2008).

Fourth, although this study incorporated multiple IBM elements, the measurement of EBRQ included several items with suboptimal factor loadings, even though supported by theoretical foundations. While these items were retained to preserve content validity, their relatively lower loadings suggest opportunities for scale refinement. Future research should consider refining the scale by conducting cognitive interviews, exploratory factor analysis, or cross-validating the EBRQ construct using alternative measurement frameworks such as employee brand endorsement, brand-based affect, and internal brand commitment (King & Grace 2010). Additionally, qualitative approaches, such as interviews or focus groups, may provide richer insights into how employees subjectively experience and interpret their relationships with organisational brands.

Lastly, this study relied on self-reported data, which may introduce common method bias (CMB), despite statistical checks indicating minimal impact. Although procedural and statistical remedies were applied, the possibility of residual bias cannot be entirely ruled out. Future research should incorporate multi-source data, such as supervisor ratings, customer outcomes, or objective performance indicators, to triangulate findings. The integration of behavioural or digital trace data (e.g., internal communication platforms or performance metrics) may further enhance measurement accuracy and reduce reliance on perceptual data.

Overall, addressing these limitations will enhance theoretical advancement and practical relevance in the fields of IBM, employee branding, and internal marketing. Future research adopting multi-method, multi-source, and longitudinal approaches will be particularly valuable in advancing a more comprehensive and dynamic understanding of how organisations foster strong employee–brand relationships across diverse contexts.

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APPENDIX A Questionnaire

Internal Brand Management (IBM)

Communication (*Adapted from Judson et al. 2006; O'Callaghan 2009; Santos-Vijande et al. 2013*)

COM1. The university communicates the corporate brand values to employees.

COM2. The university communicates brand values to my colleagues and me through internal mass communications (e.g., newsletters, memos, brochures).

COM3. The university communicates brand values to me via informal channels (e.g., meetings, briefings, presentations).

Training (*Adapted from Aurand et al. 2005; Punjaisri and Wilson 2011; Chang 2012*)

TR1. The university delivers brand values through training activities.

TR2. The university's employees attend workshops to learn about the objectives and characteristics of the brand.

TR3. The university provides training activities which are related to brand value.

Leadership (*Adapted from Carless, Wearing and Mann 2000*)

LEAD1. My supervisor communicates a clear and positive vision of the future.

LEAD2. My supervisor treats staff as individuals, supports and encourages their development.

LEAD3. My supervisor gives encouragement and recognition to staff.

LEAD4. My supervisor fosters trust, involvement, and cooperation among team members.

LEAD5. My supervisor encourages thinking about problems in new ways and questions assumptions.

LEAD6. My supervisor is clear about his/her values and practices what he/she preaches.

LEAD7. My supervisor instils pride and respect in others and inspires me by being highly competent.

Job Autonomy / Work-Related Basic Need Satisfaction (W-BNS)

(Adapted from Van den Broeck et al. 2010)

JA1. The tasks I have to do at work are in line with what I really want to do.

JA2. At work, I often feel like I have to follow other people's commands (R).

JA3. I feel like I can be myself at my job.

JA4. If I could choose, I would do things at work differently (R).

JA5. In my job, I feel forced to do things I do not want to do (R).

JA6. I feel free to do my job the way I think it could best be done.

Employee Brand Relationship Quality (EBRQ)

(Adapted from Hashim et al. 2012)

EBRQ1. I am very committed to my relationship with the university.

EBRQ2. I intend to maintain this relationship indefinitely.

EBRQ3. The relationship that I have with the university deserves my maximum effort to maintain it.

EBRQ4. I feel a strong sense of belonging with the university.

EBRQ5. I feel happy when I am working at the university.

EBRQ6. I never get bored working at the university.

EBRQ7. I find myself always thinking about visiting the university every day.

EBRQ8. I have warm feelings about the university.

EBRQ9. I like the university.

EBRQ10. I feel close to the university.