Connecting Internal Branding with Employee Brand Performance

SHOAIB MUHAMMAD [a], FRANCO CURMI [b], ABDUL REHMAN BIN S SENATHIRAJAH [a], and FIZZA ALI [c]

[a] Faculty of Business and Accounting, Persiaran Universiti, Putra Nilai, 71800 Nilai, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia; [b] Faculty of Economics, Management and Accountancy, University of Malta, Msida MSD2080, Malta; [c] National University of Modern Languages (NUML), Lahore, Pakistan.

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ABSTRACT

Despite its critical managerial relevance and foundational role as a subset of internal marketing, internal branding has historically garnered less scholarly attention and theorization, and internal branding efforts directed at internal audiences remain mainly under-researched and uncharted. This study addresses this gap, particularly within the less explored public banking sector, by examining the impact of internal branding practices on Employee Brand Performance (EBP) and exploring the crucial mediating role of Brand Commitment in this underlying relationship. A proportionate stratified random sampling technique was adopted. Using data from 426 banking staff in Pakistan, analyzed via Partial Least Squares (PLS), this research tested 13 hypotheses and identified a structure of four latent constructs influencing EBP. The results reveal that an effective organization-wide internal branding strategy affects EBP and brand commitment; however, brand trust and brand identification do not directly affect EBP. For managers, this study suggests that branding should be viewed as an all-encompassing process evolving at all organizational levels, with employee brand communication & training, trust, and commitment deserving full attention, and it recommends that managers in financial services actively pursue the internal branding strategy rather than letting it become a passive function of human resources. This research is original in that it fills a gap by bringing together two under-researched areas in the banking industry, namely internal branding and EBP, reveals the significance of creating internal branding at the corporate level, proposes the antecedents of EBP, and clarifies the relationships among them.

Keywords: Internal Branding, Brand Knowledge, Brand Commitment, Employee Brand Performance, Brand Trust, Banking Sector

JEL Codes: L25, D23, M14.

I. Introduction

Branding is a complex and multidimensional concept, and when applied within an organization, it is labelled as internal branding (Soleimani et al., 2023). Developing a strong corporate brand is a critical business activity for any organization in today's global marketplace (Raj, 2020). Service firms have long discovered that the brand message conveyed to employees is as important as the message sent to customers. An organization's employees are, in essence, its internal customers, and if they do not support the brand message, it can be detrimental to the reputation of the brand it represents. Due to significant variations in service delivery (inseparability, intangibility, and heterogeneity of services), customers' impressions of a service brand, unlike their associations with a specific product, heavily depend on employee performance in bringing unique values to life (Bashir et al., 2020; Mainardes et al., 2019).

An organization's competitiveness and long-term performance depend on its employees' attitudes and behaviour (Karatepe et al., 2019). Several studies indicate that service personnel are generally viewed as instrumental in business efforts to improve service quality and reinforce brand performance (Iyer et al., 2018; Ngo et al., 2020). Consequently, the brand behaviour of the employees, that is, EBP, comes into focus. In recent decades, branding has grown in popularity in the public-sector (Leijerholt, 2019). Brands have historically played a less significant role in the banking sector compared to other sectors (Wallace et al., 2013). Developing a strong brand internally enhances service staff's positive perceptions of the company's brand, as well as their knowledge, trust, and commitment to the organization's brand (Kashive & Khanna, 2017; Xiong & King, 2019). In the financial service industry, managing relationships with service personnel is a critical activity (Mainardes et al., 2019). Notably, the financial sector, in general, and banking institutions in particular, can increase their market competitiveness by implementing an effective internal branding strategy to help and satisfy key internal stakeholder groups (e.g., employees) in achieving higher customer satisfaction and superior service quality objectives (Ozuem et al., 2018). That is, without active employee participation, service firms struggle to meet service quality and performance expectations (Lam et al., 2018).

Globally, economies are becoming more service-oriented. In this evolving landscape, the banking sector occupies a very important position in any country. One of the service sectors currently facing intense competition is banking (Sugiarto and Octaviana, 2021). In particular, many global financial institutions, including banks, are struggling to meet their performance objectives due to the industry's declining growth and fierce competition from both established brick-and-mortar banks and emerging digital banks (de Bruin *et al.,* 2021). This is primarily due to their inability to effectively engage with customers, establish a unique market position, capitalize on sales projections, and retain the majority of their workforce (de Bruin et al., 2021). In this situation, banks are compelled to find ways to improve their performance and contribute to economic growth. With an increasing awareness of how consumers of banking services perceive and experience the offerings, there is growing concern among banking professionals regarding the need to improve the service experience received by clients and to foster long-term customer relationships. This development has likewise garnered the interest of the academic community (de Bruin et al., 2021). Among the various strategies proposed to address the crisis in the banking sector, branding has emerged as a primary focus for banks. Researchers have primarily focused on employee brand behaviour among the many other aspects of branding that affect firms, including banks (Ghenaatgar & Jalali, 2016). In particular, brand performance is one of the indicators of employee brand behaviour that has serious consequences for banks. Despite this, only a very small number of research findings have addressed brand performance.

It is important to note that the present inquiry focuses on public-sector banks (PSBs) currently operating in Pakistan. Public-sector enterprises have largely been overlooked in the context of branding. Interestingly, when it comes to branding, public-sector firms are far less successful than their private-sector counterparts. While internal branding is significant in both the private and public-sectors, prior studies have been sparse and have mainly focused on private-sector enterprises (e.g., Dahle & Wæraas, 2020; Leijerholt et al., 2020). In the public-sector public sector, brand management remains an underexplored area with few empirical studies and managerial practices; consequently, there is significant scope to carry out research from an internal branding perspective to ensure the success of the public-sector institutions' brands (Dahle & Wæraas, 2020). Besides, internal branding efforts directed at internal audiences are mainly under-researched and uncharted, with a few notable exceptions (Iyer et al*.,* 2018; Ngo et al*.,* 2019; Piehler, 2018).

Internal branding is an emerging phenomenon that aims to foster brand-supportive attitude and behaviour among employees and has gained prominence in recent years (Nataranjan et al*.,* 2017; Yang et al., 2015). It is considered a key strategic instrument by top management, which is capable of managing customer service quality expectations and bolstering brand performance (Piehler, 2018). This study claims that internal branding should be of considerable interest to academic scholars and practitioners alike, who are enthusiastic about branding and, more specifically, public-sector branding, as public-sector enterprises struggle with internal branding success (Leijerholt et al., 2019). In this study, internal branding is proposed as a predictor of brand performance for PSB employees. Nevertheless, the causal link between internal branding and brand performance is still underexplored in current research on internal branding, particularly within the nonprofit sector (Zhang et al., 2022). In addition, internal branding efforts directed at internal audiences are mainly under-researched and uncharted, with a few notable exceptions (Iyer et al., 2018; Ngo et al., 2019; Piehler, 2018; Xiong & King, 2019). Aimed at addressing the gap in internal branding research, the focus of the current study is to develop a conceptual model to analyze the relationship between internal branding dimensions and brand performance for PSB employees. Furthermore, to determine the extent to which internal branding dimensions affect the brand performance of PSB employees. We identify two important research questions for this study. Firstly, how do internal branding dimensions affect EBP in the context of Pakistan’s banking industry? Secondly, what are the effects of brand commitment as a mediator in the relationship between internal branding dimensions and EBP?

Brand performance explains how well individuals fulfil their organization’s brand promise (Punjaisri et al., 2017). It is regarded as the optimal outcome of an effective internal branding effort in the brand management literature (Mampaey et al., 2020). Xiong and King (2019) assert that EBP is a highly effective strategy for improving service organization performance and is crucial for achieving corporate brand success. Recognizing the importance of EBP, service-oriented companies have extensively implemented internal branding initiatives (Iyer et al. 2018), aiming to align service staff’s attitudes and behaviors with the company’s brand values. Additionally, few studies have explored what constitutes EBP and how it develops (Iyer et al., 2018; Kim et al., 2020;

Ngo et al., 2019). Some prominent researchers and scholars have begun examining brand performance and its antecedents from both the company's perspective (e.g., human resource practices and leadership roles) and the customer's viewpoint, emphasizing the crucial role of internal branding in enhancing a company's overall brand performance (Buil et al., 2019), while neglecting employees' contributions to service brand development (Burmann et al., 2009; Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Furthermore, the significance of EBP cannot be fully understood until the formation of brand performance is clear. Although earlier studies have supported the positive influence of internal branding on EBP in the commercial sector (e.g., Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Garas et al., 2018), this relationship in the nonprofit context has received less attention.

One of the challenges organizations face today is cultivating employee commitment (Ramos, 2018; Muhammad et al., 2020). Extant research highlights the significance of cultivating a "brand-centric" organization through committed employees (Wallace et al., 2013). Brand commitment is often the result of a well-executed IBM strategy, which is the foundation of sustainable competitive gain (Ngo et al., 2020). Previous literature has established that brand commitment is a precursor to brand citizenship behaviour (BCB) (Qureshi et al., 2022). Unfortunately, achieving this degree of employee commitment is highly challenging for public-sector organizations plagued by a negative brand image and subjected to frequent adverse media scrutiny (Leijerholt, 2019). Despite the literature demonstrating a strong link between employee affective brand commitment and favorable brand supporting behavior, there is insufficient empirical evidence to support this claim, specifically in the service business domain (Chiang, 2016; Terglav et al., 2016). In this study, social exchange theory (SET) (Blau, 1964) is drawn on further to clarify the internal branding–brand performance relationship. SET is used to explain why the inward brand management initiative has a beneficial influence on the perception, attitudes, and behaviors of PSB employees (Yu et al., 2019). Individuals' work input or task performance (brand performance) is commonly viewed as a form of acceptable currency through which individuals reciprocate the favorable treatment received from the organization (Zhang et al., 2022). Individuals with positive work outcomes display brand-supporting behaviors. Accordingly, employees feel obligated and are motivated to reciprocate the organization's favorable treatment (i.e., internal branding), and hence, perform in a manner that meets brand standards (i.e., brand performance). While internal branding has unquestionably piqued academics and practitioners' interest, additional insight is needed to better comprehend the specific indirect effects of internal branding on service staff's BCB, including brand performance (Dechawatanapaisal, 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Ngo et al., 2020). We expect that internal branding positively predicts brand performance through brand commitment for PSB employees. The research outcomes will contribute to the body of knowledge regarding brand management with a focus on internal branding.

II. Literature Review

A. Theoretical background (Social Exchange Theory)

Social Exchange Theory (SET) best explains an employee's workplace behaviour and attitudes. Specifically, SET is among the most dominant and influential theoretical models for explaining complex workplace employee behaviors (Cropanzano et al., 2017). SET is based on a complementary (reciprocal) exchange (Wu & Lee, 2017). Organizational performance can be enhanced by companies fostering a mutually advantageous work environment for their employees (Simbula & Guglielmi, 2013).

The authors have drawn study questions and hypotheses from the canons of SET. The current study used the SET framework as a distinctive theoretical lens to illustrate the efficacy of staff-manager reciprocal relationships (e.g., a sequence of mutually interdependent transactions or exchanges) in a banking context. SET offers a valuable perspective to comprehend how and why employees bring the coveted brand promise to life (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). These insights are significant because the literature on internal branding consistently highlights the major role of internal stakeholders- employees in developing a successful corporate brand in the commercial (Koo & Curtis, 2020; Piehler, 2018) and public-sectors (Eid et al., 2019). An important element of developing a robust service brand is fostering reciprocal social exchanges in the workplace so that organizational members are encouraged (e.g., through voluntary efforts) to provide the services they have committed to with the intent of achieving desired brand performance outcomes (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Wang et al., 2019; Xiong & King, 2018). In general, SET offers a plausible explanation for why internal branding (perceived formal organizational support) will have a favorable effect on service staff behaviour and will be reciprocated in the form of increased commitment and improved brand (job) performance, specifically in the service industry setting.

B. Employee Brand Performance (EBP)

Exceptional employee performance is critical for all types of businesses, particularly in highly labor and customer-contact enterprises such as banks, where employee behavior plays a major role in meeting customer expectations and offering exceptional customer experiences (Kao et al., 2015). In simpler terms, EBP can be defined as behaviors that align with the company's core vision, values, and purpose (Xiong et al., 2019). In this regard, the service organization needs more internal branding effort to reinforce brand performance among employees (Xiong et al., 2019). Evidently, EBP correlates positively with firm performance; therefore, ensuring that service staff serve as brand carriers/deliverers is crucial to developing an effective internal branding strategy along with other business strategies (Leijerholt et al., 2019). Accordingly, enhancing each employee’s brand performance is critical to fulfilling the brand promise objectives compared to other brand management activities (Pan, 2015).

Although employee behaviour is critical to the success of a service brand, it has not been well defined or documented in the brand management literature. For instance, current internal branding literature highlighted brand in-role and extra-role behaviors as denoting EBP (Erkmen & Hancer, 2015; Garas et al., 2018; Xiong & King, 2018). It follows that both types of behaviors, i.e., in-role and extra-role efforts, contribute to the performance of service representatives. While it is difficult for management to formally recognize and reward employee performance due to its implicit/tacit nature (beyond the job description), the performance of service staff is critical to improving an organization’s effectiveness and is positively correlated with the success of the service brand of an organization (Xiong & King, 2020).

The emerging body of literature on internal branding predominantly concentrates on frontline service personnel's performance (see Saleem & Iglesias, 2016). Such an approach may compromise the efficacy of the internal branding strategy and raise significant concerns regarding its impact on the brand performance of a company. In addition, little is known about what appropriate employee behaviour or attitude may affect EBP (Iyer et al., 2018). Moreover, the current body of research examining the precursors and consequences of internal branding, including brand performance, is still somewhat sparse (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Santos-Vijande et al., 2013).

In particular, a few studies have critically analyzed what is required to implement successful internal branding initiatives, including internal marketing campaigns, to yield favorable EBP (e.g., King et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2012). Given that EBP relies heavily on service staff's in-role and extra-role brand-supporting behaviors in enacting and living the organizational brand values, it is valuable to expand the current body of internal branding literature by better understanding how to affect EBP (Xiong & King, 2018). Importantly, to achieve desired brand performance, employees must perform their brand-building behavior as expected by the organizations and the target customers (Xiong & King, 2018). Consequently, contemporary scholars and industry practitioners have initiated research into the association between a company's deliberate brand internalization efforts and the extent to which the service personnel's performance influences the brand's ability to fulfil its promise commitment (Chang et al., 2020; Iyer et al., 2018; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014).

C. Brand Identification

Academics and practitioners have long recognized the central role of brand identity in effectively managing and differentiating corporate brands (Aaker, 2012; Keller, 2019). Brand identification (BI) refers to the degree to which employees strongly identify with the company's brand and the values it promotes (Knezović & Jamak, 2024). The development of a strong corporate identity is becoming increasingly crucial to financial institutions, including banks. The banking industry, which has been significantly impacted by the economic and financial crisis of 2007–2009, experienced reduced profitability and increased instability across global markets (Mirzaei, 2013). Consequently, organizational members perceive their company's brand failures and successes as their own (Bailey et al., 2016). Identification as a sense of oneness influences emotional attachment towards the brand (Piehler et al., 2016). Employees are the primary recipients of corporate BI (Gilani, 2019). According to the identity literature, strong brand identification affects employees' commitment and brand performance (Bravo et al., 2017; Johnson et al., 2012). Porricelli et al. (2014) accentuated that when service staff align their own identity with the firm's identity they serve, it improves the firm's service delivery performance. Consequently, brand identification serves as a mechanism for improving an organization's brand performance (Korschun et al., 2014; Xiong et al., 2013). The existing internal branding literature confirms that brand identification has a positive impact on brand performance and provides empirical validation for this direct effect (Buil et al., 2016; Erkmen & Hancer, 2015; Gill-Simmen et al., 2018). However, the internal branding literature is fragmented, and empirical research on analyzing brand identification's internal benefits is still limited (Bravo et al., 2017). Notably, Bravo et al. (2017) pointed out the scantness of empirical research that reconnoiters the effects of brand identification. In particular, the banking organization can expect employees' commitment only when it successfully encourages employees' brand identification.

Identification is a stronger predictor of employee commitment and behavior (Johnson et al., 2012; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). In addition, identification acts as an antecedent for affective commitment in the general model of commitment (Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Piehler et al., 2016). Literature on internal branding suggests that organizational members who exhibit brand identification demonstrate increased organizational commitment and continue to work towards its success (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Punjaisri et al., 2009; Lee et al., 2014). This hypothesized link has been statistically validated in internal branding research (Buil et al., 2016; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011; Tampi & Hegde, 2018). In addition to the positive effects of brand identification on commitment, it should also affect EBP directly. Inferred from SET, employees must not only perceive the brand to be important to the firm's success, but they must also perceive that they contribute to the brand's subsequent success. Empirical studies have confirmed the positive effect of identification on employee behaviour (Burmann et al., 2009; Piehler et al., 2016; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). Hence, employees who have positive feelings of belonging to the brand support it through their brand-supporting behaviors. Accordingly, the subsequent hypotheses are put forward:

H1. Brand identification has a significant and positive effect on Employee Brand Performance.

H2. Brand identification has a significant and positive effect on Brand Commitment.

D. Brand Knowledge

Brand knowledge (BK) sets the foundation for service representatives to consistently deliver a brand-aligned experience as expected by customers and other external stakeholders (Xiong & King, 2019). In the simplest terms, brand knowledge can be defined as employees' comprehension of brand-related information. It enables businesses to transform implicit brand promises into employee attitudes and behaviors (Piehler, 2018; Xiong et al., 2013). Moreover, in the internal branding literature, it is well-documented that brand knowledge is essential for employee brand-related attitudes and behaviors (Murillo & King, 2019). An employee's cognitive representation of the brand is shaped by perceived knowledge (e.g., tacit/practical and unscripted behaviour) and understanding of the focal brand (Murillo & King, 2019). A critical issue facing the service firms is ensuring that all service personnel have adequate brand knowledge (e.g., belief, mental modelling, technical skills, understanding of the brand's key attributes, and role clarity) to demonstrate expected behaviors and deliver differentiated customer experience according to firms' expectations (Van Nguyen et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2019). In addition, adequate brand knowledge dissemination enables staff members to gain insight into how brand promises can be fulfilled when interacting with customers (Wu & Lee, 2017), enabling them to go above and beyond their regular duties to support the brand. To enhance the image, reputation, and brand performance of businesses, employees must have the right knowledge and attitudes, which can only be achieved through increasing intellectual and emotional buy-in among employees (Natarajan et al., 2016).

Few researchers examine the effect of brand knowledge on brand commitment, but they do not examine the relationship with employee behaviour, including EBP (Piehler et al., 2016). More recently, scholars and practitioners have shifted their focus from customers' brand knowledge to understanding it from employees' perspectives (e.g., Piehler, 2018). Acquiring knowledge about products and services is particularly important in the banking industry, as banks rely heavily on high-quality services delivered by a committed, results-oriented, and impassioned banking staff (Ibrahim et al., 2018). Ngo et al. (2019) asserted that service providers need to learn about and comprehend the company's distinct brand knowledge so that they can engage in brand-aligned behaviors such as BCB, which in turn encourages employee performance. Brand knowledge is also an essential precursor of BCB (King & So, 2015; Piehler, 2018; Xiong et al., 2013). Additionally, perceived employee brand knowledge translates into favourable brand attitudes and is strongly correlated with service staff discretionary extra-role behaviours and firm performance (Nguyen et al., 2019).

According to SET, employees need to understand that they are responsible for their performance to be able to develop desired attitudes and behaviors. That is to say, employees need to comprehend their roles as relevant to the brand's success (Piehler et al., 2016). Brand knowledge is considered one of the crucial antecedents of brand commitment (Ahn et al., 2016; Piehler, 2018), and one of the most important results of effective brand knowledge dissemination is increased employee commitment (Miles et al., 2011; Piehler, 2018; Xiong et al., 2013). Brand knowledge, hence, exerts a considerable influence on brand commitment. Without adequate brand knowledge and shared understanding, role ambiguity may develop, with undesirable effects on commitment (Piehler et al., 2016). In addition to the effects of brand knowledge on commitment, it should also affect EBD directly. Drawn from SET, employees must not only perceive the brand to be important to the firm's success, but they must also understand that they contribute to the brand's subsequent success. For this, employees must have sufficient knowledge of the brand and brand-supporting behavior to engage in BCB, including brand performance. Notably, some studies have found a high correlation between brand knowledge and brand performance (King & So, 2015; Muhammad et al., 2019; Piehler, 2018), but others have found no such link (Baker et al., 2014; Kimpakorn & Tocquer). Henceforth, the authors postulate:

H3. Brand Knowledge has a significant and positive effect on Employee Brand Performance

H4. Brand Knowledge has a significant and positive effect on Brand Commitment.

E. Brand Communication & Training (BCT)

Brand management, which includes internal corporate brand communication & training (BCT), improves service staff's brand-related skills, knowledge, attitude, and service delivery expectations, and motivates them to perform better (Buil et al., 2016; Xiong & King, 2019). Internal brand communication (IBC) efforts are critical in ensuring that service staff actively participate in brand practices and successfully fulfil the company's brand promise by promoting a shared knowledge of the brand across the organization (Yu et al., 2019). The extant literature has highlighted that brand communication & training has a significant role in promoting and shaping BCB, including brand performance (Erkmen, 2018). According to Bravo et al. (2021), service personnel may develop an authentic and distinctive perception of the organization as a consequence of improved IBC.

The researchers and practitioners claimed that effective IBC activities directed at internal audiences could lead to desirable internal branding outcomes like brand commitment (Garas et al., 2018; Muhammad et al., 2020) and favorable employee BCB like service performance, among others (Burmann et al., 2009; Porricelli et al., 2014). Besides, brand-focused training programs (e.g., information about products or service features) inform and guide service staff's brand performance (Xiong & King, 2019). According to recent studies, IBC has a greater influence on employee performance than training (Hofer & Grohs, 2018). Supporting this assertion, Xiong and King (2019) argued that IBC efforts (e.g., briefing, orientation, and meetings) are the most essential factor in guiding and determining the service staff's brand performance. The literature on internal branding has highlighted the enabling role of brand communication & training in shaping staff's belief and attitude towards the brand, such that service representatives feel more attached to it and identify with it (Buil et al., 2016; Erkmen et al., 2018), resulting in increasing staff's ability to provide better service (Baker et al., 2014). Studies on IBM have found statistically supported evidence that BCT activities positively affect employees' affective organizational (brand) commitment and EBP (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Erkmen, 2018; Yang et al., 2015).

In addition, training, seen as a crucial aspect of IBC, can be utilized as a catalyst to influence and direct employees' attitudes, thereby developing a strong service brand (Buil et al., 2016; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). According to service literature, continuous exposure and training can eventually improve staff performance (Murillo & King, 2019). In this sense, Burmann and König (2012) asserted that brand-centred training as an internal branding tool is the direct lever driving employees' commitment to the organization and its brand. In the internal branding context, most previous work (e.g., Karanges et al., 2018; Sharma & Kamalanabhan, 2012) has established that brand-focused training positively and significantly affects the brand-supporting behaviour of employees. Besides, brand training programs adequately inform and guide service staff's brand performance (Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). On the contrary, the mere presence of basic service (brand standards), service procedures, guidelines, and coordinated training programs in general service skills may not be sufficient to ensure exceptional service quality delivery to realize desired EBP (Xiong & King, 2019).

This study utilized four specific internal branding mechanisms or tools as outlined by Punjaisri and Wilson (2007), which include orientation, briefing, group meeting, and training, to evaluate their impact on EBP. Gilani and Cunningham (2017) argued that more work is needed from an internal branding perspective on the sub-dimensions of internal branding activities, like internal brand communication. Besides, a considerable body of research (e.g., Barros-Arrieta et al., 2021; Gilani & Cunningham, 2017) has focused on IBC from a conceptual standpoint or predominantly within the realm of private organizations. Whilst there has been very little research on IBC in government (public) sector organizations (Sharma & Kamalanabhan, 2012). Theoretically, the relationship between brand communication & training and EBP is unclear and hence requires more rigorous academic effort and empirical research to clarify it. As a result of the discussion, the study postulates that:

H5. Brand Communication and Training have a significant and positive effect on Employee Brand Performance.

H6. Brand Communication and Training have a significant and positive effect on the Brand Commitment.

F. Brand Trust

An organization's success depends on gaining the trust of its workers, as trust is a fundamental component of employee-organization relations (Khalil & Siddiqui, 2019). Furthermore, the construct of trust is essential for effective organizational functioning (Fei & Aun, 2018). It is a common perception that employees' level of faith in the company's brand determines their level of commitment and performance. Largely, brand trust (BT) encompasses cognition-based components (similar to brand knowledge) or affect-based components (similar to brand commitment) (Srivastava et al., 2015). Generally, the construct of trust is commonly understood as "existing when one party has confidence in the exchange partner's reliability and integrity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994)". Whereas Chaudhuri and Holbrook (2001, p. 82) defined brand trust as "the willingness of the average consumer to rely on the ability of the brand to perform its stated function." Notably, Chaudhuri and Holbrook's (2001) definition of brand trust emphasizes the perceived performance of the brand, which is not the brand's actual performance as such that can be assessed based on pre-defined service standards set by the organization. In the context of this study, brand trust refers to employees' faith in the brand's capacity to keep its promises.

More importantly, in an organizational context, trust can be an effective antecedent of employees' positive attitudes, such as commitment (Colquitt et al., 2011; Ha et al., 2011; Kimpakorn & Tocquer, 2009), and favourable employee BCB (Bravo et al., 2016; Erkmen et al., 2017). Scholars and practitioners across many disciplines generally agree that trust and commitment are fundamentally linked (Yao et al., 2019). It is assumed that employees' commitment and brand performance depend largely on how much service personnel trust and show confidence in their company's products and services under its brand (Muhammad et al., 2020). Although commitment sufficiently explains the behaviour or attitude of workers, however, commitment in a relationship is usually a reflection of trust (Erkmen et al., 2017; Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Muhammad et al., 2020). Employees who trust the brand will be more committed to it and more willing to take part in a BCB that benefits the brand, due to the special effect that trust has on commitment (Erkmen et al., 2017). In other words, commitment increases as trust accumulates.

Several empirical studies in various industries, including healthcare, public administration, hotels, and automobiles, have consistently shown that the construct trust has a favorable impact on effective commitment (see Erkmen & Hancer, 2017; Yao, Qiu & Wei, 2019). According to Singh and Srivastava (2016), there is a sharp decline in trust in the company's brand among organizational members. The authors theorized that successful relational exchanges among employees and management at the organizational level are primarily governed by trust and commitment. Notably, rather than focusing on individuals' trust, this study examines employees' trust in an organization's brand, captured as employees' confidence in the quality and reliability of the services delivered. Thus, it is justifiable to inform employee commitment through brand trust because the objective of internal branding is to have a brand-committed and brand-aligned workforce that strongly demonstrates trust and confidence in the company's ability to consistently deliver on its communicated brand promise. Based on these discussions, the authors, therefore, suggest:

H7. Brand Trust has a significant and positive effect on Employee Brand Performance.
H8. Brand Trust has a significant and positive effect on Brand Commitment.

G. Brand Commitment

Brand commitment has long been a central focus of scholarly inquiry within the marketing discipline (Osuna Ramírez et al., 2017). The discourse on brand commitment was predominantly developed with customers as the focal point. The brand commitment construct is closely aligned with organizational commitment, representing the psychological connection between the organization and its employees (Siqueira et al., 2021). When applying the concept to employees, Burmann et al. (2009) defined brand commitment as "the extent of employees' psychological attachment to the brand, which influences their willingness to exert extra effort towards reaching the brand's goals".

Burmann et al. (2009) postulated that BCB is largely determined by service employees' brand commitment, which in turn influences their willingness to exert additional effort toward achieving the brand's goals. According to Garas et al. (2018), internal branding aims to serve customers better and enhance organizational (brand) commitment, which strongly influences employees' BCB. In the existing brand management research, it is argued that commitment is essential to understanding how service staff adopt favorable on-brand and extra-role behaviors and perform in line with brand standards or brand essence (Erkmen et al., 2017). Thus, the employees' understanding of the organizational brand values and commitment to delivering high-quality customer service are essential in achieving better internal brand performance (Tuominen et al., 2016).

Indeed, enhancing employee commitment has become a perpetual goal for financial institutions because highly committed employees are more likely to adhere to the firm's goals, vision, and values (Yu et al., 2019). Customer and service-oriented firms typically demand more from their service staff in terms of willingness to engage in "extra-role" performance than simply organizational membership or their intention to remain with the service firm, e.g., equivalent to normative and continuance forms of commitment (Piehler et al., 2016). In particular, the commitment model's normative and continuous components are unlikely to result in behaviors that encourage employees' in-role or extra-role behaviors (King & Grace, 2009).

A growing body of literature recognizes the significant relationship between brand commitment and brand performance. In this regard, Erkmen and Hancer (2015) asserted that construct commitment is essential to understanding how employees embrace BCB and act according to the service organization's implicit or explicit service delivery expectations. Earlier research established a statistically significant positive correlation between brand commitment and EBP (Muhammad et al., 2020; Piehler et al., 2016; Xiong et al., 2013; Yang et al., 2015), while others found no statistically significant relationship or limited direct influence (e.g., Erkmen & Hancer, 2014; Touminen et al., 2016). Hence, according to internal branding and attitudinal literature, the authors expect that bank staff who strongly identify with and are cognitively and behaviorally committed to delivering better service will result in higher levels of brand performance (Piehler et al., 2018). Furthermore, relatively few studies have examined the factors influencing employees' commitment to the Pakistani banking sector (e.g., Muhammad et al., 2020). Thus, in light of the above, it can be concluded that EBP performance can be improved simply by increasing employee commitment. The following hypothesis is advanced:

H9. Brand Commitment has a significant and positive effect on Employee Brand Performance

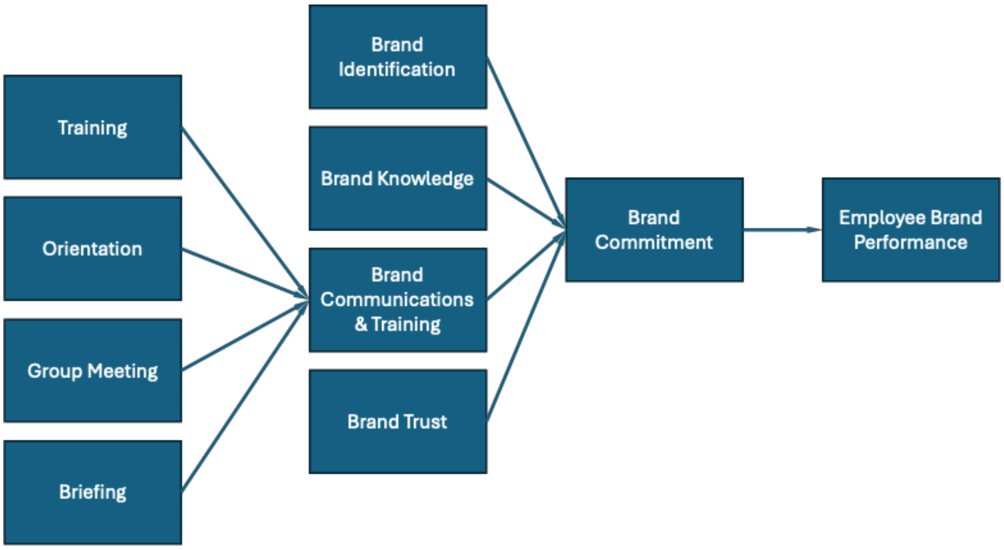
H. Mediating the role of brand commitment

This paper considers brand commitment as a mediating variable between internal branding and EBP. Burmann and Zeplin (2005) argued that employees' brand commitment is an essential component of BCB (e.g., higher role expectations), which helps explain brand performance. This construct is inextricably linked to employee performance (Battistelli et al., 2019) and ensuring the success of a business (Qureshi et al., 2022; Kaur et al., 2020). Although affective commitment has been acknowledged as a significant mediator in the literature of various fields (e.g., organizational psychology and human resources) and studies (Du Preez & Bendixen, 2015; Muhammad et al., 2020; Ngo et al., 2020), its use as a mediator in the research of the specific effects of internal branding has received very little confirmation (Kaur et al., 2020). In particular, Miles and Mangold (2005) argued that mediators are crucial in establishing a link between internal branding practices and their outcomes, including brand performance. Similarly, Porricelli et al. (2014) asserted that internal branding serves as a significant predictor of brand commitment, which in turn is an important antecedent to BCB. Specifically, this theorized mediation suggests that service providers who lack affective commitment to the focal brand, and a staff member's ability to go above and beyond the call of duty, as well as participate in discretionary extra-role activities to deliver on the company's customer service, will be constrained. Despite its importance, few studies employed the commitment construct as a mediator (Ngo et al., 2020). To test the mediation effect of brand commitment-EBP, it can be hypothesized that:

H10. Brand Commitment mediates the relationship between Brand Identification and Employee Brand Performance.
H11. Brand Commitment mediates the relationship between Brand Knowledge and Employee Brand Performance.
H12. Brand Commitment mediates the relationship between Brand Communication & Training and Employee Brand Performance.
H13. Brand Commitment mediates the relationship between Brand Trust and Employee Brand Performance.

Figure 1 depicts the study framework based on the literature review.

Figure 1
Study framework.



III. Methods

A. Data Collection and Sample

A cross-sectional survey design was employed using a structured self-administered questionnaire. The target population comprised employees of PSBs in Pakistan. To enhance representativeness and reduce sampling bias, a proportionate stratified random sampling technique was adopted. This approach is highly recommended when the population is heterogeneous and geographically dispersed, and when proportional representation of key subgroups is required (Malhotra & Dash, 2016; Saunders et al., 2019). The population was stratified by city (Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar, and Quetta) and job level (Saunders et al. 2019; Hair et al. 2019). The number of respondents selected from each stratum was proportionate to the actual distribution of bank employees within that stratum. Within each stratum, respondents were selected using random sampling procedures. This approach ensured adequate representation of heterogeneous employee groups across regions and organizational hierarchies.

To present the Pakistani banking industry, only PSBs were considered, namely First Women Bank (FWB), National Bank of Pakistan (NBP), Sindh Bank Limited (SBL), Bank of Khyber (BOK), and Bank of Punjab (BOP). Data was collected over six months, specifically from September 2018 to March 2019. The study sample comprises 70.4% (300) males and 29.6% (126) females, with the majority aged 31-39 (35.4%). Also, regarding respondents' job status, 76% (324) have permanent status, while 14.8% (63) have temporary status. Finally, and more importantly, in terms of banking experience, the majority of respondents, 27.7% (118), have 5-10 years of banking experience, 22.3%

(95) have 3-5 years of banking experience, while 16.7% (60) have 1-3 years of banking experience. The details are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1– Demographic profile.
Note: Own research data.

Variables Categories	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	300	70.4
Female	126	29.6
Age		
21 to 30 years	128	30.0
31 to 40 years	151	35.4
41 to 50 years	135	31.7
50+	12	2.9
Marital Status		
Single	153	35.9
Married	273	64.1
Education		
College	69	16.2
Under Graduation	103	24.2
Master's	203	47.7
PhD	21	4.9
Diploma in banking	30	7.0
Departments		
Accountant	124	29.1
HR/Admin	46	10.8
Sales & Marketing	39	9.1
Operations	87	20.4
Consumer Banking	25	5.9
Management	48	11.3
Others	57	13.3
Job Status		
Permanent	324	76.0
Temporary	63	14.8
Contract	39	9.2
Experience		
Less than 1 year	60	14.1
1 to 3 years	71	16.7
3 to 5 years	95	22.3
5 to 10 years	118	27.7
11+	82	19.2

B. Measures

The scales measuring the constructs were adjusted from previous research. Given that, all constructs reflect the internal environment of the PSBs as perceived by the staff, and thus, they were measured at the employee level. Minor revisions were made to the adopted scale items to align with the population's perspective. Specifically, substituted/or modified questionnaire items were those that were especially appropriate for the banking sector and the context of Pakistan. Brand identification was assessed using an eight-item scale developed by Punjaisri et al. (2009). Brand knowledge, with the eight-item scale developed by Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2009), is used. The construct BCT, a second-order construct that comprises training, orientation, briefings, and group meetings, was measured using the eleven-item scale developed by Punjaisri et al. (2009). The four-item brand trust scale was derived from Chaudhri and Holbrook (2001). The brand commitment was measured by a nine-item scale adapted from Kimpakorn and Tocquer (2009). Finally, we adapted a four-item scale from Punjaisri et al. (2009) to assess employee brand performance. Of the 750 questionnaires distributed, 496 were received. In total, 70 questionnaires were discarded and omitted from the analysis due to a variety of reasons, including incomplete responses from respondents, significant missing data, respondents who only completed the demographic section of the questionnaires, and errors in all the responses. After excluding 70 cases, the resulting sample comprised 426 employees, representing a response rate of 56.8%. Responses to each item were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 representing “strongly disagree” to 5 representing “strongly agree”.

IV. Results

A. Validation of the Measurement Model

In this paper, we utilized SmartPLS 4.0 to evaluate the proposed research model. According to Ramayah et al. (2018), research models that are complex and encompass multiple constructs and relationships are best fitted using the distribution-independent method known as Partial Least Squares (PLS). An analysis of construct reliability and validity is presented in Table 2, along with all measurement items, which include factor loadings (FL), Composite Reliability (CR), and Average Variance Extract (AVE) (Hair et al., 2019). The Heterotrait–Monotrait (HTMT) ratio and the Fornell–Larcker Criterion (F/L) have been used to demonstrate discriminant validity. As advised by Hulland (1999), factor loadings that demonstrated significant cross-loading issues, i.e., > 0.40 and were less than the prescribed threshold of 0.50, were taken into consideration for elimination. As a result, nine items across the six constructs were deleted, lowering the total number of scale items considered eligible for further analysis from 47 to 38. The results showed that almost all factor loadings (0.58 to 0.86) were equal to or greater than the recommended threshold of 0.50 (Hulland, 1999), thereby demonstrating adequate individual item reliability.

To assess internal consistency reliability, several relevant measures exist, with Composite Reliability (CR) being the most prevalent. Garson (2016) recommends using CR instead of Cronbach's alpha (CA) to report internal consistency in PLS path modelling with reflective constructs. Consequently, we evaluated the convergent validity by employing the CR criteria. According to Table 2, the CR indexes are generally high, with values ranging from 0.76 to 0.90 (Hair et al., 2017). At the construct level, it was also evident that all these measurement constructs fulfil convergent validity standards as the values of AVE ranged from 0.519 to 0.624 (i.e.,> 0.50), suggesting that the scale items possess high reliability (Fornell & Larcker, 1981). Convergent validity is thus established (refer to Table 2).

Table 2– Reliability and validity of constructs.

First Order	Second Order	Item	Loadings	CR	AVE
Brand Commitment		BC1	0.832	0.868	0.525
		BC2	0.787		
		BC3	0.734		
		BC5	0.603		
		BC7	0.640		
		BC8	0.726		
Brand Identification		BID1	0.742	0.882	0.519
		BID2	0.718		
		BID3	0.589		
		BID4	0.712		
		BID5	0.735		
		BID6	0.763		
		BID8	0.767		
Brand Knowledge		BK1	0.764	0.883	0.556
		BK2	0.765		
		BK4	0.684		
		BK5	0.729		
		BK7	0.775		
		BK8	0.755		
Brand Performance		BP1	0.685	0.821	0.536
		BP3	0.796		
		BP4	0.762		
		BP5	0.676		
Brand Trust		BT1	0.851	0.874	0.634
		BT2	0.818		
		BT3	0.772		
		BT4	0.740		
TR (LOC)		TR1	0.774	0.815	0.524
		TR2	0.674		
		TR3	0.714		
		TR4	0.730		
ORT (LOC)		ORT5	0.867	0.849	0.737
		ORT6	0.850		
GM (LOC)		GM7	0.819	0.815	0.688
		GM8	0.839		
BF (LOC)		BF9	0.769	0.762	0.517
		BF10	0.732		
		BF11	0.650		
	BCT (HOC)	ORT	0.839	0.908	0.713
		GM	0.795		
		BF	0.881		
		TR	0.859		

This study used the HTMT criterion to assess the discriminant validity of the key latent variables (Henseler et al., 2015). Violations occur as the HTMT ratio approaches one. HTMT.85 is the most prudent evaluative criterion, while HTMT.90 is deemed acceptable (Hair et al., 2019). Table 3 displays the HTMT evaluation results, which do not indicate a breach of discriminant validity. Consequently, it can be concluded with certainty that the proposed model satisfies the criteria for discriminant validity.

Table 3 – Discriminant Validity - Heterotrait–Monotrait ratio (HTMT).

Constructs	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. BC	–					
2. BCT	0.819	–				
3. BID	0.812	0.704	–			
4. BK	0.852	0.844	0.767			
5. EBP	0.782	0.736	0.681	0.793	–	
6. BT	0.838	0.768	0.781	0.863	0.712	–

Importantly, the current research model adds a second-order construct (i.e., brand communication and training); as this study introduced a reflective-reflective model, a two-stage approach was chosen to determine the reliability and validity of the second-order constructs between brand communication & training and the sub-dimensions of BCT- group meetings, briefings, orientation, and training (Becker et al., 2012). Table 2 illustrates the loadings and reliability scores for the higher-order constructs.

B. Structural model evaluation

The structural (inner) model was evaluated with SmartPLS 4.0 (Hair et al., 2022). At this stage, several important criteria must be met to complete this step (Hair *et al.,* 2022), including coefficient determination (R^2) and the statistical significance of path coefficients. The R^2 is crucial for assessing the model's explanatory power (Henseler *et al.,* 2016; Hair *et al.,* 2019). The model under consideration incorporates two outcome variables- BC and EBP. The R^2 value of BC, as determined by the PLS-SEM algorithm, was 0.653, implying that 65.3% of the variation in brand commitment was caused by IB. Additionally, the result indicates that internal branding practices have a moderate impact on BC. Concerning EBP, the R^2 value of 0.459 (or 46%) indicates that the variance in EBP is adequately explained by the antecedent constructs of the models (e.g., BID, BK, BCT, BT, and the mediator BC).

For direct effects, Table 4 shows that BK β = 0.266, t-value = 4.168, $p < 0.01$, BCT β = 0.163, t-value = 2.520, $p < 0.01$, and BC β = 0.216, t-value = 3.364, $p < 0.01$, were all positively associated with EBP. While BID β = 0.063, t-value = 1.146, $p > 0.05$, and BT β = 0.063, t-value = 1.144, $p > 0.05$, did not show significant relationships. Therefore, H3, H5, and H9 were supported, while H1 and H7 were not supported. Next, BID β = 0.253, t-value = 5.029, $p < 0.01$), BK β = 0.199, t-value =3.610, $p < 0.01$, BCT β = 0.163, t-value = 5.742, $p < 0.01$ and BT β = 0.226, t-value =4.011, $p< 0.01$ were positively related to BC which supports H2, H4, H6 and H8 of our study. Finally, we examined the mediating effects of BC by employing the Preacher and Hayes (2008) bootstrapping approach to calculate the indirect effects. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 5. The mediation effects of BID →BC → EBP β = 0.055, t-value = 2.630, $p < 0.01$, BK → BC → EBP β = 0.043, t = 2.324, $p < 0.05$, BCT → BC → EBP β = 0.056, t = 2.837, $p < 0.01$ and BT → BC → EBP β = 0.049, t-value = 2.666, $p < 0.01$, were all significant. Moreover, the lower limit and higher limit did not encompass a value of 0, proving the significance of the mediation. Hence, H10, H11, H12, and H13 received support and were validated.

Table 4– Direct Effect Hypothesis Testing.

Hypotheses	Relationship	β	Std. Dev.	t-values	P-values	PCI LL	PCI UL	f^2
H1	BID → EBP	0.063	0.055	1.146	0.126	-0.031	0.150	0.00
H2	BID → BC	0.253	0.050	5.029	*p*< .001	0.170	0.335	0.09
H3	BK → EBP	0.266	0.064	4.168	*p*< .001	0.158	0.369	0.04
H4	BK → BC	0.199	0.055	3.610	*p*< .001	0.106	0.287	0.04
H5	BCT → EBP	0.163	0.065	2.520	0.006	0.053	0.266	0.02
H6	BCT → BC	0.258	0.045	5.742	*p*< .001	0.184	0.331	0.08
H7	BT → EBP	0.063	0.055	1.144	0.126	-0.029	0.153	0.00
H8	BT → BC	0.226	0.056	4.011	*p*< .001	0.130	0.317	0.06
H9	BC → EBP	0.216	0.064	3.364	*p*< .001	0.112	0.322	0.03

Table 5– Mediation Effects Analysis.

Hypothesis	Relationship	β	Std. Dev.	t-value	p-value	PCI LL	PCI UL
H10	BID →BC → EBP	0.055	0.021	2.630	0.009	0.022	0.104
H11	BK → BC → EBP	0.043	0.019	2.324	0.020	0.014	0.088
H12	BCT → BC → EBP	0.056	0.020	2.837	0.005	0.023	0.101
H13	BT → BC → EBP	0.049	0.018	2.666	0.008	0.019	0.093

We also performed the PLSpredict analysis to assess predictive performance. More specifically, predictive validity is the level of accuracy with which a certain collection of measures of a particular construct can accurately predict the variable indicator of a specific criterion (Hair et al., 2019; Shmueli et al., 2019). To accomplish this, we utilize PLSpredict, which follows the holdout sample-based approach, as proposed by Shmueli et al. (2019). A PLSpredict analysis was run on the model according to the procedures described by Shmueli et al. (2019). Table 6 shows that our model has medium predictive power because the PLS model had fewer errors than the LM model for EBP indicators.

Table 6– PLS Predict.

MV	Q^2predict	PLS-SEM_RMSE	LM_RMSE	PLS-LM_RMSE
EBP1	0.249	0.748	0.756	-0.008
EBP3	0.266	0.646	0.657	-0.011
EBP4	0.266	0.715	0.728	-0.013
EBP5	0.11	0.707	0.713	-0.006

V. Discussion and Implications

Aimed at addressing the gap in internal branding research, the current work extends the body of knowledge on internal branding by conceptualizing it as a construct that comprehensively covers employees' cognitive (e.g., brand identification, brand knowledge and brand trust), affective (brand commitment), managerial practices (brand communication & training), and behavioral (employee brand performance) responses toward the brand, and examines the interrelationships among these underlying constructs. Our quantitative research has revealed some interesting results. Firstly, we found that internal branding is positively related to PSB employees' brand performance, which is in line with some previous work concerning the effects of internal branding on EBP in the commercial enterprise (e.g., Garas et al., 2018; Iyer et al., 2018; Ngo et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2022). This means that the implementation of internal branding practices can enhance PSB employees' brand performance. Secondly, brand commitment has been employed as a mediator linking internal branding and EBP, since the literature suggested that brand commitment is an important predictor of EBP. As expected, the results indicated that BC mediated this relationship and had a positive and significant effect. That is, the internal branding activities contribute to creating a sense of commitment among PSB employees to the organization's brand, which in turn contributes to fostering favorable behaviors toward the brand (i.e., brand performance). The specific contributions are outlined below.

A. Theoretical Implications

The current work extends the body of knowledge on internal branding by conceptualizing it as a construct that comprehensively covers employees' cognitive (e.g., brand identification, brand knowledge and brand trust), affective (brand commitment), managerial practices (brand communication & training), and behavioral (employee brand performance) responses toward the brand, and examines the interrelationships among these underlying constructs. The present study emphasized internal branding in the Pakistani public banking sector and the key role of brand commitment in encouraging EBP (Kaur et al., 2020). In addition, the current research affirms that effective internal branding implementation is indispensable to achieving a firm's overall business strategy. These findings also provide critical insights for banking institutions looking for satisfactory behavioral outcomes, such as EBP. From a theoretical lens, findings broaden internal branding's insights by focusing on the under-researched construct of brand knowledge (Piehler et al., 2019). Notably, previous research has failed to consider the cognitive factor despite the vital role of employee brand knowledge in internal brand building (Ruzzier et al., 2021). The current study is more consistent with Piehler et al.'s (2018) study because it found a significant positive effect of brand knowledge on EBP, confirming the construct's cognitive importance for inward brand management initiatives.

Generally, the study's findings are aligned with the existing body of inquiries on service marketing and brand management, which asserts that a workforce that has a strong personal attachment and pride in the company's brand will exhibit higher levels of brand identification (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Piehler et al., 2016), brand knowledge (Xiong and King, 2019; Zhang, 2019), greater commitment (Ngo et al., 2019), and higher levels of brand performance (Dechawatanapaisal, 2018; Ngo et al., 2019). Our study confirms that all four dimensions of internal branding (identification, knowledge, communication and training, and trust) are distinct but interrelated constructs and substantiates the fact that all four factors, namely group meetings, briefing, orientation, communication and training, jointly form brand communication & training as a second-order construct. In particular, findings provided vital insight suggesting that dimensions of internal branding positively affected employees' brand commitment and, subsequently, their brand performance (Kaur et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022). Hence, the PSBs should focus on all four highlighted dimensions to maintain a high degree of brand performance.

As with earlier research (e.g., Garas et al., 2018; Zhang et al., 2022), this study emphasizes that internal branding plays a significant role in determining PSBs' brand performance. This finding is aligned with SET (Blau, 1964), which postulates that staff who have a positive impression of internal branding and who receive formal organizational support (e.g., appropriate knowledge, communication and training) in the context of their work are more likely to put in extra effort (reciprocate) to show their appreciation by passionately participating in the organization's brand building efforts (Lee et al., 2014) and are likely to exhibit higher amounts of discretionary effort beyond their assigned responsibilities to deliver extra-role service performance (Hyun et al., 2024).

PSB's brand performance was not directly affected by brand identity and brand trust, contrary to past studies (e.g., Erkmen et al., 2017; Muhammad et al., 2020; Piehler et al., 2016). Instead, their influence was only observed through brand commitment. In other words, the findings invalidate the proposition that brand identification has a statistically significant impact on the PSB employees' performance. In contrast, previous studies have found a link between brand identification and EBP and provided empirical validation for this direct effect (e.g., Helm et al., 2016; Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014; Punjaisri & Wilson, 2011). Plausible explanations for this insignificant relationship could be that bank staff did not perceive brand identification as a critical factor in enhancing their brand performance. Second, service personnel who strongly identify with the corporate brand highly value their organizational membership. They are compelled to adhere to prescribed (pre-mandated) workplace rules and regulations (similar to brand compliance or in-role brand behaviour) and act in the organization's best interest (Liu et al., 2011).

For example, high-performance banks that place a strong emphasis on their customers typically operate in business environments that are characterized as highly regulated and controlled. In such workplace environments, highly identified bank employees will be more likely to go above and beyond the standard requirements of a job to contribute positively to their firm's objectives. In other words, employees' in-role behaviour will be the dominant factor in driving their job-related performance intention (Buil et al., 2016). Therefore, for these reasons, bank staff's identification significantly influenced their brand commitment, but did not directly inform EBP, such as extra-role behaviors concerning other employees' and customers' needs. In comparison, performance behaviour requires service personnel to be proactive and exhibit more extra-role behaviors in a given service setting. Although extra-role behaviors may increase customer satisfaction, they may also result in dissatisfaction as customer service expectations are raised but not always delivered (Muhammad et al., 2020). This explains why bank employees' effort to deliver on service promises did not translate into extra-role performance behaviour or EBP.

Also, contrary to past studies (Erkmen & Hancer, 2015; Erkmen et al., 2017; Muhammad et al., 2020), this study fails to support H7 for the direct effect of brand trust on EBP, despite the logical and theoretical justification for the assumption. Although banking staff in the study had a reasonable level of trust in the organization and its brand, it was found to be insufficient to affect EBP. In other words, bank staff adequately fulfilled their in-role or brand-compliant behaviour as intended by the organization, which is mandatory to deliver the promised brand experience to external customers.

Moreover, H1 and H7 findings should be interpreted with caution. Firstly, the study's sample of respondents was diverse regarding employment status. For instance, 76% of survey respondents were full-time employees, while the remaining 24% worked on a contractual basis. Due to the stable employment in Pakistan's public-sector, especially government-owned PSBs, most survey respondents (e.g., 76% of permanent staff) were engaged in a social exchange-based (characterized by perceived fairness and trust) employment relationship with their current employers (e.g., banks). As a result, these findings may not apply to bank employees (e.g., contractual staff) who are more involved in an economic exchange-based employment relationship to maximize their short-term monetary benefits (Aryee et al., 2002). Owing to this, they engage in fewer extra-role BCB behaviors and hence have a lower level of commitment than full-time employees (Stamper & Van Dyne, 2001). In this regard, banking staff exhibit more in-role/brand compliance behaviors (prescribed behaviors such as detailed job description, written instructions, strictly following company rules & procedures, etc.) necessary for the organization's smooth functioning (House et al., 2004). Consequently, they met lower levels of performance expectations set by their organizations. More importantly, in line with the standard learning model, BCB is a higher-order response from service personnel to the company brand than brand knowledge and commitment (Zhang & Xu, 2021). Strictly speaking, EBP encourages service staff's extra roles beyond their formal brand duties. Thus, due to the lower levers, brand identification and brand trust could not significantly impact EBP.

Our work empirically demonstrated the importance of brand commitment as a mediator between internal branding and EBP in the banking setting, as it has been shown in previous research to be a significant predictor of employee in-role and extra-role service performance (Garas et al., 2018; Hamstra et al., 2019; Wu & Ye, 2022; Xiong & King, 2019). To build a strong corporate brand, the relevance of social exchanges among the internal audience (such as employees) should be emphasized through suitable internal branding initiatives to strengthen their commitment and willingness to deliver exceptional customer service to achieve superior brand performance (Löhndorf & Diamantopoulos, 2014). The results also demonstrate that high levels of EBP cannot be attained solely through internal branding, and that brand commitment is a crucial behavioral and attitudinal component that contributes to the conversion of essential internal branding practices into EBP. To ensure good brand performance, it is sensible to maintain the internal branding strategy at the maximum level, as this ensures employee brand commitment, a more reliable indicator of brand performance.

B. Managerial Implications

The findings of the study provide managerial insights to executives and managers of financial service institutions (e.g., banks), who wish to understand how internal branding initiatives influence service staff's brand performance. Banking senior management may take the following into account: Firstly, brand-specific internal branding practices and tools are regarded as a desirable management approach for banking firms that want to establish and preserve a strong service brand through employees' brand-aligned performance. PSBs can ensure the effectiveness of their internal branding efforts if they implement a successful corporate brand strategy that includes establishing employee trust, disseminating appropriate brand values, increasing employee commitment to the corporate brand, and improving their brand insight into how to deliver more than just good service. Secondly, results revealed that internal branding should not be applied without carefully considering for whom the concept is intended. Surprisingly, despite the effectiveness of internal branding, many service firms and other establishments overlook this essential component from their overall corporate business strategy, which is deeply rooted in the brand and the company's success. The findings suggest that a general-purpose approach to managing employees' brand impressions and attitudes in service-oriented businesses may be deemed undesirable.

Thirdly, appropriate brand communication & training strategies are suitable for developing and improving brand-compliant/or pro-brand behaviour among service personnel. Banking organizations are required to facilitate and encourage the seamless internal branding process by implementing brand education programs and diffusing brand messages, vision, and values through daily briefings, orientations, group meetings, bulletin boards, and corporate periodicals. In addition, to increase the satisfaction level of service staff in the banking sector, the banks must provide sufficient training to their staff based on their skill levels and job requirements (Jung et al., 2021). This will guarantee that bank staff are appropriately knowledgeable about the product and possess the correct service attitude to deliver good performance in accordance with ways that fit with its company brand identity and brand spirit. This specifies that a competent and trustworthy workforce is critical for PSBs to improve overall brand performance and help their organizations succeed both internally and externally. Fourthly, although brand identification and trust were insignificant in determining EBP, bank management should not ignore their significance in determining overall organizational and brand success. Enduring commitment, in particular, is a long-term strategic approach that demands unwavering support from management and perpetual effort (Piehler, 2018). Hence, if Pakistan's public-sector banks want to retain competent and committed staff for a longer period, it is recommended that sufficient attention be paid to internal branding practices.

C. Limitations and Future Recommendations

There are a few caveats to this study. The researcher used self-reported data to draw from a sample of banking staff only. As such, the study only assessed data based on bank employees' perceptions. This might be strengthened by employing larger samples and data from multiple sources, not just employees, but also managers and supervisors. The second flaw is that this research examines internal stakeholders' (e.g., employees) perspectives on internal branding initiatives. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to research external approaches, such as customers' perspectives on the company's internal branding initiatives. Lastly, concerning our structural model, the R^2 value for EBP is 0.459, meaning the model explains 46% of the variance. This is acceptable; however, the PLS-Predict results (see Table 6) show that a Q^2 predict for one indicator (EBP5) is quite low (0.11), suggesting weak predictive power for that item (Item 5: I always handle customers' specific requests within a standard set for the bank (brand). Although the overall model strength is satisfactory, confirmation is needed that our structural model not only fits the sample data but also performs well in predicting new or omitted data. Nonetheless, there may be other unmeasured variables (e.g., employee-brand fit, psychological contract, leadership style, reward systems, organizational culture, etc.) in addition to brand commitment that may also influence EBP and could be researched to gain a more complete perspective on the issues discussed earlier and provide further understanding for theoretical and practical relevance.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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