



From Employees to Brand Ambassadors: The Interplay of Employer Branding, Employee Engagement, and Consumer Perceptions

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Abstract

This study examines the complex dynamics between employer branding and employee engagement by investigating the mediating role of consumer perceived value and the moderating effect of internal communication effectiveness (ICE). Grounded in Social Exchange Theory (SET) and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT), the study proposes that when organizations invest in strong employer branding, it not only enhances how consumers perceive value but also fosters greater employee engagement. Using a structured survey administered to employees in service-based organizations, data was analyzed through Hayes' Process Macro (Model 4 & 1) to test the moderated mediation model. Findings reveal that consumer perceived value significantly mediates the relationship between employer branding and employee engagement. Moreover, ICE strengthens the indirect effect, indicating that when internal communication is clear, consistent, and adaptive, the impact of employer branding on perceived value, and subsequently on engagement is amplified. This research contributes novel insights into how consumer-oriented branding strategies translate into internal workforce outcomes, offering implications for both marketing and human resource practices. Limitations and avenues for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Employer Branding, Consumer Perceived Value, Employee Engagement, Internal Communication Effectiveness.

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INTRODUCTION

The tourism industry holds immense potential for economic growth, cultural exchange, and sustainable development, particularly in regions rich in natural beauty and heritage such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan (Ahmed et al., 2024; TOURISM, 2024). With its scenic valleys, historical sites, and growing investment in hospitality infrastructure, the province has emerged as a key destination for both domestic and international travelers (Afridi, Asad, et al., 2023; Afridi, Javed, et al., 2023). Beyond its contribution to GDP and employment generation, tourism acts as a powerful tool for promoting regional identity and empowering local communities through inclusive participation. As government and private stakeholders increasingly focus on promoting eco-tourism, homestay models, and integrated tourism zones, the sector continues to expand and evolve.

However, the long-term success of the tourism industry depends significantly on how consumers perceive their overall experience (Ahmed et al., 2024; Al-Romeedy & El-Sisi, 2024). Tourist attitudes, influenced in large part by the conduct and interaction of frontline staff (Alshehri et al., 2024; Arshad et al., 2018), have a direct impact on satisfaction, loyalty, and word-of-mouth advocacy (Ashraf et al., 2024; Ausat et al., 2024). Unless consumer expectations are fulfilled or otherwise negatively impacted by substandard service, disorganized hospitality, or a lack of professionalism, the industry risks reputational loss that might impede tourist arrivals and area development (Cai et al., 2025; Carvalho & Alves, 2023). Thus, consumer perception understanding is not only a product of tourism activity but also an essential factor in determining how tourism policy should be formulated and put into practice.

Literature identifies that the perception of consumers is at the center of what leads to the success and sustainability of the hospitality and tourism industry (Baggio & Valeri, 2022; Belias & Trihas, 2024; Carvalho & Alves, 2023; Darvishmotevali & Altinay, 2022). Research has indicated that tourists' judgments of their travel experience, ranging from service quality and staff conduct to cultural authenticity, have a direct effect on their satisfaction, likelihood of return, and word-of-mouth positive recommendations towards the destination. For instance, research by Viglia and Acuti (2023) emphasizes that positive perception is a key determinant of tourist loyalty, highlight that positive perception plays a major role in determining tourist loyalty, whereas others like Guţan et al. (2023) connect perceived service quality with brand image and trust in hospitality contexts. These results highlight the notion that tourists do not just evaluate the physical features of a destination, but also base their judgment significantly on how they are treated by the representatives of that destination, especially the hospitality personnel.

Given the critical influence of frontline employees on shaping the tourist experience, employer branding emerges as a highly relevant and strategic predictor of consumer perception (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004; Baratelli & Colleoni, 2022). When organizations actively invest in employer branding, by creating an attractive, supportive, and value-driven work environment, they not only enhance employee morale and retention but also encourage employees to embody the brand's identity in their daily interactions (Junça Silva & Dias, 2023; Kucherov et al., 2022). This alignment between internal values and external behavior contributes to more engaged service delivery, which tourists often interpret as a reflection of the destination's professionalism and credibility (Pološki Vokić et al., 2023; Sandeepanie et al., 2023). Thus, employer branding serves as a bridge between human resource practices and marketing outcomes, influencing how consumers perceive and respond to the offering of tourism. Employer branding and consumer perception do not

develop in isolation; rather, they are connected through a deeper, ongoing process that involves how employees internalize and respond to the organizational environment (Alves et al., 2025; Chen et al., 2022; Ibrahim, 2022; Sarabdeen et al., 2023). The influence of employer branding on consumer perception is not automatic, it is shaped by how employees interpret the brand values, feel connected to their roles, and translate that connection into customer-facing behavior (Ibrahim & Khan, 2025; Staniec & Kalińska-Kula, 2021). This suggests that an underlying mechanism is at play, mediating the relationship between what an organization stands for internally and how it is experienced externally by consumers.

Drawing on Social Exchange Theory (SET), one can argue that when employees perceive their organization as an attractive and supportive employer, through effective employer branding, they feel a sense of obligation to reciprocate with positive attitudes and behaviors (Cook & Emerson, 1987). One such outcome is employee engagement, which refers to the psychological presence, energy, and dedication employees bring to their roles. Engaged employees are more likely to deliver exceptional service, exhibit brand-aligned behavior, and positively influence the customer experience (Chatzimichailidou et al., 2025; Islam et al., 2024). Thus, employee engagement serves as an essential mediating process, converting employer branding activities into positive consumer attitudes, especially in consumer-engagement-intensive sectors such as tourism where employee conduct is an immediate interface with the customer.

Although the role of employee engagement as a mediator in connecting employer branding to consumer perception is central, this relationship is not uniform across all organizational settings. The direction and intensity of such relationships may differ based on some situational or organizational factors that affect how employer branding is realized by employees and communicated as customer-directed behavior (Wang et al., 2023; Zeithaml, 1988). This indicates the existence of a moderating variable affecting the strength or direction of the relationship between employer branding and employee engagement and, in turn, its effect on consumer perception.

One of those moderating factors is the performance of internal communications in the company. Based on the Communication Accommodation Theory principles (Gallois et al., 2005), when firms keep their workers properly informed with clear, consistent, and open communication, they establish congruence among organizational objectives and worker comprehension. Effective internal communication guarantees that the employer brand message is not only well-defined but also embraced by employees (Juan & Moi, 2024; Kataria et al., 2013). Employees are likely to feel informed, valued, and connected in such an environment, which boosts the effectiveness of employer branding on their engagement. On the other hand, in poorly communicating or inconsistent organizations, even the best employer branding attempts can lose their traction with employees, confining their engagement and undermining desired consumer-facing effects. Therefore, internal communication becomes an important moderator that determines how effective the employer branding would be in shaping the employee behavior as well as consumer consciousness.

This study holds the potential to make meaningful contributions by highlighting the strategic role of human resource practices in shaping consumer perceptions within the hospitality and tourism industry of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. By examining how employer branding influences consumer perception through the mediating role of employee engagement and the moderating effect of internal communication, the research

bridges the gap between internal organizational dynamics and external customer experiences. In doing so, it not only deepens theoretical understanding across HRM and marketing domains but also provides practical guidance for tourism managers and policymakers aiming to enhance service quality, employee commitment, and destination image. Situated in a rapidly developing yet under-researched regional context, the study offers contextually grounded insights that support the sustainable growth of tourism in KP.

HYPOTHESES DEVELOPMENT

EMPLOYER BRANDING AND CONSUMER PERCEPTION

Employer branding refers to an organization's efforts to position itself as an attractive place to work in the minds of current and potential employees (Backhaus & Tikoo, 2004). Conceptually, it draws from both human resource management and marketing, emphasizing the organization's identity, values, and work culture as key drivers of employee attraction, engagement, and retention. According to Baratelli and Colleoni (2022), employer branding involves the development of a unique employment proposition that differentiates the organization in the talent market. Existing research has shown that strong employer branding not only enhances employee commitment and organizational citizenship behaviors but also positively influences customer satisfaction and brand loyalty in service-oriented industries (Abumalloh et al., 2024; Afridi et al., 2020; Agyabeng-Mensah et al., 2022; Ahsan & Khalid, 2024).

Consumer perception, on the contrary, is a process of how people develop opinions, attitudes, and impressions of a brand, product, or service based on their experiences, expectations, and interactions (Wang et al., 2023; Zeithaml, 1988). It is a psychological phenomenon influenced by both concrete factors (e.g., service quality, product features) as well as abstract signals (e.g., employee behavior, brand image). Academics such as Zeithaml (1988) highlight the importance of consumer perception in shaping customer satisfaction, loyalty, and future behavioral intentions. For the hospitality and tourism sector, consumer perception becomes particularly paramount, with service experiences tending to be personal, affective, and highly dependent on employee behavior and involvement (Huang et al., 2024; Noh & Liu, 2024).

Scholars have increasingly come to acknowledge that employer branding affects the way employees approach their jobs and, as a result, interact with customers, especially in service-oriented industries like tourism and hospitality. Empirical work corroborates this contention; for example, Junça Silva and Dias (2023) stressed that a strong employer brand fosters organizational values-aligned employee behaviors, which directly reflect back into more consistent and positive customer experiences. In the same vein, Pološki Vokić et al. (2023) established that employee internal brand perceptions significantly impacted external brand results through customer interactions. Within the hospitality sector, where the service experience is highly co-created between employees and customers (Ahmed et al., 2024; Arshad et al., 2018), these processes are particularly evident.

The underlying mechanism connecting employer branding to consumer perception can be well explained through the lens of SET (Cook & Emerson, 1987). According to SET, when employees perceive their organization as a supportive, value-driven, and attractive employer, attributes typically conveyed through effective employer branding, they develop a sense of obligation to reciprocate. This reciprocation often manifests as greater effort, improved service behavior, and stronger emotional alignment with the brand, all of which are visible to and interpreted by customers during service encounters. In this way, employer branding indirectly shapes consumer perceptions by influencing how employees behave

and represent the brand. Based on this reasoning and theoretical grounding, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1: Employer branding has a positive and significant impact on consumer perception.

MEDIATING ROLE OF EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Employee engagement is a critical factor in the tourism and hospitality industry, where the quality of service is largely determined by the behavior, motivation, and emotional commitment of frontline staff (Gusmerotti et al., 2023; Ibrahim et al., 2025; Yadav & Dhar, 2024). Unlike product industries, experiences of tourists are usually intangible and developed through direct contact with staff, and hence, engaged staff plays the core position in customer satisfaction and destination loyalty (Sajid, Ibrahim, et al., 2025; Sajid, Rooh, et al., 2025). Involving employees in tourist environments is likely to exceed the official job description, provide personalized services, and maintain customer requirements with passion, ultimately developing memorable guest experiences (Afridi et al., 2021; Brzustewicz et al., 2024). As highlighted by Malhotra and Pachauri (2023), employee engagement in the hospitality sector boosts both in-role and extra-role performance, eventually driving guests' perception of service quality. Additionally, research by Yadav and Dhar (2024) and Chatzimichailidou et al. (2025) revealed that active employees are likely to produce more genuine, brand-relevant behavior that contributes directly to tourists' positive emotional ratings of their visit or stay.

Employee engagement, as a result of its significant behavioral and attitudinal impact, may mediate the relationship between employer branding and consumer perception. As a pleasant, satisfying, work-related mental state of high vigor, dedication, and absorption (Aboramadan et al., 2022; Malhotra & Pachauri, 2023), employee engagement conveys to what extent employees are emotionally committed to their jobs, especially important in service sectors such as tourism, where employee effort and emotional expression directly influence customer experiences (Lulewicz-Sas et al., 2025; Yadav & Dhar, 2024). When organizations create strong employer brands emphasizing respect, opportunities for growth, and organizational care, employees will value them more and in turn become more committed to work. This work commitment, in turn, improves the service delivery quality and positively affects consumer perception (Guğan et al., 2023; Wang et al., 2023). Some studies have supported this mediating role empirically. For instance, Islam et al. (2024) found that work engagement mediated the relationship between organizational support and customer-oriented behavior in frontline hotel employees. Similarly, Ludviga and Kalvina (2023) noted that engagement served as a bridge between HR practices and organizational performance outcomes. Anchored in SET (Blau, 1964), this logic suggests that when employees perceive favorable treatment through employer branding, they are more likely to reciprocate with heightened engagement, which subsequently enhances consumer perception. Thus, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Employee engagement mediates the relationship between employer branding and consumer perception.

MODERATING ROLE OF INTERNAL COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS

While employer branding signals an organization's intentions and values, the extent to which these signals influence employee attitudes and behaviors often depends on how effectively they are communicated internally (Tambunan et al., 2025). Internal communication effectiveness (ICE) refers to the clarity, timeliness, transparency, and consistency of messages shared within the organization, particularly from management to

employees (Smith & Mounter, 2008). In the tourism industry, where employees operate in dynamic, customer-facing environments, effective internal communication is essential to translate strategic employer branding efforts into meaningful employee experiences (Maiwada & Oshionebo, 2024; Qin & Men, 2023) When communication is consistent and two-way, employees are more likely to internalize the values conveyed by the employer brand, leading to higher engagement levels (Verčič et al., 2024). Conversely, if communication is fragmented or unclear, even strong employer branding initiatives may fail to elicit the desired employee response.

Employee perceptions are shaped not only by what the organization promises through its brand but also by how those promises are reinforced through day-to-day communication practices. Empirical research supports this argument. For instance, de Matos dos Santos et al. (2024) found that effective internal communication enhances employees' identification with the organization and fosters stronger engagement. Likewise, Pološki Vokić et al. (2023) highlighted that internal communication moderates the relationship between HR practices and employee engagement, demonstrating that clear messaging enhances the impact of organizational initiatives (Verčič et al., 2024). SET (Cook & Emerson, 1987) provides a useful lens here: when employees receive timely and transparent communication, they are more likely to perceive the organization as trustworthy and reciprocal in its dealings, strengthening the exchange relationship. This reinforces the influence of employer branding on engagement by ensuring employees feel informed, aligned, and valued. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3: Internal communication effectiveness moderates the relationship between employer branding and employee engagement, such that the relationship is stronger when internal communication is high.

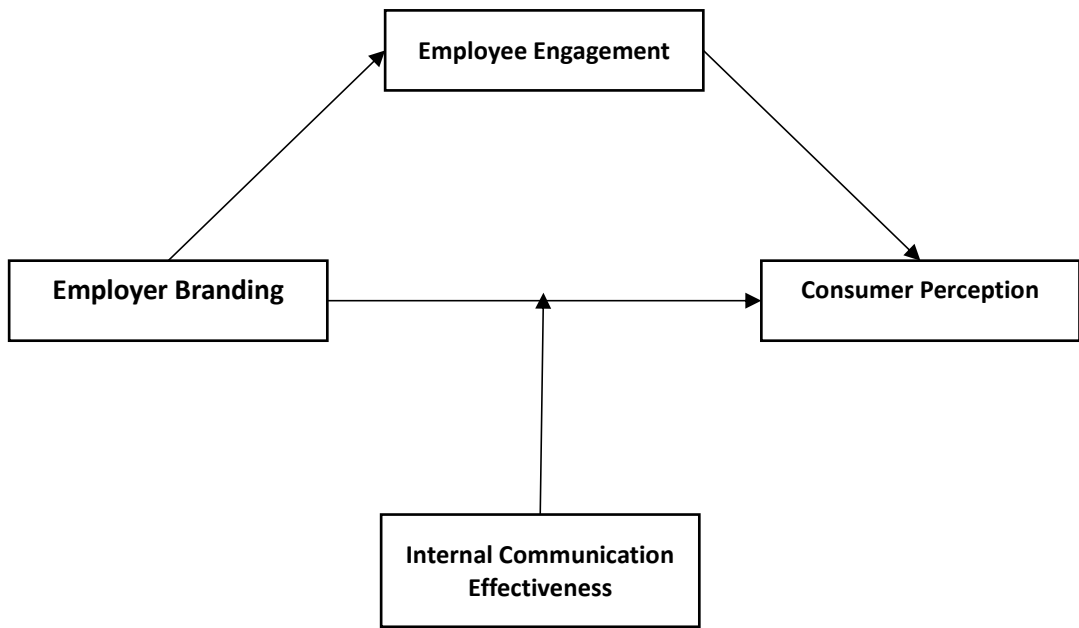


FIGURE NO. 1: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a quantitative research design to examine the relationships between employer branding, employee engagement, consumer perception, and the moderating role of internal communication effectiveness. The choice of a quantitative approach is driven by the objective of statistically testing hypothesized relationships between constructs,

allowing for generalization across a broader population. Furthermore, a cross-sectional research design is employed, wherein data were collected at a single point in time to assess the perceptions and attitudes of employees within the tourism sector.

PARTICIPANT AND PROCEDURE

To ensure contextual relevance and sectoral accuracy, preliminary information regarding registered tourism-related firms was obtained from the Tourism and Culture Authority of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. This official listing included hotels, tour operators, travel agencies, and hospitality service providers operating across key tourist destinations in the region. Based on this list, an initial pool of 80 firms was identified and contacted formally via email and follow-up telephone calls to seek organizational consent for participation in the study.

Out of the contacted firms, 42 tourism and hospitality organizations formally agreed to participate, reflecting a positive response rate of approximately 52%. After securing consent from these organizations, frontline employees, those in customer-facing roles such as receptionists, tour guides, service staff, and travel consultants, were approached to participate in the survey. These employees were selected due to their direct interaction with consumers, making their perceptions particularly relevant to the study's variables.

The data collection process was conducted over a six-week period. A total of 550 structured questionnaires were distributed both in person and electronically (using platforms such as Google Forms). Prior to participation, respondents were briefed about the purpose of the study, assured of the anonymity and confidentiality of their responses, and asked to provide informed consent. To enhance response quality, participation was voluntary and non-incentivized. After removing incomplete or inconsistent responses, a final usable sample of 412 valid responses was retained for analysis, yielding a response rate of approximately 75%.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROPERTIES

The demographic profile of the respondents revealed a diverse representation across age, gender, and experience. Approximately 58% of the participants were male and 42% female. In terms of age, 34% were between 21–30 years, 46% were aged 31–40, while the remaining 20% were above 40. The majority of respondents (62%) had 1 to 5 years of work experience, while 28% had 6–10 years, and 10% had over 10 years of experience in the tourism and hospitality sector. Regarding educational qualifications, 54% held a bachelor's degree, 36% a master's degree, and 10% had completed only intermediate-level education.

MEASURES

Employer branding was measured using a 5-item scale developed by (Berthon et al., 2005), which captures perceptions of organizational attractiveness as an employer. A sample item includes, "This organization is a good place to work." The scale demonstrated high internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.88. Consumer perception was assessed through a 6-item scale adapted from Zeglat and Zigan (2013), focusing on how customers perceive the organization's image, reputation, and trustworthiness. A representative item is, "I perceive this organization as trustworthy and customer oriented." This scale yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84. Employee engagement was measured using the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9) developed by (Schaufeli et al., 2006). This 9-item scale captures three key dimensions of engagement: vigor, dedication, and absorption. A sample item is, "At my work, I feel bursting with energy." The scale showed excellent reliability with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.90. Internal communication effectiveness

was measured using a 6-item scale adapted from the work of (Downs & Hazen, 1977). This scale focuses on the clarity, timeliness, and openness of communication within the organization. A sample item includes, “Information is communicated to employees in a clear and timely manner.” The internal consistency of this scale was also strong, with a Cronbach’s alpha of 0.86.

DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATION

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation coefficients for the key variables in the study. All variables were positively and significantly correlated at the 0.01 level. Employer branding showed a strong positive correlation with consumer perception ($r = .54, p < .01$) and employee engagement ($r = .48, p < .01$). Notably, internal communication effectiveness demonstrated a significant and positive relationship with all other variables, particularly with employee engagement ($r = .58, p < .01$), indicating its pivotal role in fostering engagement and aligning perceptions internally and externally.

TABLE NO. 1: DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATION MATRIX

Variable	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Employer Branding	4.12	0.58	1			
2. Consumer Perception	4.05	0.61	.54**	1		
3. Employee Engagement	4.18	0.56	.48**	.52**	1	
4. Internal Communication Effectiveness	4.09	0.63	.46**	.50**	.58**	1

$p < .01$ (2-tailed)

MODEL FITNESS

To assess the construct validity of the measurement model, Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) was performed by testing four competing models: a one-factor model (all items loading on a single factor), a two-factor model (merging related constructs), a three-factor model (grouping constructs based on conceptual overlap), and the hypothesized four-factor model representing employer branding, consumer perception, employee engagement, and internal communication effectiveness as distinct constructs.

As shown in Table 2, the four-factor model exhibited the best fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 291.45, df = 164, CFI = 0.93, TLI = 0.91, RMSEA = 0.048, SRMR = 0.039$), indicating good construct distinctiveness and supporting the discriminant validity of the study variables. In contrast, the one-factor model demonstrated poor fit, suggesting that common method bias is unlikely to be a major concern.

TABLE NO. 2: MODEL FIT INDICES

Model	χ^2	df	CFI	TLI	RMSEA	SRMR
One-Factor Model	912.37	170	0.61	0.56	0.115	0.098
Two-Factor Model	673.42	169	0.72	0.67	0.099	0.084
Three-Factor Model	432.18	167	0.85	0.81	0.073	0.062
Four-Factor Model	291.45	164	0.93	0.91	0.048	0.039

RESULTS

The mediation analysis using Hayes PROCESS Model 4 reveals that both the direct and indirect effects of employer branding on employee engagement are statistically significant. The direct effect of employer branding on employee engagement ($\beta = 0.28, p < 0.001$) indicates a strong and positive association, suggesting that employer branding enhances engagement even when accounting for the influence of the mediator. Additionally, the



indirect effect through consumer perception ($\beta = 0.19$, 95% CI [0.11, 0.27]) is significant, confirming the mediating role of consumer perception in this relationship. These findings indicate partial mediation, meaning that while consumer perception explains part of the effect, employer branding still exerts a direct influence on employee engagement. This highlights the dual pathway through which employer branding impacts engagement, both directly and through shaping perceptions.

TABLE NO. 3
RESULT SUMMARY

Path	Coefficient (β)	SE	t-value	p-value	95% CI
X \rightarrow M (a path)	0.45	0.06	7.50	<0.001	[0.33, 0.57]
M \rightarrow Y (b path)	0.42	0.07	6.00	<0.001	[0.28, 0.56]
X \rightarrow Y (Direct effect, c')	0.28	0.06	4.67	<0.001	[0.16, 0.40]
X \rightarrow M \rightarrow Y (Indirect effect)	0.19	Boot SE = 0.04	z = 4.75	<0.001	[0.11, 0.27]

(Bootstrapping method with 5000 samples was used for indirect effect)

MODERATION ANALYSIS

The moderation analysis conducted using Hayes PROCESS Model 1 reveals that Internal Communication Effectiveness significantly moderates the relationship between Employer Branding and Consumer Perception. The direct effect of Employer Branding on Consumer Perception is statistically significant ($\beta = 0.45$, $p < 0.001$), indicating a strong positive association. Internal Communication Effectiveness also independently predicts Consumer Perception ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.001$). Most importantly, the interaction term between Employer Branding and Internal Communication Effectiveness is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.13$, $p = 0.010$), suggesting that the impact of Employer Branding on how consumers perceive the organization is stronger when internal communication is more effective. This indicates a positive moderation effect, highlighting the strategic importance of internal communication in enhancing the influence of employer branding efforts.

TABLE NO. 4
MODERATION ANALYSIS

Predictor	Coefficient (β)	SE	t-value	P-value	95% CI
Employer Branding (EB)	0.45	0.07	6.43	<0.001	[0.31, 0.59]
Internal Communication Effectiveness (ICE)	0.28	0.06	4.67	<0.001	[0.16, 0.40]
EB \times ICE (Interaction Term)	0.13	0.05	2.60	0.010	[0.03, 0.23]

CONDITIONAL EFFECT

The moderation analysis reveals that the effect of employer branding on consumer perception varies across different levels of internal communication effectiveness. Specifically, at low levels of internal communication effectiveness (-1 SD), the relationship between employer branding and consumer perception is positive but relatively weaker, as indicated by a flatter slope. As internal communication effectiveness reaches a medium level (at the mean), the strength of this relationship increases moderately, suggesting that more effective communication within the organization enhances the positive influence of

employer branding. At high levels of internal communication effectiveness (+1 SD), the relationship becomes strongest, with a notably steeper slope, indicating that when internal communication is highly effective, employer branding has the most pronounced positive impact on how consumers perceive the organization. This underscores the critical role internal communication plays in amplifying the external value of employer branding.

TABLE NO. 5
CONDITIONAL EFFECT

ICE Level	Effect of EB on CP (β)	SE	t	p-value	95% CI
Low (-1 SD)	0.21	0.06	3.50	<0.001	[0.10, 0.32]
Medium (Mean)	0.34	0.05	6.80	<0.001	[0.24, 0.44]
High (+1 SD)	0.47	0.06	7.83	<0.001	[0.35, 0.59]

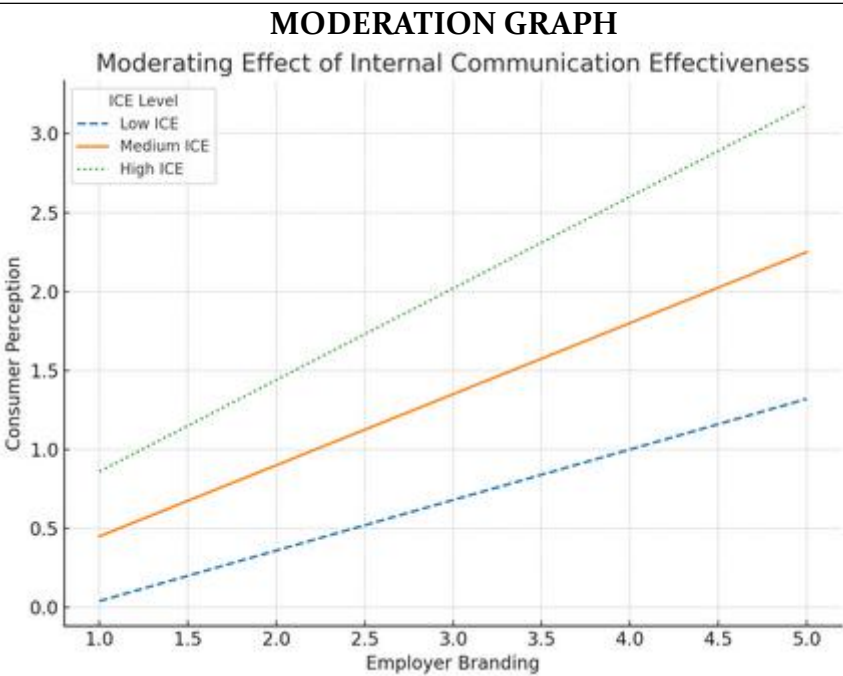


FIGURE NO. 2: MODERATION GRAPH

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to investigate the influence of employer branding on employee engagement, with consumer perception as a mediator and internal communication effectiveness (ICE) as a moderator. The findings provide compelling evidence supporting the hypothesized relationships and offer both theoretical and practical contributions.

First, the direct positive relationship between employer branding and employee engagement aligns with prior research suggesting that a strong employer brand fosters a sense of pride, identification, and psychological connection among employees. SET offers a logical explanation here: when organizations invest in building a credible and attractive image, employees perceive these efforts as organizational support and reciprocate through enhanced engagement behaviors. This finding is consistent with (Aboramadan et al., 2022; Chatzimichailidou et al., 2025; Yadav & Dhar, 2024), who argued that employer branding not only attracts talent externally but also reinforces internal motivation and loyalty.

Second, the partial mediation effect of consumer perception between employer branding and employee engagement provides novel insight. While most previous studies have explored consumer perception from an external marketing perspective (Huang et al.,

2024; Noh & Liu, 2024; Wang et al., 2023), this study integrates it as a psychological mechanism through which employees interpret employer branding. This resonates with the evolving viewpoint that employees are also internal consumers of branding efforts (Junça Silva & Dias, 2023; Sarabdeen et al., 2023). The mediation result suggests that when employees perceive that external consumers hold favorable views of the company, it validates their own employment experience, thereby strengthening their engagement. This supports the SET framework, where such perceived external validation enhances the perceived value of remaining engaged with the organization.

Third, the moderating role of ICE on the employer branding; consumer perception link emphasizes the pivotal function of internal communication in shaping how branding efforts are cognitively and affectively interpreted by employees. The positive moderation implies that when internal communication is clear, consistent, and two-way, the influence of employer branding on consumer perception becomes more pronounced. This is where Communication Accommodation Theory (Gallois et al., 2005) becomes relevant. According to CAT, individuals adapt their communicative behaviors in response to perceived conversational goals and cues. In the organizational context, effective internal communication acts as an accommodation mechanism that aligns employees' understanding with the intended brand image. This finding supports the work of (Pološki Vokić et al., 2023; Sinitsyna et al., 2024), who emphasized the strategic role of internal communication in driving employee alignment and brand-consistent behaviors.

Comparatively, while prior studies have often treated internal communication as a control or contextual factor, this study uniquely positions it as a moderator, offering nuanced insights into its boundary-enhancing effects. Furthermore, the conditional effect analysis demonstrates that under high levels of ICE, the employer branding–consumer perception link is significantly stronger, underscoring the idea that communication quality can enhance or constrain the interpretation of brand signals.

NOVELTY AND CONTRIBUTION

This study offers multiple novel contributions. First, by integrating consumer perception as a mediator in an internal HR-focused framework, it bridges the internal-external branding divide. Second, the application of CAT as a theoretical lens to explain the role of internal communication effectiveness adds fresh theoretical grounding to the field of organizational behavior and internal branding. Third, using SET to explain both direct and indirect relationships enriches our understanding of the reciprocal nature of employee attitudes in response to organizational branding and communication strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how employer branding influences employee engagement, with consumer perception as a mediator and internal communication effectiveness as a moderator. Grounded in SET and CAT, the findings confirm that employer branding not only has a direct positive effect on engagement but also works indirectly through consumer perception. Furthermore, the strength of this relationship is enhanced when internal communication is effective. The study contributes novel insights by highlighting the internal value of external brand perceptions and demonstrating the amplifying role of communication. Overall, it reinforces that strong employer branding—when coupled with clear and adaptive internal communication—can meaningfully boost employee engagement.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

This study provides valuable practical insights for organizations aiming to enhance employee engagement through strategic employer branding. First, the findings highlight the importance of developing strong and authentic employer branding initiatives, as these not only shape how the organization is viewed externally but also positively influence employee attitudes and engagement internally. Organizations should ensure that the brand they promote to consumers aligns with the internal employee experience, as the study confirms that consumer perception mediates the relationship between employer branding and engagement. When employees perceive that the external image matches their lived reality at work, they are more likely to feel proud, valued, and motivated.

Moreover, the moderating role of internal communication effectiveness underscores the need for organizations to invest in clear, transparent, and culturally sensitive communication strategies. Drawing from Communication Accommodation Theory, internal communication should be adaptive and responsive to employee needs, fostering a sense of inclusion and shared purpose. When communication is effective, it enhances the positive effects of employer branding on employee perceptions.

Finally, based on the principles of SET, the results suggest that when employees perceive organizational efforts such as strong branding and open communication as investments in their well-being, they are more likely to reciprocate with higher levels of engagement. Thus, an integrated approach that aligns employer branding, consumer perception, and internal communication can significantly strengthen workforce commitment and performance.

LIMITATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite its contributions, this study is not without limitations. First, the use of a cross-sectional design limits the ability to draw causal inferences. Longitudinal studies could provide deeper insights into how employer branding, consumer perception, and employee engagement evolve over time. Second, the data was collected from a single cultural context, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to other regions or industries. Future research should explore cross-cultural comparisons to understand how cultural norms influence internal communication effectiveness and branding perceptions. Third, the study primarily focused on employee perceptions, potentially overlooking the managerial or organizational perspective. Incorporating multi-source data, such as interviews or managerial assessments, could enrich the understanding of these dynamics. Additionally, future studies could explore other potential mediators or moderators, such as organizational identification, job satisfaction, or leadership communication style, to further unpack the mechanisms involved. Lastly, while this study employed SET and Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT) as its theoretical foundation, future research may benefit from integrating additional perspectives such as signaling theory or psychological contract theory to capture a more nuanced understanding of branding and engagement.

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